

EVA ASHWOOD

A movie poster for 'Kings of Chaos'. The central image shows a shirtless, muscular man with extensive tattoos embracing a woman with long, straight blonde hair. The man is looking down at the woman, who is looking up at him. The background is a dark, textured grey. At the bottom, there are several large, vibrant red roses. The title 'KINGS OF CHAOS' is written in a large, white, serif font across the middle. Below the title, there is a small decorative diamond symbol flanked by horizontal lines. At the very bottom, the tagline 'DIRTY BROKEN SAVAGES' is written in a smaller, white, serif font.

KINGS OF CHAOS

DIRTY BROKEN
SAVAGES

KINGS OF CHAOS

DIRTY BROKEN SAVAGES #1

EVA ASHWOOD

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For all the readers who like their book boyfriends a little psycho. I see you.

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RIVER

COLORED lights flash in time to the beat of the song thumping through the speakers. The patrons of the club I'm in grind on each other or hold drinks over their heads as they push their way through the crowd of tangled bodies, heading from the bar to the dance floor or over to the tables and couches pressed into one corner.

It's one of the more popular clubs in Detroit, and I can tell why. The drinks keep flowing, the music is good, and the girls dancing in cages along the walls and over the bar are hot. Plenty of dudes lean against the bar, drooling all over themselves at the curvy women gyrating to the pulsing hip hop song blaring through the speakers, and the bartender keeps their drinks full so they don't have a reason to leave.

In the quiet corners, hands are roaming, and the smell of arousal and sex is in the air. I don't know what the rules are about getting it on right there on the dance floor, but they're clearly not stopping people from groping and dry humping each other in the dim light.

I guess as long as the owners have their money, they don't care too much what else the patrons get up to, as long as it's not outwardly illegal. Or maybe they don't care about that either. Who knows?

Sin and Salvation is a pretty fucking apt name for this place, considering that most of the people here are either looking to get fucked up and get into some trouble, or hiding from their real lives and looking for some excitement.

Except me.

Neither of those reasons are why I'm here.

Everyone else seems to be looking for distractions, but I've never been more focused. People move around me, and I don't pay them any attention. They're no concern of mine. I'm here for one reason—one person. And that person has already fucked me over once. I won't let it happen again.

I can see my prey through a strobe of purple, on the other side of the dance floor near the lounge area, standing with a drink in his hand. I narrow my eyes, locking onto him, determined not to let him slip away. He's a weaselly asshole with a pinched face and a slimy gaze. I should have known from the beginning that he was going to be nothing but trouble, but he sounded so sure—and to be honest, at the time I was desperate for any lead I could get.

Just looking at him pisses me off, and I clench one hand into a fist. He's over there knocking back drinks and laughing as if he's not a lying piece of shit, but I know better.

He betrayed me. He gave me bad info. And it almost got me killed.

I don't care much one way or the other about dying in the long run, but I refuse to die before I finish the job I set out to do.

One more name.

One more death.

One more death before the mission I set for myself is complete, and I can finally move on with my life... or die in fucking peace.

"It's almost done, Hannah," I mutter under my breath.

There's not a hope of anyone overhearing me over the loud bass of the hip hop song blaring through the club. I can feel a few eyes on me, but that doesn't have anything to do with what I'm saying. Probably just because I'm a woman alone in this place, and there are plenty of thirsty people looking to move in. They're not really paying attention to anything I might say.

But Hannah hears me, wherever she is. Even if she's gone, this mission of mine binds us together. This quest I'm on to get rid of every motherfucker who took her from me. Her death is almost avenged.

I have this idea in my mind that she can't really rest in peace until it's over and done with, and that's a shitty thought. If anyone deserves peace, it's my sister, who never did anything to anyone and was a victim of shit that never should have happened.

I'll get her the peace she deserves by carving my way through every single person who had a hand in her death.

I'm so close now.

So damn close.

But first, I have to deal with this sleazy fucker.

I keep my eyes on the prize and start to make my way through the crowd. Women and men are locked together, grinding and dancing and laughing, the whole mess of bodies writhing like some kind of boozed up monster.

"Hey, baby," some guy slurs, moving into my personal space. He puts his hands on my hips and tries to drag me in closer to him, thrusting his pelvis in my direction. "You wanna have some fun?"

"No," I tell him, keeping it short and simple. "Leave me alone."

"Aww," he pouts. "Don't be like that. You're so fuckin' pretty."

"And you're so fucking drunk. Move before I make you."

He grins, leering at me. "Feisty. I like that. Love a spicy bitch."

I roll my eyes and shove him out of the way, pushing past him and his friends who laugh at the rejection. I could have done much worse to someone who doesn't know how to take no as a complete fucking sentence, but I'm in a hurry, and I don't want the man I'm after to get away while I'm dealing with handsy idiots.

I'm dressed to blend in at a dance club since I don't want to draw too much attention to myself, but it has the unfortunate side effect of making these idiots think I'm available, when I'm definitely not. Not for them. Not for anybody.

The outfit I picked out is sexy and low cut, designed to show off my assets. The flashing lights in Sin and Salvation reflect off my silver hair, and I can see when that draws eyes down to my body. My dress is black and short, showing off my legs and the sprawling tattoo that runs down the side of my thigh. My tits are pushed up and out, practically spilling out of the dress, and I can feel hungry eyes tracing over them and the tattoos that wind over my arms.

I look like any other hot bitch here to get some, but the men I push past are wrong if they think that's all I am. I'm not here to dance. The first guy who approached me isn't the only one to think he can make a move, but I'm not breaking my focus, and I don't stop walking. I keep shoving them away as I slip through the crowd like a ghost, finally coming out of the throng of bodies to a more open area where I find my mark.

He's standing in a cocky pose, one hand on the waist of a blonde woman while he leers at her friends.

I can't make out what he's saying over the beat of the music, but he's grinning like he thinks he's smooth, and all the women look uncomfortable. The one he's touching moves out of his grip, shaking her head and stepping back over to her friends. They close ranks around her but don't leave just yet. Maybe they're waiting for him to sweeten the pot or something. I don't care either way.

I close some of the distance between us, stalking him like a predator.

Something in my direction catches his eye, and he looks over. For a second, his gaze slides past me, but then he locks on, the same way I'm locked onto him, and his eyes widen. Surprise flashes across his face, making it clear he wasn't expecting to see me here. Then something shifty slides through his expression, as if he's trying to think of a way to get away from me.

He steps closer to the women, like he thinks that'll save him.

Now I'm even more pissed. My blood boils at the fucking nerve of this idiot, thinking he can get away with what he did to me. Thinking he can scam me with bad info and just go on with his life like it's no big fucking deal.

I grab my gun from the thigh holster that's barely hidden under my short dress and raise it enough that this fucker can see it, but not so high that it causes a panic in the club. Keeping it pointed at him, I close the remaining distance between us.

The women he was sliming on scatter, maybe assuming from my pissed off expression that I'm a jilted lover or something. I want to puke at the thought of that, but at least it gets them out of the way.

"Outside," I tell him, pressing the gun against his side when I'm close enough.

He opens his mouth like he's going to protest, or more likely lie again to try to save his own skin, but I jab him hard with the barrel of the gun, and that shuts him up. I watch him swallow hard, and he starts moving toward an exit at the back, not making any sudden moves.

I'm holding onto the slim hope that I can still get something out of this asshole, so I want him alive, but if he tries to run for it, I won't hesitate to kill him right here and now. It would be complicated and messy, but that's sort of been the theme of my life for the past several years.

Stepping outside is a relief after being inside the club. The air is cool and it's quieter, for one thing, although the *thump thump thump* of the music is still audible through the heavy brick wall and the smooth metal exit door.

As soon as the door shuts behind us, I shove my mark deeper into the alley behind the building. It's lit only by a streetlight on the corner near the alley's entrance, and as long as no one comes down this way, there'll be nothing to see.

He backs away from me like he wants to run, but he ends up with his back to the wall and nowhere to go. His eyes are wild for a second, darting this way and that, looking for an escape or someone to help him. He's not going to find either.

I train the gun on him, aiming right for his fucking head.

"You sold me out," I hiss, letting the rage I feel show plainly on my face. "Why? I needed info on how to get to Ivan St. James, and you fucking lied to me."

"Of course I lied. He's the head of the Five Blades Syndicate," the man whines. "He's highly protected. He's one of the most powerful men in all of Detroit. It's your fault if you thought you could just waltz in and get to him. What were you going to do, take down all of his body guards? Do you know how many layers of security that man has?"

I narrow my eyes and grip the gun harder. This dickhead is seriously pissing me off, and shooting him in the face is sounding better and better.

"That's why I needed the goddamn information, you fucking rat. Info you *claimed* you had."

I'm not a damn idiot. I know Ivan is one of the most protected men in Detroit. As head of a powerful mafia syndicate, he's got the resources and manpower to keep himself safe. Even if I could get to him, he'd have people waiting to take me out, and I wouldn't stand a chance. Which is why I didn't just go barging into his territory to try to take his fucking head off. I tried to play it the smart way, reaching out through the criminal underground to try to see if anyone had anything that would help.

But the best I could find was this fucking lowlife. I don't even remember this asshole's name, but he promised me he had insider info on when Ivan would be alone. A way I could get to him while he was unprotected.

My lip curls in disgust. *Liar.*

“You think someone like you could take out Ivan St. James?” the guy adds, scoffing. He’s shaking a little, clearly worried about the gun I’ve got pointed at his goddamn head, but not worried enough that it keeps him from being a dick.

“Someone like *me*?” I fire back, taking a step closer. “The fuck is that supposed to mean?”

He just gestures vaguely toward me with one hand, as if that’s supposed to explain it all.

I grin at him, letting the curve of my lips turn ugly and feral. I might look like some club bunny right now, but he doesn’t know what I’ve done. He doesn’t know about the list I keep, and how many names have been crossed off that list. He doesn’t know that I’m willing to do whatever it takes to avenge my sister’s death.

I’ve got blood on my hands already, and when your skin is already slick with it, your soul already darkened by death, adding one more body to the total doesn’t seem like that big of a deal anymore.

“Maybe I did you a favor in the long run,” he says, speaking a little faster. “I kept you alive. You should think about that.”

He uses that tone of voice that I fucking hate. The one that’s all condescension and him talking down to me like he thinks he knows what’s best. Like he *must* know more than me because he’s a big strong man and I’m just a girl.

“You think he would have killed me?” I ask, cocking my head as if I’m considering his words.

Something sparks in his slightly bloodshot eyes, as if he thinks he’s just found his way out of this. “If not him, then one of his goons would have. You might think you’re big and bad with your gun, honey, but to work for Ivan, you have to really know your shit. You wouldn’t have stood a chance.”

“So you think I should be thanking you. For saving my poor, weak little ass from getting in over my head?”

He nods quickly, not even noticing how savage my tone has gotten. “Yeah. Yeah, I do think so. So maybe we just let this go? Pretend it never happened. Water under the bridge. We can move on... hell, maybe even get a drink.”

Jesus. He’s already pivoted from trying to save his ass to trying to get laid. I didn’t think it was possible for someone to be this stupid.

“Oh, you want me to let it go?” I snap back, dropping any hint of the helpless little girl act. “You want to walk away from this alive? Maybe I’ll think about letting you live if you can actually help me. Give me the info I want.”

“I don’t have it,” he says quickly, his eyes widening. He’s got sallow skin and deeply set eyes, and it gives him an almost rat-like appearance—which is fitting, I guess. “I already told you. I don’t know how to get close to him. How the hell would I know that? Nobody knows that. If people knew how to get through Ivan St. James’s defenses, someone would have done it already. You’re not the only crazy bitch who wants to see him burn, I bet.”

“No, I’m just the only crazy bitch who matters right now,” I tell him. I shake my head, and the grin on my face gets even more savage. “Either way, that was the wrong answer. You didn’t help me, and I can’t let you warn Ivan that I’m after him.”

Maybe it’s the grin, or maybe it’s the fact that he’s finally realized I’m serious with the gun pointed at his face, but real fear shows in the guy’s eyes now. He’s finally catching onto the fact that I’m not fucking around, and that whatever he thinks about me being weak or a woman or whatever, I’m definitely not too weak to kill him.

He lifts his hands, eyes bugged out and frantic.

“W-wait. You don’t have to do this. I can—I can pay you. I can get you information. *Good* information this time. I promise.”

“You were already supposed to give me information,” I tell him coolly. “And you fucked that up and lied to me about it. You just said you don’t know how to get to Ivan, and I don’t need anything else from you. Besides, why would I give you another chance to fuck me over? I know how men like you operate, and the world will be a better place without you in it.”

I pull the silencer from my holster and screw it onto my gun, eyes locked with his.

“Wait! Please,” he begs, sounding like he’s a second away from bursting into tears. “Please. Just. Give me another chance. I-I can... I can...”

He keeps babbling half sentences and broken pleas, and I tune them out, not giving a shit about his whining now. There’s nothing he can do for me. Anything he says now is just the gibberish of someone trying to save his own life.

All the attitude he had when he was talking to me before is gone, and there's a satisfaction in knowing that he's finally realized I mean business. He also knows he doesn't have anything I want, but he's begging all the same. Trying anything he can to change my mind, even though there's no chance of that happening.

"What happened to all that confidence from earlier?" I ask him in a drawl. "When you were talking down to me like a big man who needed to help a weak, stupid woman? Where'd all that go?"

"Please. I-I didn't mean it. I was just trying to say—"

"You were just trying to talk your way out of this. But it's too late for that. You already said you can't give me what I want. So we're done here."

The pleading continues, and I just stand like a statue in front of him, unmoved. I don't know if it's the look on my face or the coldness in my eyes, but I know he can tell I mean business. I spare a second to think that I bet he didn't expect his night to go like this. He probably thought he'd be able to talk some woman into going home with him for the night. Or at the very least into going into one of the bathrooms to suck his dick or something.

At worst, he'd end up going home alone, a little drunk and lonely, but not any worse for wear. Maybe his pride would have been bruised if all the other women he approached seemed as uninterested in him as the women he was trying to feel up when I found him.

Now the real worst-case scenario—dying in this fucking alley—is about to become his reality.

He stood between me and the last name on my list. And I don't forgive shit like that.

G A G E

THE MUSIC from the main part of the club is more muted at the back. We had the office areas soundproofed just enough that we can hear ourselves think while we go over business and shit, but not so much that a riot could break out on the dance floor or something and we wouldn't be able to hear it.

Sin and Salvation is one of the most popular clubs in this part of Detroit, so shit gets pretty rowdy and trouble could pop off at any time—something we do our best to keep from happening. It's good to be able to keep an eye on things even when we're not out there in the thick of it.

My three best friends and business partners are here too, sprawled over furniture or leaning up against the walls, relaxed the way they always are when we're in our domain.

The club is a legit business, but we also use it as a front for money laundering, working with various shady organizations in the city. We talk business in the back room while the bartenders and bouncers run the club for us most of the time.

The thumping base line pulses loud enough that we can hear it and feel it from the dance floor, and Ash taps his foot along with the beat. He's draped over a chair in a sprawl that looks uncomfortable as fuck. But he's like that. As long as it makes him look good, he doesn't care too much about the rest. He runs his hand through his brown hair before adjusting his glasses, shifting his gaze from me to Knox.

We've been discussing a possible new business deal with a local biker gang, but we haven't gotten very far since we're split on whether to move ahead with it or not.

“I say we do it,” Knox puts in about the issue at hand.

No one’s surprised by that. He’s always ready to leap into something dangerous, even if it’s fucking stupid. Maybe even more if it’s fucking stupid. He’s always looking for a challenge, for a chance to test his limits and see if he can come out on top even if the odds are against him. With the way he’ll do anything to get what he wants, the odds are rarely stacked that high against him.

Still, we can’t just rush into something without thinking about it first.

“We need more info,” Priest says, arms folded where he’s leaning up against the wall. His light blue eyes are hooded, and he looks bored with the conversation already, but I know he’s got his focus on everything that’s going on. He doesn’t raise his voice, but it cracks through the room anyway with its usual cold precision.

“Really? Knox, wait for more info?” Ash teases, his amber eyes glinting with amusement. “You have *met* Knox, right? He heard ‘smuggling guns’ and probably came in his pants from the excitement of it.” He sits up and pulls a playing card from his pocket, fidgeting with it in a clear sign that he’s ready for this meeting to be over so he can go off and do something else. *Someone* else, more likely. He flips the card back and forth in his hand, making it disappear and reappear at will.

“It’s dangerous,” Priest fires back, cutting his gaze toward Knox. “We don’t know enough about them or who they’re working with. We don’t want to get tangled up in some bad blood that has nothing to do with us. The money isn’t worth it if it brings trouble down on our heads.”

It’s one of the longer strings of words Priest has put together in recent memory. Usually, he’s a fan of speaking as few words as possible, so I know he’s serious about being cautious.

“Yeah, I know it’s dangerous,” Ash returns with a grin. “That’s why Knox is so horny for it. It’s just more fun if things go south. The chance to take down a whole biker gang for fucking with us?” He makes a jacking off gesture with the hand that’s not playing with the card.

Knox doesn’t deny any of that or look upset about being talked about like he’s not there. He paces the center of the room with a hungry look on his face and a feral smile. He always gets twitchy when there hasn’t been any action for a while. You’d only need to look at him, big and burly and covered in scars and tattoos, to know he’s the type who doesn’t shy away

from danger and always walks away from whatever decides to fuck with him.

“I don’t care about the guns,” I tell them, making them all look to me again. “I don’t know if the Diamond Devils can be trusted.” I tip my head to Priest, acknowledging his point. “If they’re tangled up in some shit we’d rather avoid, then it’s not worth it.”

“They’re low stakes,” Knox says, waving a hand. “If they try something, we’ll make ’em regret it. Simple.”

Ash points to Knox with a gesture that’s a clear *I told you so*. He’s got his sleeves rolled up to his elbows, and the tattoos on his forearm ripple over his muscles as he plays with the card. We’ve all got tats, although none of us ever got quite as addicted to ink as Knox.

“Everything’s simple to you,” Priest says, ignoring Ash and rolling his eyes. His voice is cold and cutting. He knows Knox well, so the sharpness in his tone isn’t even really directed at him—it’s just how Priest sounds all the time.

Knox shrugs, not bothered by the implication or tone one bit. “Someone fucks with me, I make ’em disappear. Simple,” he says back, drawing out the word with a grin. “You think I’m scared of the fucking Diamond Devils? They’re small fry, and they wouldn’t know what hit ’em if we decided to take them out.”

“Fuck the Diamond Devils for a second,” Priest cuts in. “What about Ivan St. James?”

“What about him?” I ask.

“He’s been undercutting our business, snaking clients from us.”

“How do you know that?”

“Heard it from one of the clients themselves,” Knox answers for him, trading a look with Priest. “I went to go collect on them and they said they were moving on. Don’t worry, I left them a little reminder of why brand loyalty matters.”

“What does that mean?” Ash asks.

Knox just grins, looking even more unhinged than usual. “He’s not dead, if that’s what you’re worried about. I wouldn’t kill anyone without running it by you guys first. I just made sure he knew it’s bad manners to cheat on your money launderers. Especially with a slimy bitch like Ivan St. James.”

My jaw clenches. Every time someone says that name, it's like another layer of anger rises in me. I narrow my eyes and take a controlled breath. I fucking hate Ivan St. James, the smug motherfucker. He walks around like he owns the whole damn city, just because he's head of one of the more powerful mafia organizations that operate here. No one else has been able to take him down a peg, so he just does what he wants, no matter who it fucks over. And apparently, he's now decided it's a good idea to fuck with our business.

"Did he say why he went with Ivan?" I ask Knox. "The client?"

He shakes his head. "I asked, too. He just said he felt better with Ivan, which is bullshit because who the fuck would?"

"Good question," Ash replies. "Do you think Ivan's giving him a better deal? Or has something on him that made him switch? Blackmail? Threats?"

Knox shrugs. "No clue. But he'd have to have something on everybody who he's snaking if that's the case."

That's a good point. Most likely he's just straight undercutting us, stealing clients because he can. I'm tempted to do something about it, to finally put him in his place and teach him a lesson about fucking with us, but in the long run, I know it's not worth starting a war over. Because that's what would happen. It would get bloody and ugly, and while Knox would be into that for sure, it's not something I want to deal with. The three men in this office with me might not be my actual brothers, but they're the only family I've got, and I make it a point to look out for them. To look out for our little organization, keeping the money rolling in and increasing our power in Detroit slowly but steadily.

Priest said it best. We don't need the extra drama.

"We'll table the shit with the Diamond Devils for now," I tell the others, making an executive decision and ending the debate. "And I'll deal with the St. James issue."

Knox pouts a little, either because he was excited to keep discussing the guns and the Diamond Devils or because he wants to be the one to deal with St. James, but either way, he nods and stretches, cracking his neck and rolling his broad shoulders.

Priest doesn't go anywhere, keeping his post on the wall. Out of all of us, he's the one who seems the most out of place in the club. He's not the type for drinking or dancing or grinding up on random women in the dark.

Whenever he happens to be on the floor, he stands out like a sore thumb, and people usually give him a wide berth, even if they are intrigued by his looks. He's got a sharp jaw and high cheekbones, and he could probably pass for a model if it weren't for the dangerous edge that lingers around him at all times.

Ash leaves with me as I head out of the office. We walk partway down the hall together, then split apart. He heads toward the main part of the club with a grin on his face, ready to drink and flirt and get his dick sucked or whatever it is he plans to do. Probably all three, knowing him. The dancers love the attention, and it keeps them working for us and loyal so whatever. He can do what he wants as long as nothing he does fucks up our business. That's always been the rule.

I don't feel like being around people, so I leave the back way, stepping out into the alley that runs around the back of the club.

It's dimly lit by the glow of a streetlamp from the mouth of the alley, and I come out here when I need to clear my head sometimes because it's usually empty.

Except that's not the case tonight.

As I let the door close behind me, I turn to see two figures standing farther down the alley, away from the light and shrouded in darkness.

At first, I think it's just some drunk patrons from the club who've ducked outside to grope each other or fuck up against the wall. It wouldn't be the first time, and if they want to suck each other off by the dumpster, then that's on them. We already have their cover charge and money they spent buying drinks.

But then I hear the familiar telltale whisper of a gun firing through a silencer, and as I watch, one of the bodies falls.

There's no question about what just happened.

Oh, fuck no.

Not at my goddamn club. This isn't the shit that goes down here. Especially not in the fucking alley where anyone could stumble onto the scene and think this has something to do with us. We run illegal businesses out of our club, using it as a front for money laundering and trafficking in illegal goods, but because of that, we keep our legit business squeaky clean.

We don't give the cops reason to come sniffing around. *Ever.*

The anger that's been simmering in my chest since Priest brought up Ivan St. James threatens to bubble over, but I keep a hold on it and move

silently and swiftly down the alley, grabbing the person with the gun from behind and dragging them away from the body.

Once I get my arms around her, I can tell it's a woman from the curves and softness pressed against me, and she's anything but passive. She fights back, clawing at the arm I have around her waist and twisting in my hold. She fights like a fucking hellcat, breaking out of my grip and whirling around, lashing out at me.

"Let me fucking go," she snarls, and her voice is husky and furious.

I manage to block her swing, but she has another attack ready, aiming for my dick with her knee. I swing around to try to block that one, too. It's enough to let her land a blow to the side of my face, a punch strong enough to make my head snap to the side. I recover quickly, and we stagger sideways as we fight with each other, heading out of the darkness and toward the dim light cast by the street light.

I can see it glinting off her silver hair, and damn. She's sexy as fuck.

The dress she has on hugs her curves, drawing attention to full hips and big tits. There are tattoos on both arms and down her thigh, and when she tries to kick me, the skirt of the dress rides up and shows off the holster strapped to one thigh.

She came prepared for this, and dressed the way she is, no one would have given her a second look unless they were looking at her ass. And it's a really nice ass. My blood is pumping, and some of it surges down to my dick, reacting to both the way she looks and the way she fights.

The reaction of my body just makes me angrier, because I'm not here to ogle this fucking woman or try to get my dick wet. She just killed someone in the alley behind my club, and I can't let that stand.

We grapple, fighting for control of the gun, and I manage to overpower her by being taller and bigger than she is, but it's a near thing. She's scrappy as fuck in addition to being sexy as hell, and even when I get her back pinned against the rough brick of the building, she doesn't stop struggling to get away from me.

Her chest heaves while she gasps for breath, and she twists against my hold, snarling curses and trying to lunge for me even with no leverage. A fighter through and through.

I pin one arm to the wall and snatch the gun from her, shoving it up under her chin, which finally gets her to calm the fuck down. There's still defiance and anger in her dark blue eyes, and she looks at me like if she

could kill me with a look, I'd already be on the ground with the first guy she dropped.

My heart is racing from the fight, and I can feel the blood pumping through me as I stare at her, my eyes narrowed.

"What the hell are you doing murdering someone at my fucking club?" I demand, keeping my voice down. "Are you trying to have cops crawling all over the place?"

With the music still blaring from inside, the odds are low that someone will overhear us, but I'm not taking any chances.

She doesn't answer, staring back at me with those angry dark blue eyes. She has a long, graceful neck and plush lips, which are currently pulled back in something like a snarl.

Our bodies are pressed together, and I can feel all of her curves against me and the heat that's pouring off her. I hold her gaze and press in even tighter, licking my lips slightly.

"It would be a shame to destroy something so beautiful," I tell her in a low voice. "But I'll do it if you don't start talking."

Still, she just stares at me, not giving any indication that she's listening or even gives a shit about anything I'm saying.

"Last chance," I warn her, my voice hardening.

She turns her head and spits on the ground next to my feet, making her choice pretty damn clear.

I shrug and draw back, then draw the hand holding the weapon back in a flash and bring it down heavily, bashing her in the head with the butt of her gun and sending her crumpling to the ground.

When she falls, I take a step back, looking at the two bodies on the ground. Her, unconscious, and the man she killed who isn't getting up again.

What a fucking mess.

I pull out my phone and text my brothers in our group thread, letting them know we've got a problem and to meet me in the alley. I add in an 'ASAP' for Ash, just in case he's busy doing something else.

It only takes a few minutes for them to join me, Knox first and Priest on his heels. Ash is the last to step out the door, still in the process of tucking his dick away. He was probably getting it sucked by one of the cage dancers, knowing him.

They take a look at the bodies and then look back up to me.

“Aw, did you have fun without us?” Knox asks, folding his arms and furrowing his brows. The tattoos crawling up his neck from under the fabric of his shirt look like shadows in the darkness. “That’s not fair.”

“They’re not both dead, are they?” Ash wants to know.

I shake my head. “She killed him,” I tell them, nudging the dead guy with the toe of my boot. “I don’t know why.”

“Why here?” Priest asks, eyes locked on the scene.

“Don’t know that either,” I tell him. “She wasn’t talking, so I knocked her out. She put up a hell of a fight first, though.” I can feel the sting of the shallow scratches where she raked her nails into my skin, trying to claw and get away from me.

“Are we gonna kill her?” Knox asks, staring down at her body. He runs a hand over the scruff on his jaw. “We should wake her up if we are. It’s always better when they know why they’re being killed.”

“Seems like a bad idea to kill her if we don’t know why she’s here in the first place,” Ash puts in.

I nod at that. “Agreed.”

Knox makes a face that’s probably as close as he gets to a pout, and Priest rolls his eyes. We all know how much Knox likes to be able to have his fun without worrying about logistics.

“If she doesn’t talk, then maybe we’ll turn her over to you,” Ash tells him, patting his shoulder.

“She’d better talk,” I say darkly. “We need to know what the fuck she was doing and why she was doing it here. We’re not letting this shit go down at our club.”

The others nod in agreement at that. Whatever else is going on, we have to protect our business. We built it up from nothing into what it is today, and it’s the key to our freedom and independence, to our power in this city.

“Priest, help me get the girl out of here,” I say, giving directions. “Ash, you and Knox deal with him.” I nod at the dead body.

Priest moves around to grab the girl, hauling her up to her feet so she’s slumped over his shoulder, weighing him down.

I move in to help him, holding in an agitated sigh behind my teeth. What a fuck-up of a night this turned into.

RIVER

I WAKE up with a splitting headache.

The side of my face is sticky with blood, dripped down from the throbbing wound at the side of my head, and it takes me a little while to remember what happened. I killed the shitty informant in the alley and then someone came out of the club and attacked me. My head hurts because the asshole hit me over the head with my own gun.

I go to lift one hand to touch the wound and see how bad it is or if it's still bleeding, but I get brought up short by the chain attached to the shackle around my wrist. I'm chained to a wall, which explains the cold, hard brick against my back. The realization shoots through me like a bolt of electricity, and for just a second, I have a flash of extreme panic.

My breath comes in short, quick pants, and my heart kicks into overdrive, my pulse thundering through my veins. The facts of what's happening here and now start to blur with old fears and memories, and ice spreads through my chest, keeping me frozen with terror. Even though I'm alone in this room, the vision of a group of men standing over me, leering and laughing at my pain, flashes through my mind, as real as it was back then. A flashback of the hellish time I spent in captivity when I was sixteen years old.

But this isn't the same as that, I remind myself. That's over. It's done. You're not that girl anymore.

I repeat those words in my head as I drag in one deep breath and then another, forcing my burning lungs to cooperate with me.

Six of the men who fucked with me and tortured me are dead. There's only one name left to go.

This isn't the same as my previous captivity.

The rooms are different, for one thing. This is all grayish brick and cinderblocks from what I can make out as my eyes adjust to the darkness. There's a tiny bit of light coming in from the small crack under the door, and I squint as I try to gauge my surroundings. I can't see far enough to make out furniture or anything, but it doesn't feel like a completely empty space.

The room Hannah and I were held in back then was mostly brick, but red and brown and cut with wood. There were tables and chairs and doors that led to rooms with beds and other surfaces those men used to make us scream and hurt.

Those differences are enough to root me in reality, and I blink and shake off the terror as best I can. My blood runs hot and cold, and as I calm down from that first bout of panic, a new kind sets in. This time, my fear has much more to do with my *current* situation.

What if I die here and don't get that last name?

It's all I've lived for, for the past five years. It's all that's keeping me going. Killing Ivan St. James and crossing his name off my list is the last thing I have to do before I can die, and the thought of not fulfilling that promise to my sister fills me with a sick kind of dread.

I flex my fingers and shake out my hands, trying to get rid of that nervous pins-and-needles feeling. I need to have my goddamn wits about me if I'm going to handle whatever this is and get out of here.

I refuse to be taken out before I get that last name, no matter who the guy that captured me is.

A larger sliver of light floods the room, making me squint my eyes against it. I hear footsteps on stairs, and when I finally blink away the spots, there are two guys standing in front of me.

One of them is the guy from the club, the one who took my gun and bashed me over the head with it.

He's tall and well-built, with dark hair and a strong jawline. His eyes are a piercing green that I remember from the alley when he stared at me and demanded that I tell him why I was there.

He's giving me that same look now, and I look away from him to his friend, giving the other man a slow once over.

This guy is just as attractive as the first, but in a harsh way. Everything about him seems to be sharpened as if to cut. His blue eyes are bright and

icy, and he watches me as I look at him. He's got dark blond hair, buzzed on the sides and long on top, which would probably make anyone else look like a fuck boy, but he just seems to wear it like armor.

Where the first guy looks angry and impatient, there's no expression on Blue Eyes' face. He stares back at me, but that neutral expression doesn't change.

"What were you doing at our club?" the first man demands, and I shift my attention back to him. He looks frustrated, his arms folded and his eyes narrowed. There's a small scar on his upper lip, and I focus on that for a second instead of answering his question. Just to piss him off.

"Why did you kill that man?" Blue Eyes adds. His voice is as flat as his expression, and I wonder what he's hiding under all that calm coldness.

"Because he had to die," I snap, finally giving them something. The longer this night goes on, the more pissed off I get. My lead on Ivan evaporated into thin fucking air thanks to that shitty-ass informant, and I'm ending the night in chains with some assholes poking their noses into my business.

"Why our club?" the first guy asks again, and this time I can hear how pissed off he is.

"The location wasn't the point," I tell him through gritted teeth. "But he had it coming. That's all you need to know."

The two of them exchange a look, and I don't even know what Green Eyes can see in Blue Eyes' expression because it doesn't change. But there's some wordless communication there all the same, and I know they're not happy with my answer.

Too fucking bad.

"Do you work with one of the gangs in the city?" Blue Eyes asks coolly. I just stare back at him.

"Answer his fucking question!" Green Eyes snaps, giving into his anger even more. He's clearly pissed off, and he takes a step closer to me, getting in my face.

I try to mimic Blue Eyes' neutrality, just staring right back at him and keeping my mouth shut.

Blue Eyes watches it all, staying where he is with that same look on his face. It's like he doesn't even care what's happening, although I can tell he's taking it all in.

“Look at me,” Green Eyes growls, and I do, staring defiantly into those bright jade colored eyes. “I haven’t killed you yet because we want answers. But if you’re not going to tell us anything, then you’re no use to us.”

It’s almost an echo of what I told the guy I killed outside their club, and I laugh in spite of myself, amused at how the tables have turned in such a short time.

Something flickers across Blue Eyes’ features. It looks almost like surprise, but it doesn’t do anything to really shake that stone-faced thing he’s got going on.

Green Eyes has no problem showing his feelings, though. The anger is right there on his face, and he leans in close enough that I can feel the heat of his breath fanning across my skin. His eyes trace over my body, lingering on the cleavage the dress shows off. I almost forgot what I’m wearing—that I’m still dressed like a damn club bunny.

He lifts a hand and settles it along the curve of my jaw, brandishing the gun he stole from me in his other hand. The barrel of it is cold as he traces it down from my throat to my chest, skimming it over the fullness of my tits.

“I’ll give you a day,” he says in a low, husky tone. “So you can think it over and decide what you want to do here. I’m not a patient man, and I protect what’s mine. I need to know if you’re a threat to my club and therefore to my brothers.”

The threat is clear in his voice. This is the part where he probably expects me to spill my guts and tell him what he wants to hear. He can probably feel the way my pulse speeds up just a bit when he runs that gun over my skin, but I still don’t give in.

Instead, I just keep my mouth shut and watch him.

He lets his hand linger on my jaw for a second longer and then steps back, jerking his head at Blue Eyes. The two of them head back up the stairs and shut the door, plunging the basement or whatever this is back into darkness.

As soon as they’re gone, I slump back against the wall, letting out a low breath. I rotate my wrists in the shackles and jerk against the chains that hold them, testing to see how much leeway I have.

Unfortunately, the restraints are well done, and I don’t have anywhere to go. The chains are bolted into the wall, and it would take someone stronger

than me to bust them out. The shackles are pretty tight on my wrists, and I won't be getting out of them easily.

These guys clearly know what they're doing. They're serious, and they mean business. When Green Eyes said he'd give me a day, he meant it.

And that doesn't bode well for me at all.

KNOX

I DON'T EVEN BREAK a sweat as we dump the body that girl left in the alley in the trunk of my car and haul it out of town. Ash pouts the whole way there, but that's Ash. He loves getting what he wants, and he definitely didn't want to be stuck on corpse duty with me when he could be doing more fun stuff.

I don't know what he's so annoyed about, though. It's just work. Easy work, too.

We head out to a spot in the middle of nowhere that I'm familiar with, all looming trees and craggy ditches.

"Well, this is a cheerful place," Ash mutters under his breath, climbing out of the car when I kill the engine.

"Not supposed to be cheerful," I tell him, even though I'm smiling. I pop the trunk and haul the body out, throwing it over my shoulder.

"You're going to get blood on your shirt," he comments, following behind me once I slam the trunk closed and start hoofing it into the trees.

The smell of damp dirt and mildewy leaves and pine is thick in my nose, and I don't mind it. There's something kind of peaceful about being out here in the middle of the night, handling business.

I've used this spot before, a little patch of woods off the highway enough that no one comes here unless it's to do shady business. The pine needles, soggy leaves, and dirt cover the sound of our footsteps, and I can tell there's no one else around.

It's just the two of us and the trees and the holes in the ground. *And our dead friend*, I add mentally, bumping him higher up on my shoulder.

“It’s just a shirt,” I tell Ash over my other shoulder. “I’ve got a lot of shirts.”

I don’t need to be able to see him to know he’ll be rolling his eyes, crabby that his night has been ruined by some strange girl dusting off some strange dude in the alley behind our club.

“Let’s just make this quick, okay?” he says, and I shrug and hustle along.

I’ve always felt like I have some kind of sixth sense when it comes to where to bury a body. I’ve done it enough times that it’s not new, and there’s a certain kind of feel to the ground where you know it’ll be easy to break through the earth and dig a deep enough hole to bury the remains.

“Did you grab the stuff?” I ask Ash, dumping the body on the ground in a good spot with a huff.

“Yeah,” he replies, hefting a bag in one hand and a shovel in the other. “This isn’t my first rodeo. But it’s your kinda thing, so here.”

He hands over the bag and leans the shovel against a nearby tree. I take the accelerant out of the bag and start squeezing the bottle, squirting the nasty smelling liquid all over the body.

Ash wrinkles his nose and steps back, but the smell doesn’t bother me as much. Maybe I’m just used to it. It burns my nose, but it’s a familiar feeling, and I smile a little as I light a match and drop it onto the body, watching the flames catch and grow immediately.

The fire lights up the woods, making flickering lights dance off the trees, and I watch it like a kid staring into a fireplace ready to roast a marshmallow. There’s something beautiful about it, and about the way the fire eats through the body, leaving a pile of charred bones and ash behind in a dark spot on the ground.

I look over at Ash, who has his phone out, not interested in the show. Oh well. It always has been my kinda thing.

I grab the shovel and dig a hole deep enough that someone would really have to go digging to find what’s left of Mr. Nobody here, and then I shovel the remains and the dirt back into it.

It’s easy work. Honest work. My muscles get warm from the repetitive movement, and it makes me feel good and alive. I was right about the spot being perfect, since the dirt splits easily under the shovel, with no hard stone or solid rock to get in the way.

All told, it takes about half an hour, and when it's done, I wipe my brow and smile with satisfaction, breathing in the cool night air that's still scented with the aroma of char.

"Are we done here?" Ash asks, his voice cutting through the quiet of the night with that impatient edge he gets when he's not doing something he thinks is worth his time.

"Yup," I tell him, gathering the stuff back up and slinging the shovel over my shoulder. He watches and then shrugs, leading the way out of the woods and back to the car so we can head back to the city.

"You know, I had better things to do with my night than this," he grumbles. His amber eyes gleam behind his glasses as he turns to look at me over his shoulder. "Much better things."

"What's better than this?" I ask him, grinning teasingly. "Spending time with your favorite person in the great outdoors. Sounds like a good night to me."

He rolls his eyes. "I was supposed to have a fucking three-way with one of the dancers from the club and her twin sister."

"Exciting," I say, nodding along.

"Yeah, it fucking would've been. Have you seen this girl? She dances in the cages above the bar, and she's fucking stacked. I mean, just gorgeous. Great tits, ass that won't quit, long hair and sexy legs. She says her sister's in even better shape than she is because she teaches yoga. You know what that means, Knox?"

"Bendy?"

He nods. "Bendy. In all the right ways. And there's two of them, and they wanted to get it on tonight. I'd be there right now if it wasn't for this bullshit. Gage finds a body and some girl in the alley and now I'm on body duty instead of getting my dick sucked by a girl who can probably put her legs behind her head."

I don't really see how that would make getting his dick sucked easier, but I don't say that.

"Gage said it had to be done," I tell him.

"Yeah, I know."

"And I got put on body duty too."

Ash snorts and rolls his eyes again. "Yeah, but you get off on this shit. You'd rather torture some poor idiot or burn a body than have a three-way with two sexy as fuck dancers anyway."

I just laugh, not denying it.

I like sex, don't get me wrong, but Ash has a point. I like this too. There's something primal about death and pain. Something in it reminds me that I'm alive, but that I could die at any moment too. It keeps me on my toes and keeps me moving forward.

I got the nickname The Butcher of Seven Mile years ago, and there was definitely a reason for it.

We make it back to the car, and Ash pulls out his phone again, either texting Priest to complain about his night being ruined or trying to coordinate his three-way from a distance. Either way, I strap in and get us headed back to Detroit, turning on some low music to bop my head to while I drive.

I'm in a zen kind of mood after all that, the smell of the fire and the dirt still clinging to my clothes, reminding me of what I just did in a way I really like.

"Home or back to the club?" I ask Ash, looking over at him.

"The club," he says, grinning now instead of the scowl he's been wearing since Gage told us we had to take care of the random dead guy.

It's so late it's early by this point, but clearly his night isn't completely ruined.

I give him a sarcastic little salute and drop him off out front, watching him get out and hustle his way inside, dragging fingers through his dark hair as he goes. He's usually the best dressed out of all of us, the one who puts the most care into his appearance—not that the rest of us are slob, we just don't get into that shit the same way he does—and even after burying a body in the woods, he looks like he could've walked off the page of some men's magazine.

I'm sure the ladies will be thrilled to see him.

Pulling away from the curb, I take myself back to the house the four of us share. We've been living together practically since we opened Sin and Salvation and went into business for ourselves, after deciding we weren't going to get absorbed into any of the other gangs in Detroit. They came knocking, trying to recruit each of us for our various skills and connections, but we knew it was just them trying to control us in the end. So now it's just the four of us, the Kings of Chaos, taking orders from nobody and doing only what we want, and I like it that way.

Priest and Gage are home, but the front room of the house is quiet when I get inside. Gage is probably in his room in planning mode, trying to decide what to do about all the shit we have breathing down our necks at the moment. This girl, Ivan St. James, the thing with the possible gun smuggling—which I still don't think is that big a deal.

Priest is probably brooding somewhere, or staring off into the middle distance, which seems to be his favorite activity. I love the guy and would kill for him without question, but I don't pretend to know what goes on in his head most of the time.

Everyone in the house has a place that's kind of their space, their domain.

Mine is the basement.

It's where I do all the dirty work that needs doing. Where I handle my business. Sometimes it's as simple as hurting someone in the right way until they tell me what I want to know. Sometimes, they're a lost cause and I have to eliminate them altogether. But it's easy. All of my instruments are down there, the tools of my trade, and knowing Gage like I do, I know the girl we're saddled with now is down there, too.

I don't bother to change clothes before I head down the stairs. I want her to see the dirt and blood on me and to smell the scent of burned flesh, so she'll know how serious we are. Intimidation is always important when it comes to negotiations, after all.

I half expect to see the girl huddled in the corner as far as her chains will let her go. Or for her to be ready to beg for release as soon as she sees me. It always depends when it comes to the people we keep locked up down here.

Some of them are already scared shitless when I show up, eyes wide and the scent of fear hanging on them like cologne. It doesn't take much to make them start singing for me. And then there are the ones who come in stoic and close-mouthed. Who watch me with defiant eyes and set jaws. They take a little more work, but it's never too hard to get them to open up in the end. Just takes the right touch.

From what Gage said about this girl, she's probably the second type. If she wasn't, she would have already told him what he wanted to know, and she'd be freed or dead by now. But she's still here, enjoying our hospitality, so she must be stubborn.

I like the stubborn ones best.

They're more fun, for one. And for another, it's always interesting to try to figure out what makes them tick. So I'm curious about this girl, and I'm surprised to see her sleeping, head tipped back against the wall.

She must be out of it, because she doesn't even stir when I step closer to her, looking her over.

Even in the dim light of the basement, she looks sexy as hell. Her dress has ridden up, showing off her long legs, smooth thighs, and tattoos, and there's a lot of cleavage on display too. Her hair's a mess, but the silvery color looks good on her.

There's dried blood on the side of her face from where Gage hit her, and it catches my attention more than anything else. I step closer, breathing her in, and then lean in to drag my tongue up the side of her temple, licking the blood from her face.

It's sharp and coppery, and I lick my lips, watching her face as she snaps awake with wild eyes.

She lunges, trying to bite me, and I grin, catching her jaw in one hand and pushing her head back against the wall with ease.

"Now that's not nice," I say in a teasing voice, grinning at her with her blood probably still staining my teeth a bit.

"What do you want?" she snaps, her dark blue eyes narrowed. She's trying to get her calm back, but I can feel the way her heart hammers, making her pulse beat faster under my hand. It's a dead giveaway that she's startled, like a little deer in headlights.

"I'm just visiting," I tell her.

"Are you here to interrogate me like the other two?" she asks. "Because I'll give you the same thing I gave them. Jack shit."

She's feisty, and I grin wider. "No, not at the moment. If Gage decides that I should interrogate you, though, you won't like it very much."

I glance over to the side of the room where my cabinet and workbench are. The cabinet doors are shut now, but the inside is full of neatly arranged tools of torture. Everyone gives me shit for my bedroom being a mess, but I keep my tools neat and tidy, so that I can use them when I need them.

She follows my gaze and seems to get the point. Smart girl.

I expect there to be more fear, more anger, in her expression. Some kind of reaction I'm familiar with that goes along with how most people react when they realize the situation they're in.

But instead she grins right back at me, feral around the edges.

“I’ve played this game before,” she tells me in a low voice. “I’ve been hurt before. I know you’re gonna kill me no matter what, so I’m not giving you what you want.”

Huh. Definitely not what I was expecting.

The look in her eyes tells me she’s not lying. She’s no stranger to being hurt, maybe even tortured, and she’s come through it well enough to be sitting here in front of me.

There’s something sexy about that. About her showing no fear. She thinks she’s not going to make it out of here, and she’s still not backing down, not showing her neck.

I use the hold on her chin to tip her head to one side, forcing her to show it to me anyway. It’s not the same, but there’s something satisfying about how much bigger I am than her, how easy she is to move physically, even if she won’t be moved to talk without more force.

“You’d be hard to crack, I bet,” I murmur, leaning in to let my voice drag over her skin like my eyes. “I’d have to use the special tools for you. Maybe make you beg for it first.”

“You could try,” she spits out. “You wouldn’t be the first.”

She throws the words in my face to try to shake my confidence, but I just grin back at her.

“I was wrong about you, little fox,” I say. “You’re tougher than I expected.”

There’s no deer in the headlights here. She’s a predator in her own right, but that still won’t help her here. My brothers and I are at the top of the food chain.

I tighten my fingers on her chin, letting her feel the strength there. “But you’re in the wolves’ den now. And little foxes don’t survive when they go up against wolves.”

RIVER

THE BIG MAN with the wild, dark eyes grins one more time and then gets up and strides toward the door. His footsteps echo as he heads back up the stairs to the upper part of the house, leaving me alone in the room in the dark.

I can still smell him on me, and I can remember the heat of his breath on my face. He reeked of smoke and burned flesh, and I spare a second to think about the informant I killed outside their club. He's probably nothing but ashes now, and I bet the big guy liked it. I probably did him a favor by leaving that body there. Made his fucking night or something. He's obviously fucking psycho as hell, grinning like a loon while talking about torturing me the same way someone else might talk about sex or having dinner or something. But for some reason, I felt weirdly... drawn to him. To the wildness in his eyes, maybe. He's not the type to back down from a fight, and I understand that completely.

Then I remember what he said—how foxes don't survive with wolves.

Annoyance rises up in me, sharp and acrid. I'm prepared to die. I have been since I started this mission of vengeance. Maybe it will end in death for me, or maybe it won't, but that's not the thing that makes me mad right now.

What pisses me off in this moment is the fact that I might lose to these assholes.

Whatever their issues are, they have nothing to do with me. I just happened to be in the wrong place at the wrong time and pissed them off, but it has nothing to do with them. I have my own stuff to deal with, and being stuck down here in their shitty dungeon is fucking with that.

They don't even give a shit about the man I killed, or me, just their club.

There has to be a way out of this, without compromising myself and giving them more information than I want them to have.

I jerk on the chains, hearing them rattle against the cold brick of the wall. They're bolted in there, and I'm definitely not going to be able to yank them out.

The shackles are tight around my wrists, and there's not even much room to wiggle them free. They definitely know what they're doing, and I think about the big guy and the pride and excitement in his eyes at the thought of being able to torture me. He's done it before. He has the tools for it, apparently.

When they grab someone, that person probably doesn't get out. But I'm not just anyone.

My double joints have come in handy before, and I think they will now, too. I suck in a breath and start compressing my hands, working them so they're as small and slender as they possibly can be.

I start on the left, yanking my wrist against the hard metal of the cuff. It hurts like a bitch, the metal digging into my skin, slicing it up a little.

But pain has never stopped me before, and it's not about to stop me now. I grit my teeth through it and keep pulling until my left hand is free. It's sore and red around the widest part, but it's out.

Time for the right one.

That one's harder, and by the time I have it halfway out, there's blood pouring down my forearm, and it seems stuck. I rotate my wrist, letting the blood slick the slide of it, lubricating it enough that I can wiggle it free after a minute or so.

I pause when I'm done, holding my breath to hear if anyone is coming. The basement is silent, and I can't hear anyone on the stairs or coming to the door. Above me, there's the creaking of floorboards, but that could be coming from anywhere in the house.

There are at least three of them here now, and if they catch me, it probably won't be pretty.

Stepping away from the wall, I hiss and shake out my wrists. I go over to the cabinets the big guy gestured to before. If he keeps his torture implements in there, then maybe there's something I can use as a weapon or to get out of the basement in one piece.

I try every door, but they're all locked up tight. No amount of tugging on the handles does anything to even budge them, and there's nothing I can use to pry them open.

I'd rather find something I can use to defend myself with before attempting to escape, but I don't have a lot of choice, so I try it anyway, creeping over to the door that leads to the stairs and testing the knob.

Of course the fucking door to the rest of the house is locked too.

Motherfucker.

They're smart. Maybe they've had a prisoner break out of the shackles before, so now they aren't taking any chances by leaving the door unlocked. Maybe they're just good at this and not dumb enough to leave anything to chance. Either way, I'm not going to be able to sneak out of here that way. And there are no windows in the basement, so there's nothing for me to break or try to force open and climb out of.

I'll have to wait until one of the guys comes back and then fight my way out. Unarmed, since that one asshole took my gun. I usually like my odds in a fight, but there are three of them and one of me, and the one guy with the wild eyes definitely wasn't fucking around.

He'd put me down in a heartbeat and probably get off on it. And Blue Eyes and Green Eyes would just let it happen.

I have to find some way to get an advantage over them, but I can plan that as I go.

For now, I settle back down to wait. I work my hands partially back into the cuffs, keeping them loose enough that I can get myself back out of them easily enough. At a quick glance, it looks like I'm still restrained and helpless in their little torture basement, but it won't fool anyone for long.

Hopefully, it'll be enough to make whoever comes down next drop their guard.

It's been a long fucking night. Even before I got mixed up with these guys, there was that whole thing with hunting down the fucking liar who scammed me out of my shot at revenge. That all seems like it happened ages ago now. I can feel the exhaustion dragging at me, so I lean back against the wall and let myself doze off a little, but I don't drop into a deep sleep.

As soon as I hear the door open, I snap awake, blinking in the darkness to try to get a glimpse of whoever's coming down.

It's not one of the three from earlier, but a different guy I haven't seen before. He's gorgeous like a model, and as soon as he sees me, he flashes a killer smile.

He looks like the kind of man who knows how hot he is, and the effect he has on anyone inclined to look his way. His hair is dark, but even in the dim light, I can tell it's thick and soft. His eyes look like a warm amber brown, and I bet there are flecks of gold in his irises when the light hits them just right. He has on glasses, but they just make him look sexy and charming, rather than like a dork.

Everything about the way he moves screams confidence, and he swaggers his way over to where I'm chained up, grinning at me.

When he gets close, I can smell whiskey on his breath and the scent of sex clinging to his clothes and skin. He's clearly been having fun tonight, and that annoys the hell out of me, but also makes something low in my body go tight for some reason.

But I shake that off and tense up, ready for the fight that's coming.

"I heard we had a guest," he says in a smooth voice, like he might be flirting with someone at a bar and not talking to a prisoner in his house. "So I had to come see for myself. How did you sleep?"

I lift an eyebrow at him. Unlike the others, he's not making demands or threats. But if he thinks he can flirt the information out of me, he's about to be extremely disappointed.

"I've got some complaints, actually," I tell him. "The room service sucks, and there was no chocolate on my pillow. If this is how you treat your guests, I'm afraid I'm gonna have no choice but to leave a one-star review."

One of the others, short tempered as they seem to be, might have lashed out at my smartass response, but Four Eyes only grins. Huh. That's a good way to keep them separate in my mind since I don't know their names and don't *want* to know them. Blue Eyes, Green Eyes, Wild Eyes, and Four Eyes. The fuckers keeping me captive. The ones I have to get through if I want to get out of here.

"I'm sorry to hear that," he says, practically purring. "We usually try to keep our lovely guests so much more comfortable than this. Has Knox been down to see you yet?"

"Is he the big guy, the bossy guy, or the constipated one?" I shoot back.

He actually laughs, seemingly amused by me. Good. The more he lowers his guard, the better.

“You really do have them all pegged, huh? What would you describe me as? The sexy one? The intriguing one? The one you’d like to take for a spin?”

“Sure. Just dying to,” I say in my flattest, driest tone possible.

“I knew it. All you have to do is ask, honey. And probably tell Gage what he wants to know, so he’ll be okay with me taking you out of those shackles. Unless you’d rather stay in them. That’s more than fine, too. I’d never kick a kinky girl out of bed.”

“I bet you’ve never kicked anyone out of bed,” I shoot back, and he laughs.

“You might be right.” His eyes trace over me, taking in my outfit, my hair, my disheveled appearance. I know he’ll be able to see how tired I am, and maybe that’ll get him to loosen up even more. He already seems plenty comfortable, because he’s a flirt and he’s on his own turf, so if he drops his guard just a bit more, it should be perfect.

“Damn, Gage really clocked you, huh?” he asks, leaning in to look at the wound on my head.

That’s all I need.

I headbutt him with all the strength I can muster, and when he reels back in surprise, I yank my hands free and launch myself forward.

I land on Four Eyes, lashing out at him. With my bloody hand, I give him a good punch in the face, then aim my knee for his gut, winding him.

I get a good few hits in, enough to keep him disoriented, hopefully, and then I bolt for the door and shove it open.

Just as I suspected, I’m in a basement, and the stairs loom ahead of me. My outfit isn’t great for this kind of thing, but I’m not letting that stop me. This is my only chance, so I start running, clattering up the stairs, trying to get to the open door.

There are footsteps on the stairs behind me, and before I can reach the door, arms wind their way around my waist, stopping me in my tracks.

I pull against Four Eyes’ hold, but he’s strong, digging in his heels to keep me from getting free.

“You’re a feisty one,” he says, sounding out of breath. “But you’re not getting away from us that easily.”

“Fuck you,” I spit, all the banter gone now that I can see a path to freedom right ahead of me.

“Don’t threaten me with a good time, sweetheart,” he grunts, trying to drag me back down the stairs.

I rear back with my elbow, aiming for something soft and sensitive. His face, his throat, anything will do. He manages to block the blow and shoves me sideways so that I slam chest first against the wall to the side of the staircase.

My chest heaves as I suck in air, and I can feel him pressed hard against my back, breathing just as heavily as I am as he pins me to the wall. The air is electric between us, and his muscles are taut against me. He’s not as thick as Wild Eyes, lean where the other man is beefy, but he’s strong, and I’m not making much progress in struggling to get away from him.

“Let it go,” he hisses in my ear. “You’re not going to get out of here like this.”

The fuck I’m not.

I lift my foot and kick backward, finding his knee with the heel of my shoe. He makes a pained noise, and his grip loosens enough for me to be able to wiggle my way free and start racing up the stairs again.

He’s not far behind me, though, grabbing me and spinning me around to face him. I almost lose my balance, but I manage to shove him back as we fight our way to the top of the steps.

Four Eyes gets in behind me again, and I can feel his breath hot and heavy against the back of my neck. One hand comes around to grab at my neck, and I reach up to try to force it away, but he gets a grip on my throat before I can do anything.

His hand is big enough to cut off my air, and I try to suck in a breath before he squeezes, but I can feel myself going lightheaded.

It’s hard to focus when I can’t fucking breathe, and he’s pulling me, trying to drag me back down toward their shitty dungeon as he chokes me.

But I can’t let that happen.

I claw at his wrist, trying to break his grip, and I keep shoving my body backward in an attempt to throw him off balance. When I give another forceful shove, he stumbles, missing a step or just losing his balance, and that’s enough of an opening for me to push him away and get free, gasping for breath.

My head is spinning from having my air cut off like that, but I sprint to the top of the stairs and shove the door open. I'm barely through it when the man catches me by the arm in a hard grip, and I whirl around, ready to fight back. I'm not giving up until I'm out of here.

But then a voice cuts in, cracking through the air like a whip.

"You'd better stop that shit right now," Green Eyes tells me, his tone low and serious. "Unless you want a bullet through your head."

A S H

IT'S a hell of an ultimatum Gage just laid down, and I can see the woman struggling with it, the debate playing out on her face. She's really considering whether she'd rather have a bullet through her head than stop fighting.

I like that. She's scrappy and never gives up, even when the odds are so clearly stacked against her. Although... I have no idea how she managed to get out of her cuffs down there, and judging from how she was fighting me on the stairs, she might have more tricks up her sleeve that we don't know about.

Still, it would be a shame for this to end in bloodshed.

I grin at her, putting some distance between us.

"Stop fighting, sweet thing," I say, letting my voice dip down into the register that usually has panties dropping left and right. "I'd hate to see that pretty head get a hole in it."

She glares at me like she wants to set me on fire with her eyes, but she stops struggling, going still.

I dust myself off and reach down to adjust my cock, which has swelled all over again in the fight, even though I just went a few rounds with that hot dancer and her sister.

Knox, who's standing in the doorway at the top of the stairs with Gage now, howls with laughter. "Getting the shit kicked out of you made you hard?" he asks, wiping his eyes.

"Excuse you, Knox. I wasn't 'getting the shit kicked out of me.' It was mutual," I shoot back, cocking an eyebrow at him. But he's not totally

wrong. Having her pressed against me, feeling all that energy while she struggled to get away and wouldn't give up... it was damn hot.

Priest just looks blank, as per usual, not letting anyone know anything about how he feels about this whole situation.

Gage looks annoyed, either with me for my 'antics' as he calls them, or with the girl for somehow getting free.

Either way, I laugh, not embarrassed about the fact that the fight affected me in more ways than one.

"What about the twins?" Knox rumbles, his thick arms folded. "They weren't enough for you? I thought one of them was all bendy and shit."

I shrug one shoulder. "They were alright. Her sister was bendy. A human pretzel with a mouth that didn't quit. But they weren't nearly feisty enough for my taste." I glance at the woman when I say that last part, taking in her outfit and silver hair now that we're standing in the light.

She glares even harder at me, if such a thing is possible, and flips me off.

"Enough!" Gage roars, a vein in his neck bulging. When he's pissed off, he's a nightmare to deal with, and the anger and frustration is clear to see on his face. His hands are balled into fists at his side, and he looks from me to the girl like he's trying to work out a math problem or something.

"How the fuck did this happen, Ash?" he demands. "Why is she loose?"

"I don't know," I admit, grimacing as some of my amusement slips away. "I went down to see her, and she must have already been free. I didn't let her go."

To emphasize my point, I hold up my hands in a gesture of innocence. I'm horny, not stupid, and anyone undermining Gage in a situation like this would have to be short on some brain cells.

"Then how did she—" He cuts himself off and looks down at the girl's bloody hands.

They were already bloody before, when she hit me the first time, I remember. At the time, I didn't think anything of it, but now I realize that she must have slipped her cuffs, not giving a shit if she scraped her wrists all to shit in the process.

Fuck. Impressive.

The others realize at the same time as I do what must have happened, and they trade looks.

If anything, Gage just looks even more done with this whole mess than he was before. She's a threat, and he doesn't take kindly to those, especially ones who manage to be as twisty and close-mouthed as this girl has been tonight.

I've seen that look on his face before, when he decides something just isn't worth it, and it doesn't bode well for the silver-haired beauty at all.

"I was gonna give you twenty-four hours," he says to her, his eyes narrowed and his jaw tight. "But I'm fed the fuck up with this bullshit."

He lifts his gun, his face going blank as Priest's usually is. The barrel points right between her eyes, and I know he's not going to hesitate to kill her. He'll blow her brains out right here in our house, and then have Knox take care of the remains. Whatever mess the girl was involved in will end with her, most likely, and we can get back to our business.

But for some reason, I don't want to see that happen.

It's not like we have some code of honor against killing women. We've knocked off plenty of them for getting in our way, since they can be just as deserving of death as men are. But this particular woman? She intrigues me too much to let the mystery of what the fuck she's after die with her.

Going against Gage is usually a one-way ticket to a shallow grave, but it's different when it's one of us, so I step in between them, pushing the gun away with one hand in a smooth motion. I flash him my most winning smile.

"Maybe you should try catching flies with honey next time," I tell him.

He growls, but I ignore him, putting my back to him and facing the girl. "What's your name?" I ask her.

"Ghost," she practically spits. For someone who just had a gun pointed at her head, she doesn't seem shaken at all. She doesn't seem all that grateful to me for saving her life, either.

"Sure," I reply with a chuckle. "And his name is Priest." I point at Priest, who just raises an eyebrow and keeps pretending to be a mannequin.

I can see that obstinance in the woman's eyes. She's not going to back down easily, and she's not going to give up anything without a good reason... and apparently, she doesn't think the threat of death is a good enough reason to spill her secrets.

"Look," I tell her. "If you don't talk, Gage *will* kill you. He'll end you right here in the middle of the floor, and the only thing he'll feel bad about is what it does to the carpet."

I don't know if I'm getting through to her, but I keep going. "We don't give a shit about that guy you killed. We've got no vendetta against you for that. We already took care of the body, and we can consider that water under the bridge. But we need to know what the hell is going on and why you killed him, because if it's some gang war that spills into our club, it'll be bad for business. You understand, right? We're trying to protect our interests here."

Her eyes narrow while I talk, and she looks like she's chewing it over, weighing her options. Gage isn't pulling the trigger, at least, so that's one thing going right.

Finally, the girl sighs. "It's not a gang war," she says. "I'm not in a gang."

"Then why did you kill that guy?" Gage demands, still sounding on edge.

"Because he had it coming," she snaps.

"Why?"

"He... gave me bad information." Each word comes out of her mouth slowly, like she's debating whether she should say it or not. I can tell she's not going to give us everything, but hopefully she says enough.

Gage frowns, but I keep smiling, taking over. "So it wasn't just a personal vendetta?"

"It was," she says. "But he's not my end target."

"Then who is?"

There's another pause, and then she lifts her chin, meeting my eyes with a defiance that makes my cock twitch all over again. "Ivan St. James."

My eyebrows shoot up when she says that name. *Oh shit, this is perfect. It couldn't be any better if I'd planned it.*

I turn to grin at Gage. "See? Maybe she's not so much a thorn in our side as the perfect solution to our problem."

"What the fuck is that supposed to mean?" the girl demands, folding her arms and glaring at me.

I ignore her just as cheerfully as I ignored Gage before, keeping my gaze on my friend. "This could be a great solution, and you know it."

"It's dangerous," Priest points out, talking for the first time since the girl and I came up the stairs.

"You say that about everything. We live dangerous lives," I tell him. "Sometimes you have to take a... a calculated risk."

“Is that what you call it?” he fires back, glancing down at my crotch.

I just grin back at him, shrugging. “Hey, I like what I like.”

“But can we trust her?” Gage cuts in.

“She wants St. James dead, at least,” Knox says. “I trust that. She knocked off some other dude trying to get to him, and you can tell she’s serious. If she wasn’t, she would’ve just told us what we wanted to know in the first place, right?”

“Could be an act.”

“Nah.” Knox shakes his head. “I know a personal grudge when I smell one.”

“So you’re just going to talk about me like I’m not standing right the fuck here?” the girl asks, sounding ticked off.

No one stops to answer her, which makes her lips flatten into a thin line in irritation.

“You were just foaming at the mouth about St. James earlier tonight,” I point out to Gage, even though it feels like it might as well have been another day, considering how much has happened since then. Night has pretty much given up the ghost and turned into morning by this point. “We’ve got someone here already gunning for him. Someone who doesn’t seem like she’s gonna stop until he’s dead.”

“I’m going to kill him one way or another,” the girl called Ghost says forcefully, and when I turn to glance at her, that fierce light is back in her eyes.

It’s not an idle or empty threat.

She means every word of it, and she’ll do whatever it takes to make it happen. I can tell that much. She already ripped up her wrists and went up against me unarmed just to get out of our basement, and judging from the look of her, that’s probably not the hardest thing she’s come through to get to where she is now.

I raise an eyebrow at Gage as if to say ‘see?’ and he sighs and grits his teeth. I can tell it’s going against pretty much every instinct he has to let her walk out of here after everything, but he nods in the end.

I flash him a bright smile for his trouble.

“Fine,” he says. “She can handle this.”

“Oh wow, thank you,” the girl deadpans. “I’m so happy you’re willing to let me continue the thing I was going to do anyway. You’re all just too fucking nice.”

Finally, we all turn to look at her. She still has her arms folded, still looks guarded and tired as hell, but that doesn't take away from how gorgeous she is even a little bit.

"You're welcome," I tell her cheerfully. I take a step closer and put a hand on her shoulder, massaging it a little as if that will relieve some of the tension coursing through her.

When she glares at me, I just wink back, flashing her my most winning smile.

"We're not bad guys," I continue. "Well... not all the time. We can work together on this."

"We're not working together," Gage cuts in. "She's going to make up for killing some fucker outside our club by killing Ivan for us. That's it."

I grimace, catching the girl's gaze and chuckling. "He's grumpy tonight. But the point is, it's a win-win."

It's not quite a win for anyone yet, actually, since there's still a chance Gage could change his mind and end her right here and now. A long moment stretches by, and I wait to see what he'll do.

Finally, he lowers the gun, and the tension in the room eases up a little.

"You're free to go," he says, jerking his head at the door.

RIVER

FREE TO GO.

The words bounce around in my head like they're searching for a place to land and not having much luck.

The four men are all looking at me like they're waiting for me to leave, but there's an uneasy feeling in my gut. I'm suspicious as fuck, because I know guys like this don't just capture people and then let them go out of nowhere. Yeah, the flirty one smoothed things over, but the leader, Gage or whatever, still looks like he'd rather shoot me in the face than let me leave this house in one piece. His full lips are pressed into a hard line, and he doesn't blink as he holds his gaze on me.

At least he's not pointing the gun right between my eyes anymore.

Well, whatever. They said I can go, so I do, shrugging Four Eyes' hand off my arm with more force than necessary and marching past them toward the door that leads out of the room.

I don't want to turn my back on them, because it probably wouldn't be out of character for them to shoot me in the back as soon as I take my eyes off them, but I've never been one to overthink shit.

It's a waste of time.

Their house is massive, and it takes a little while for me to find my way to the front door of their big ass house. None of them follow me, either to help show me the way or take it all back with a 'gotcha' and a gun to the face.

I yank the door open and step out into the weak early morning light. After spending the last however long in their basement, the cool morning air on my face and skin feels good as fuck, and I tip my head back,

breathing it in. Birds are chirping in their nests up the trees, and the grass is all damp with that morning mist. It's not the first time I've dragged my ass home just after dawn, and it probably won't be the last.

But fuck, what a night. I remember getting dressed in my little apartment, planning out how the night was going to go, but nothing could have prepared me for what really happened. I didn't expect to spend the night in their fucking basement, chained up and interrogated and flirted with by a bunch of dangerous psychos.

I need a shower and to fall face first into my bed, but first, I have to get out of this weirdly posh ass neighborhood they live in.

I have no idea where I am, since I was out of it when they dragged me here, so I just pick a direction and start walking that way, assuming it'll lead me to a main road eventually.

No one comes running after me. No gunshots ring out or anything, so I finally breathe a little sigh of relief. I did it. I got out of there.

Not the way I thought I would, but whatever. If they want to think I'm hunting down Ivan St. James for them, then they can think that. Doesn't change the point of my mission.

Once I hit a bigger, less residential street, I manage to hail a cab, and the guy pulls up to a stop and eyes me warily.

I know I look like shit. My face is bloody and bruised, and my wrists and hands look like I got in a fight with something sharp and didn't win.

He doesn't try to kick me out, and I ignore his looks and just settle into the back seat after I give him my address. I don't give a fuck about what he thinks of what I look like. His job is just to get me home.

I roll the window down and fish a cigarette out of the little bag I kept tucked in my cleavage since this dress doesn't exactly have pockets. Perks of having big tits.

The cabbie doesn't like the smoking either, and he gives me a look in the rearview mirror that makes him seem like a disapproving dad or something.

But he doesn't say anything, so neither do I. I blow a cloud of smoke out the window, watching the trees and buildings whiz by as he drives.

Eventually, the unfamiliar territory changes to the stuff I recognize. The shitty package store on the corner. The group of guys who always stand at the bus stop, arguing in loud-ass voices about a poker game from the night

before. The motel that definitely is a front for prostitution and who knows what else.

I lean back in the seat even more, tapping ash off the end of my cigarette out the window and letting more of that tension seep out of me. Being back on my own turf feels good. It feels like I have more control.

We pull up to my shitty apartment building, and I hand the guy enough for the ride and a little extra as a tip. He zooms the fuck out of the parking lot like he can't wait to be away from me and this place, and I snort, not blaming him.

I drop the butt of my cigarette on the pavement and stomp it out before heading up to the building.

It really is a piece of shit. From the outside, it looks like some kind of rundown old factory or something, all cracked brick and stone. Maybe it used to be nice, but now it's just another place for weirdos and crooks to hide out.

Before I hit the door, I hear a little whuff of a bark, and the stray dog I've been feeding comes wandering out of the alley at the side of the building.

He's a scrawny thing, even with me giving him scraps all the time, and he probably hasn't ever had a bath. He trots right up to me and wags his tail, tongue lolling out of his mouth as he stares up at my face.

"I don't have shit for you," I tell him, waving my hands to try to shoo him off. "If I'd died last night, your cushy life of scraps would've been over." He doesn't seem to care about any of that, just wagging his tail harder at the sound of my voice.

"Should've let you starve," I scoff under my breath. "Now you're getting soft." He just whines low in his throat and nudges my leg. "Yeah, yeah," I mutter. "Fuck off."

I brush him off and go inside. At this hour, most of the people who live here are either too strung out from the night before to be up yet, or they're all crashing hard after nights like mine, so the hall is quiet. There's no one to see me take the stairs two at a time until I get to my apartment.

I let myself in and sigh with relief before crossing to the fridge and rummaging through it. There are some leftovers from a couple nights ago, and I toss it out the window to Dog, who waits below.

He yips with excitement and pounces on the food with joy, and I roll my eyes and slam the window closed.

Kicking my shoes off feels good, and I take a second to enjoy the cool feeling of the scuffed and pitted wood floor of my bedroom under my bare feet.

I want to shower the night off me and then maybe sleep for a week, so I head to the bathroom, flipping on the light and making a face at my reflection in the mirror.

It's not a pretty sight.

My dress from the night is torn in more than one place, showing off a lot of tattooed skin. My face is bruised all to hell, and there are marks around my neck from where that asshole tried to choke me out.

I look like shit, and I smell like shit from being locked in a room that smelled like blood and fear all night.

But I made it out of there, and that's all that matters. I've gone through worse before, and after a shower and some sleep, I can get this experience off me and move onto the next one. Because there's always a next one.

I peel the dress off, letting it fall in a heap on the bathroom floor. I sit on the toilet with the lid closed and rummage in the cabinet under the sink for my box of nail polish.

The black polish I did the other day is chipped and ruined from last night's mess, so I take it off, careful to get every smudge of black from around the cuticles.

There's something relaxing about changing the color of my polish after a rough few nights. Like a reset, in a way. I choose a bright ass red this time, painting it over my nails like streaks of blood.

I fan my hands out while my nails dry, blowing on them until it's good enough that I can shower without fucking them up.

The hot water burns as it hits the cuts and scrapes I've got from fighting with assholes all night. Bloody water runs over my body and swirls down the drain, and I roll my shoulders and let the heat wash away the last of the tension in my body.

I stand there until the water runs clean, streaming over my breasts and down my stomach to my legs. It runs down my tattooed thigh and makes the scars on my legs look rippled, instead of the neat lines they're actually in.

I soak my hair and let it run down my back and then reach for the soap and the shampoo.

I don't leave the shower until I'm clean and refreshed, and I take the time to dry myself off before walking naked into the main room of my shitty little studio.

It was definitely empty when I came home, but now Wild Eyes is standing in the middle of the room. Knox, I think they called him.

He grins when he sees me and doesn't even hide the fact that he's ogling me, letting his eyes drag over my body from head to toe and then back up again.

I freeze, caught in his gaze and the surprise of seeing someone standing in my fucking apartment.

"Well damn, River," he says. "This is a hell of a welcome."

How the fuck does he know my name? The only one I gave him and the other men was Ghost. Dammit. He probably went through my shit while I was showering, and the thought of him pawing through my things makes my blood boil. Should've known them letting me go was too good to be true.

The spell breaks when he says that, and I lunge for the side table where I keep my weapons. I just need to get my hands on a gun, a knife, anything I can use to defend myself and take this asshole out.

But he's quick for someone so big, and he grabs me before I can reach anything, dragging me back to the center of the room.

For the third time in the last few hours, I'm being grappled by some dick, and I growl my frustration, trying to break his hold. Being naked puts me at a disadvantage, and even though I'm doing my level best to kick his fucking ass, I'm also way too aware of his body pressing against mine.

I can feel the hardness of his muscles and the heat of him through his clothes. He yanks me back against his chest, and my ass is right at his crotch. I don't linger long enough to see if he's hard from this or not, instead elbowing him in the side so he has to let me go.

"You're slippery," he grunts. I whirl on him, ready to punch him in the face, but he catches my hand easily, twisting my arm back down. I narrow my eyes and lash out with the other hand, managing to slap him across the face.

It doesn't even seem to faze him very much, and he goes to grab for me again, but this time I'm too quick.

I dart out of the tattooed man's path and use my leg to sweep his own legs out from under him, sending him toppling to the floor. The people who

live under me aren't going to be impressed with that, but fuck them.

Unfortunately, even though he's built like a fucking truck, he's fast enough to grab out for me as he falls, sending me crashing down on top of him.

He grins, clearly enjoying himself, and I glare back, putting a hand on his face and using it for leverage to try to pick myself back up.

Knox doesn't let me get far. He keeps his hold on me and flips us with ease, pinning me to the hardwood floor.

My chest heaves from the fight, and he stares down at me, heat from the physical exertion—and from me being naked, probably—burning in his eyes. His body is hard and solid against mine, and my legs are splayed open wide, giving him room to settle between them.

"Goddammit," I spit, fighting to get away, but he's too heavy to move. When I buck my hips up, it rubs me right against him, and I have to suppress a shudder at how not bad that feels.

Knox dips his head and trails his nose from just under my ear to my shoulder, inhaling deeply. At least I don't smell like blood and death anymore, but it's still weird. Even weirder when he follows it up with his tongue, tracing the same path as before.

"What the fuck?" I snarl, giving in to the anger instead of the shivery feeling that makes my nipples pucker. "You assholes *just* let me go. Is this some kind of sick hunt for you now? You come to where I live and fuck me up here instead of doing it at your place?"

He just laughs, and the sound is low and husky. He's pressed tight enough to me that I can feel it reverberate through his body and into mine.

"We agreed to let you go after Ivan, but we're not letting you do it without supervision," he says. "We've got more sense than that. We let you go home to get your shit and clean up, but now you're coming back to our place. We're gonna keep a fucking eye on you until we know you weren't lying—until you do what you said you're planning to do."

Right. Should've known there'd be a damn catch.

Guys like these four don't fuck around with trust, especially with someone they don't know. They're more interested in protecting their interests than anything else, and as much as it pisses me off to admit it, I can sort of understand that.

Fighting it is pointless, because they'll probably just kill me if I try. At least if I agree to this shit, they'll let me keep going after Ivan. I need to

take the last name on my list down, and I don't have time for people standing in my way. Easiest thing to do here is agree to their terms, and then once it's done, I can go on my way.

"Fine," I tell him, sounding as irritated as I feel. "Now get the fuck off me."

He just flashes me another grin, and it makes him look even more unhinged. But he gets up, offering me a hand that I ignore. I can feel his gaze on me as I heave myself to my feet and cross over to the corner where my bed is hidden behind a curtain—an attempt to make the little studio apartment feel like it's got more than one room.

My clothes and shit are stuffed into an old dresser, and I start yanking drawers open, finding something to wear first.

Knox makes a disappointed noise when I pull a shirt over my head, and I flip him off over my shoulder, not even bothering to turn around.

I pack a bag quickly, throwing anything and everything I think I'll need into it. It's hard to know how long I'll be gone for. I'm starting at square one with the Ivan shit, considering my lead went dead, so I'll have to dig up another one from somewhere before I can even make any progress at all.

"You ready to go yet?"

I look up to see Knox leaning against a wall, looking like he owns the damn place. He doesn't seem bothered that we were just fighting on the floor, and his eyes wander over my bed and my body in a way that makes me have to wrench my thoughts back to getting everything I need in the bag.

"Yeah," I tell him, shouldering the duffel and stepping away from the bed. "Let's go if we're going."

He leads the way out of the apartment and into the hall, and I lock the door, even though that's mostly symbolic. If someone wanted to break in, they could. Not that I have anything worth stealing.

He stomps down the stairs toward the front door, and I follow behind him, trying to shake off the irritating feeling that I didn't even notice him following me home. Fucking asshole.

There's a sleek, black car outside, and he leads me to it, opening the door to the passenger side for me.

"Dog!" I call, before getting in.

The mutt perks up and comes trotting over immediately, looking like he's going to piss himself with excitement to have some attention. Usually I

just toss him scraps and go on with my life, so the attention and affection seem to really have him going.

“Come on, boy,” I say. “Let’s go.”

Knox lifts an eyebrow. He’s wearing a dark t-shirt that stretches almost obscenely over his thickly muscled biceps and chest, and there’s barely an inch of his arms that isn’t covered in ink. With his dark brow still raised, he looks from the dog to me

“He’s mine, and he’s coming with me,” I tell him, putting one hand on my hip. “No one else is gonna feed him while I’m off fucking around with you idiots.”

The brawny man just laughs and shakes his head. “I bet you really love him, with a name like Dog,” he says. “I can tell you’d be so lonely without him.”

He probably knows the damn thing is just a stray, but he clearly doesn’t give a shit, seeming more amused than anything. That works well enough for me.

I slam the front passenger door closed and open the back seat door instead, whistling to Dog and gesturing to the car. He hops in, and I climb in after him. I slam that door too, just for good measure.

Knox doesn’t seem to give a shit about that either. Running a hand through his shaggy dark hair, he chuckles and gets in the driver’s seat. He cranks the key to start the car up, and we peel out.

PRIEST

IT DIDN'T TAKE much time after the woman left for Gage to send Knox after her.

He decided it was too dangerous to just let her go without keeping an eye on her, especially since we still don't know enough about her motives or her story, so he sent my cousin to collect her. I know Knox will probably enjoy raining all over her parade, poking a hole in her assumption that she's gotten away from us forever. Ash and Gage seem satisfied enough with the resolution, but I can feel irritation and concern moving like ants under my skin.

It's not that easy.

Nothing is ever that easy.

Ash is grinning, feeling proud of his part in this, no doubt. Everyone knows why he wants the girl to stay here. She's pretty and gives him his shit right back. He loves a challenge—even when it's clear that the challenge might be too much for him to handle and might end up taking us all down with him.

"This is a mistake," I say, speaking up and uncrossing my arms. "I don't like it."

Ash pulls a face the way he always does when someone goes against him.

"Of course you don't like it," he drawls. "You can't run her through a background check and make sure she's never kicked a puppy or something, so you don't trust her. Why not have a little faith for once? Your nickname is Priest after all."

I look to Gage, who also seems less than thrilled, but he's not arguing with Ash. Now that he's said we're working with her, he won't go back on his word unless she gives him a reason to, I guess.

"It'll be great," Ash continues. "She's a spitfire, and she'll be staying with us, so we can keep an eye on her and make sure she doesn't do anything to fuck with our business. I can't wait to find out what makes her tick. I mean, she practically broke her own damn wrists to get out of the cuffs and be able to fight me off. She has to have some kind of crazy story."

"You just want to fuck her," I shoot back. "That's the *only* reason you want her to stay here. Don't pretend you give a fuck about her story. For once, it would be great if you would use the head your brain is in, instead of the one in your pants when it comes to making a decision."

Ash just laughs. Nothing can really get to him when he's in a mood like this. "My way is more fun," he insists. "You have got to lighten up and learn to live a little. Besides, we all know the only reason you don't want her to stay here is because you don't want to fuck anything."

He says it casually, no bite to his tone at all, but it hits like a blow anyway. My face drops back into neutral lines, and I fold my arms again, closing myself off. Whatever response Ash was looking for with that comment, he won't get from me. I don't show him any emotion, and I don't let myself feel it, either. It doesn't matter, so I push it all back.

He can think what he wants. He can say what he wants. Whatever it is, it doesn't change the facts. We can't trust her just because she's attractive and says what we want to hear. That's beyond stupid.

Instead of trying to get through to Ash, which is largely a lost cause at this point, I look at Gage again. He's on the fence, I can tell. Unsure of whether we made the right move or not. He gave the girl his word in a way, but if he takes it back, what is she going to do? There are four of us and one of her, and if Gage gave the word, even Ash would have to obey. No matter how much he wants to fuck her.

"She's an unknown, Gage," I say, dropping my chin a little. "It's too risky. She might have been lying to us. For all we know, she's working with someone else who hates Ivan, and she'll drag us into the middle of it. This isn't a good idea. We don't have enough information, and she wasn't exactly being forthcoming with offering up any reasons for us to trust her. This isn't how we should do things."

“What are we gonna do?” Ash cuts in before Gage can answer. “Have Knox bring her back here and then shoot her in the face? That’s just bad manners. It’s a done deal already, and you know it’s the best plan.” He turns to the dark-haired man who’s become our leader over the years. “You saw her. You saw how serious she is about this shit. The only reason she gave up anything at all is because she wants to get back to her fight, I bet. She’s going to take St. James down because she has some personal grudge against him, and then she’ll leave us alone. She doesn’t even care about us. If it wasn’t for her being at the club, she never would have even been involved with us.”

“But she is now,” I tell him firmly. My face is still basically blank, and even though I’m arguing with conviction, there’s no trace of emotion in my voice or posture. “What if she decides she wants revenge for being locked in the basement all night?”

Ash shakes his head. “She’ll take out Ivan first. That’s what’s most important to her, and if she gets it in her head that she wants to start some shit with us afterward, then we can deal with that then. But at least she’ll have already done the dirty work we want her to do, right?”

Frustration wells up in me. I want to grab Ash and shake him. Everything is so easy in his mind. Everything always works out for the best. He gets the girl and there’s no drama, and things work out the way they should, with all of us on top. He doesn’t understand that sometimes things blow up in your fucking face. Sometimes you don’t win. Sometimes you lose *everything*, and all you have left is the burning question of why you didn’t see it coming.

That thought makes my stomach clench, a years-old ache in my chest throbbing dully.

But again, I don’t show any of that. I just take a controlled breath, letting it out and looking at Gage once more.

He seems angry, growling under his breath as Ash and I argue. He’s always got his anger close to the surface, ready to use it like a weapon when he needs to even though it burns him up right along with it. I can tell he’s working through the situation in his head, turning over the few things we know about this girl and the things Ash and I are saying.

Out of my three best friends, Gage is the one most likely to take my side. He’s cautious enough to not do things recklessly. Usually.

He sighs, dragging a hand through his hair in a motion that looks like it hurts. “Ash is right,” he says finally, even though it sounds like he still doesn’t like it. “She’ll be solving a problem for us if we let her take down Ivan St. James. We need him gone so that he stops fucking around with our business, and she’s giving us the perfect chance to do that without upsetting any of our allies or bringing down fire on ourselves.”

Ash grins, folding his arms and mimicking my posture.

I don’t say anything, but I grit my teeth.

I can see their points—mostly Gage’s point, since everyone knows what Ash’s point is, and it mainly has to do with his dick—but I’m not convinced, and I don’t agree.

Before I can make another argument against it though, the front door opens. A second later, a scruffy brown dog comes trotting into the room, tail wagging a mile a minute and tongue lolling out of its mouth. It gives one loud, gleeful bark, and then plops down on the floor in front of us, its tail thumping against the carpet as if its expecting attention or a treat or something.

I blink at it, confused, and for the first time today, Ash and Gage are on the same page as I am, staring down at it like they have no idea how a dog just materialized in our house.

Then Knox comes strolling in, a grin on his face.

“Everyone say hello to River,” he declares, gesturing behind him. “Our new houseguest.”

River.

So that’s her name. It fits her somehow, even more than Ghost does. She’s slippery and hard to grasp, seeming calm on the surface but concealing rapids underneath. Not someone you should trust when you don’t know what you’re getting yourself into.

Knox doesn’t seem to care about any of that. He grins, bending down to pet the dog. “Good boy, Manson,” he says.

“That’s not his name,” the girl—River—snaps from behind him, stepping around him with a duffel bag slung over one shoulder. She’s showered and changed since we last saw her, her hair pulled back into a messy bun, and more of her body covered up by a t-shirt and jeans. Her skin has been scrubbed free of blood, but her wrists are still raw and red, and a bruise blooms over her temple.

"I'm just trying it out," Knox shoots back, rubbing the dog behind the ears. "You obviously don't care about his name, and this one fits him better."

"You don't get to decide that."

"Don't mind her, Manson." Knox puts on a funny voice as he talks to the dog, scratching him under his hairy little chin. "She's just cranky. We'll find you a good name."

"What. The. Fuck," Gage breaks in before she can reply to Knox again. "I told you to bring *her* back. Not her and *this*." He gestures to the dog like it's dragged in some kind of disease, and judging from the state of the thing, it very well may have.

It's scrawny, and its fur is matted in some places despite not being very long. There are healed scars and bite marks on its droopy ears, as if it's been through some shit.

"We're a package deal," River snaps, matching Gage's anger in a flash. "If you're going to drag me back here after telling me I'm free to go, then you get to put up with Dog until I'm done with my mission. Otherwise I can leave."

Gage narrows his eyes, and I know he hates her tone. She's acting like she's the one calling the shots here, instead of her being here because we said so. His face darkens, ready to lash out right back at her.

Ash and Knox both look a bit amused. Knox keeps petting the dog, and Ash is looking at River, not at all deterred by the fact that she's more covered up as he lets his gaze roam all over her.

I just stand back and watch it all happen. That's my usual role anyway. The observer. Trying to sniff out trouble before it happens. But this already smells like shit. This girl is trouble, and it's obvious. Knox looks self-satisfied and smug, like he's already had his fun and can't wait to have more, and Ash just looks hungry. Neither of them bother to hide it.

It makes me hate her, and I can feel that anger and resentment bubbling away inside me. None of it shows on my face, but just for a second, I let myself indulge in the emotion before shutting it down. We've worked hard to build this life for ourselves. Dealt with lowlifes and assholes and all kinds of bullshit to claw ourselves up to where we are. Anything that could destabilize what we've built is a threat in my eyes, and as I watch River glare at Gage while the other two eye her like a piece of meat, I know this woman is trouble waiting to happen.

The rage builds beyond where I can control it, warping into a kind of unaccountable fury that makes me see red.

Usually, I'd shut it down and carry on, forcing my emotions down, but this is different.

This is outside of my control.

I don't want any of them to see it, least of all this woman, so I turn on my heel and stalk out the door, leaving them all to keep carrying out this farce if they want to.

RIVER

I GLANCE sideways to watch the guy named Priest go, noticing his tense, angry posture. His features were still impassive when he turned away, but this is still more emotion than I've seen from him since I got dragged into this mess. Even when they were interrogating me down in their creepy dungeon, he didn't show anything on his face. But this is a line for him, apparently.

Huh. Interesting.

So there's at least one of these men who doesn't want me here just as much I don't want to be here. I file that information away for later.

I'm not sure whether that fact will make him more or less of an ally in this case. Maybe it just makes him more likely to kill me.

No one tries to stop him from leaving, so I forget about him for the moment, letting him go off to sulk or whatever. Instead, I focus on my new surroundings.

I walk out of the large foyer we're all standing in and follow the short hall to the living room, plopping down on their stupidly comfortable sofa and making myself comfortable. It's a nice house from what I've seen so far. Not ostentatiously decorated, even though from the size of it, you'd expect something like that.

They've got nice, serviceable furniture, a couch, love seat, and recliner all in a soft gray leather. It's probably real leather, even. The floor is hardwood, but a shaggy white rug covers the floor between the seating and the large TV, with a coffee table in the middle of it all.

I prop my feet right up on the table, letting the heels of my combat boots rest right on top of a magazine, not giving a shit.

Dog and the three men who didn't storm off to have a tantrum follow me in, and Dog moves to curl up on the rug under my legs, tail still wagging. It's probably the first time he's been in a house for a while, and he's clearly loving it.

That just adds to the image of me making myself comfortable, putting on a show to make sure they see it.

They might have dragged me here and left me with no choice but to put up with their shit, but that doesn't mean they own me. I'm not some terrified, cowed little girl that they can boss around and intimidate. I've killed men more powerful than them. Bigger and stronger, too. They won't get the best of me.

Besides, they "invited" me here, so it's my space too. That's just how it works now.

"Can one of you get me a drink or something?" I ask, looking up at the three of them like I'm just noticing them for the first time. "And some breakfast if you've got it. I didn't have time to eat anything this morning before I was assaulted in my own home."

I shoot Knox a narrow-eyed look as I say the last part, since he seems darkly amused rather than sorry about breaking into my place. It's hard to know what's going on in his head, but he's grinning, his eyes still wild.

Ash just looks hungry, watching me, dragging his gaze over my legs where they're stretched out.

Gage looks pissed off, but I don't think he has another expression. Everything seems to rile him up. I lean down and pet Dog, not breaking eye contact with the imposing man who seems to be the leader of this little group. He's not the only one who's angry here, and I think I have more of a right to be mad than he does.

He folds his arms and clears his throat, staring at me hard. I can tell he wants to say something about my little show, but he doesn't, cutting right to the chase instead.

"How do you plan to kill Ivan St. James?" he asks me. "He's powerful, paranoid, and well-protected."

I fight the urge to scowl at him, not wanting to give him the satisfaction.

As if I don't already know that. As if I haven't been trying to get at him for months and coming up against dead end after dead end. I don't need a lecture from this asshole about the facts.

“I don’t know yet,” I admit, clenching my jaw. “I thought I had a lead, but the guy lied about it. That’s why I killed him last night. So now I’m back to square one.”

“So you have nothing,” Gage says. “Why should we think you can even do this?”

I bristle at his implication, narrowing my eyes. “Why don’t you share what *you* know about him then?” I challenge him. “Maybe it’ll help me since you think I’m so fucking useless.”

He drags a hand through his dark brown hair and then nods curtly. Whatever these four men do other than run a nightclub, they’re clearly well-connected enough in the criminal world to know something. Enough that they have issues with Ivan in the first place.

“He’s got heavy security,” Gage says. His face is all hard lines and sharp edges, and I can’t even quite imagine what it would look like if he smiled. I doubt it’s something he does often. “The man is so paranoid he’s gonna end up with a knife in his back that he doesn’t go anywhere without his team. He rotates them often, and he doesn’t let anyone get close. He rarely conducts business outside of his home, since it’s more easily defensible than going somewhere else. He forces people to deal with him on his turf, and more than a few people have gone missing after trying to strike a deal with him that didn’t go the way he wanted it to.”

A lot of that is shit I already know. Ivan is big enough in the crime world that he has his own legend about him. Rumors fly, and it’s not always easy to tell which are true and which are exaggerated. With Ivan St. James, it’s probably best to assume they’re all true and play it safe.

“He’s also a slumlord,” I put in. “He’s got a shitload of properties scattered around the city, and basically everyone who lives in one is doing his dirty work in one way or another. Even if they don’t know it yet. There has to be a weakness, though. I know he’s crazy paranoid and doesn’t take big risks, but *everyone* has a weakness. The thing about powerful men is they think their power keeps them safe, when really it just paints a big, red target on their asses.”

“You think there’s a hole somewhere?”

“I think there has to be. Something he’s missed or overlooked, someone who works for him who hates him or isn’t loyal and can be bought. Something that will let me get close enough to kill him.”

Gage shakes his head. "Anyone who sold him out would be dead before they could reap any benefit from it."

"Not if I kill Ivan first. Who's going to step in to defend him if he's gone?"

The broad-shouldered man narrows his eyes as he studies me like he's trying to look right through me, but I hold my ground. Like I said, I'm not letting him intimidate me. The other two stay back, letting Gage handle this, but they're watching with clear interest.

"Why do you want him dead so badly?" Gage finally asks.

My stomach churns as a rush of memories flow through my head, but I keep my features neutral. "That's not important."

Gage's expression hardens, his jade eyes flashing. "The fuck it isn't. You have to be smart about this. We can't risk you fucking this up because you're too trigger-happy to use your brain."

I glare at him. "If that was an issue, I would've already tried to get to him by now. I'm not a fucking idiot."

"I'm not sure I believe that," he fires back. "What is it? Does he owe you money?"

"Yeah, that's it. He borrowed five bucks off me and didn't give it back. Mystery solved. Good job, Sherlock."

"It has to be something. You're serious about this. Are you his illegitimate daughter?"

I just make a face that tells him what I think of that.

"No? Scorned lover then? Ex-best friend? He killed someone you care about?"

That's getting too close to the truth, and I surge to my feet, stepping around the dog as hot anger floods my veins.

"Let it fucking go!" I snap. "It doesn't matter what the reason is. I'll kill him like I said I would. That's all you need to know."

"You're defensive about it." Gage cocks his head, his full lips turning down. "Which means there's a story there. Some loose end. I hate loose ends."

"Well, it's not your fucking loose end to deal with, so you don't need to worry about it," I spit back.

"I do if it's going to come back to bite me and mine in the ass later."

"It won't."

“How do I know that? If he’s some jilted lover of yours and he wants revenge against you too—”

“Shut the fuck up!” I shout, getting even more pissed off. Just thinking about Ivan being my *lover* is enough to make me want to throw up right here on their stupid white rug. Gage is trying to push my buttons, trying to get a rise out of me... and it’s fucking working.

Fuck this shit. I don’t have to take this. Not from some wannabe gangster who doesn’t know shit or when to shut his fucking mouth. If they want to kill me, then they can, but I’m not some goddamn puppet for them to boss around or control.

I turn and storm out of the house, slamming the door behind me.

Not even two seconds later, Gage yanks the door open and steps outside, yanking it shut behind him before striding over and squaring off with me in the middle of the driveway.

“You don’t seem to get it,” he says, looming over me as his voice drops to a low, dangerous register. “I don’t give a shit about your history because I want to know you. It’s about making sure this isn’t gonna come back to fuck us. I need to know who I’m getting in bed with.”

“I told you all you need to know, so mind your own damn business.”

He takes a step closer, getting in my face, and I don’t back down. He’s taller than me by a good bit, well over six feet tall, but I’m not afraid of him. I’m just as pissed off as he is, riding my anger and letting it make me bold.

“You need to watch your mouth,” he growls, the words rumbling in his chest.

“Oh, fuck you!” The words explode out of me, carried on a wave of anger. “You’re not the fucking boss of me. You don’t get to tell me what to do.”

“You don’t realize the position you’re in.”

“And you don’t realize that I don’t give a shit about your intimidation act. If you’re gonna kill me, then do it! Stop with these fucking threats and bullshit. I’m not telling you anything you don’t need to know.”

We’re only inches apart now, right up in each other’s faces. He’s still speaking in a low voice, but I’m practically shouting, every word growing in volume.

Gage makes a move like he’s going to touch me, either to shove me or grab me or whatever, and I yank back, fury in my eyes. That just seems to

piss him off more. He reaches out again, grabbing my shoulder and spinning me around so fast that the world blurs around me for a moment. He shoves me forward, pressing me to the hood of the car that Knox picked me up in.

“Be quiet,” he hisses low in my ear. His breath is warm on my face, and I fight the urge to shiver as it tickles against my skin. “We have neighbors.”

“Get the fuck off me, you asshole!” I struggle against his hold, pushing back against him as I try to leverage us both away from the car.

He grunts, adjusting his grip on me to keep me in place, and I start to wriggle in his grasp again, looking for a way to elbow him in the face or twist out of his hold. He’s caging me in with his body, and when he shoves me even harder against the hood of the car, my pelvis grinds against the hot metal, sending an involuntary shiver of pleasure through me.

Without even meaning to, I let out a soft gasp that turns into a moan.

Gage freezes, his body still draped over mine.

His hips press against my ass, and my breath catches in my throat as I realize... he’s hard.

G A G E

JESUS.

Her body is right there beneath mine, my chest pressed to her back, her ass firm against my crotch.

I can feel the heat of her through our clothes, and it just adds to the heat of everything else coursing through me. I'm fucking pissed off at her attitude and the way she refuses to tell me anything that would be helpful. We could have just killed her for what she did, for testing us and being so close-mouthed about everything, but we didn't.

We gave her a chance, and she's acting like *we're* the ones putting her out.

My blood is pumping through my body, and I can hear it pounding in my ears. My hand itches, as if it wants to grab my gun and get rid of this wildcat right now before she can cause us any more trouble.

But still, despite all of that—or maybe because of it—my cock throbs insistently, wanting to press harder against her and feel more of her heat and softness.

I know she can tell. She can clearly feel my cock pressed to her ass, and she lets out another soft groan as she shifts beneath me.

It's like she's teasing me, and that just makes my fury burn even hotter. It's not a fucking game, and she's acting like she's playing to win.

I release my grip on her with one hand and shove it down between us, cupping her through her pants. She sucks in a sharp breath, grinding forward against my palm.

Like she can't help her reaction to me.

Fuck. Goddammit.

I can't fucking help myself.

Keeping her boxed in, pressed over the hood of the car, I slide my fingers over her jeans-covered pussy. I can feel the heat of her even through her clothes, and with her back pressed against me, I'm aware of every slight hitch in her breath as I tease her with my fingertips, moving them back and forth over her clit.

She shivers, and I press a little harder, sliding my fingers lower to tease her entrance. I can't put them inside her because her pants are in the way, but I press harder anyway, grinding the heel of my hand against her clit. It's enough to make her whine softly, her hips rolling against my touch, seeking more.

I use my weight to pin her down against the car, making sure she can't move. My cock throbs against the soft curve of her ass as she arches her back a little.

"We have neighbors," I remind her again, my voice hoarse. "You don't want them to hear this, do you?"

River growls under her breath and stills her hips, breathing hard through her nose like she doesn't want to give me the satisfaction of a reaction.

I narrow my eyes and grind my hand against her even more, then slide my fingers up and tease her clit through her jeans. A gasp escapes her rigid silence, and her hips jerk and then stop, as if she wants to ride my hand but won't let herself.

I don't say anything, just keep touching her. My cock is like iron, hard and throbbing, straining painfully against my zipper. I don't know what the fuck I'm doing, or how the hell this happened. How we went from fighting to dry humping against the car.

"Are you going to tell me what I want to know?" I murmur in her ear, rocking into her and making the car sway a little beneath us. "So that I can be sure we can trust you?"

"You can trust that I want to kill Ivan," she shoots back, her voice breathy and strained. "That'll have to be good enough."

"What if I say it's not?" My cock grinds against her ass, and I grit my teeth harder, letting out a shuddering breath.

She chokes off a moan in her throat, shaking her head as much as she can with the limited range of motion her position allows. "Then I'd say fuck you."

I laugh darkly. Our bodies are moving together, hips rolling and grinding, giving and seeking friction. I find her clit with my fingers again and pinch it through the fabric of her jeans. "Sorry, sweetheart. Nice offer, but I told you, we have neighbors."

"*Fuck you*," she repeats, more bite in her voice as she thrusts back against me hard, and I can tell she's getting close to falling apart. She's grinding against my hand openly now, her lips parted as she bumps her ass against my hips, mimicking the motions of a deep fuck.

"Again. Neighbors."

Even as I say the words, I work her clit harder. My cock is pulsing, the mental image of fucking her for real over the hood of this car driving me so crazy that my balls are drawing up tight, heat radiating through me. If we don't stop this soon, I'm gonna come in my fucking pants, and I won't let that happen.

Because this isn't about pleasure.

It's about control.

It's another kind of standoff, like her little power move back there in the house or our face-off in the driveway.

I palm one of her tits with my free hand as I increase the pressure and speed of my fingers on her clit, squeezing and massaging her breast as I roll my hips against her ass, letting her feel every inch of me.

River's breathing is ragged and harsh, and she's trembling against me, her breath misting across the hood of the car and leaving little clouds of fog on the shiny surface. Her eyes are closed, her nostrils flared, and I know she's close. She can't hold back her sounds, and each breath has a little moan on the tail end of it, giving her away completely.

My breathing is labored too, but I'm not stopping until she comes for me. Until she falls apart.

It doesn't take much longer. I grind my hand against her mound, pinching her nipple this time, and I feel her body go tense beneath mine. I manage to let go of her tit and get my hand up to slap it over her mouth before she screams and lets the whole fucking neighborhood know what we're doing, and the guttural sound of her orgasm spills out behind my palm. Her hips buck and jerk, and she shakes her head as if she can still deny it, even as the release tears through her.

She sags against the hood, breathing hard, and I draw my head back and watch her for a second, my cock still so hard that it could burst through my

pants. The thought of fucking her like this, when she's already worn out from coming once and maybe less likely to ruin it with her attitude, is a tempting one—but it would be a mistake.

I release her and step back, putting distance between us. A neutral expression falls over my face, and I channel my inner Priest so she won't be able to tell how affected I am by what just happened. How close I was to losing it too.

I wait for her to turn around, and then shrug.

"Fine," I say. My voice is steady and hard, although there's a low rasp to it too. "I don't need to know shit about you. You can keep your secrets. As long as you do what you said you'll do, I don't want to know anything else. But if you fuck us over, if I even get a hint that you're *thinking* about fucking us over, I'll end you."

Her face is flushed, and her midnight blue eyes are a little glazed, which lights a bit of a fire in my gut that I steadfastly ignore.

Even beneath that, though, there's still hatred in her gaze as she eyes me. "Fine. I don't wanna know shit about you either. About *any* of you. Let's just keep it to the mission, and maybe this won't be completely intolerable."

She practically spits the words at me, and I nod curtly. I can make that deal with her. There's no need for sharing personal stories or getting buddy-buddy here. Beyond the scope of her mission, she doesn't matter. Not to me, not to the rest of us. Ash might have the idea that he's going to fuck her, but beyond that, we don't need her. Once this is done, we can wash our hands of her, and that day can't come soon enough for my liking.

"Deal," I say. "You'll stay here until the job is done, and then you'll leave. The less we know about each other, the better."

"I already know too much about you," River mutters, eyeing me with irritation. "Pushy asshole."

I shrug a shoulder. "This is my operation. If you'd just cooperated in the first place, then it wouldn't have had to go so far."

She rolls her eyes like she doesn't give a shit about what I have to say, and she probably doesn't. If there's one thing I've learned about her so far, it's that she operates by her own set of rules. She has some code she follows, and anything that falls outside of that is barely worth her time. I can see it in the way she talks to us, and the way she brought her piece of shit dog to our house without so much as asking for permission.

But it doesn't matter. We've made the deal now.

She kills Ivan, then we go our separate ways. No need to muddy the waters between those two things happening. No need to get more involved than we have to.

The less involvement, the better, at this point.

Something passes over her face, and she pushes away from the car and comes toward me. I half expect her to offer a hand to shake on the deal or something, but she passes that distance and gets right in my face.

I hold my ground, not sure what she's up to, until she puts her hands on my chest. I can feel the heat of her skin through my shirt, and she leans up, her mouth just a few breaths away from mine like she's going to kiss me.

There's a little smirk on her face as she drags her hands downward, letting her nails scrape along the planes of my chest, and even through the shirt, I can feel the sensation of it. It sends a shiver down my spine, and my cock reacts immediately, like it's pissed at me for not giving in to what it wanted in the first place.

I drag in a breath, my nostrils flaring, confused at what the hell River is doing. Her hands trail lower, down my stomach, and then even lower until I'm sure she's going to do something stupid like take my cock out and touch me right here in the driveway.

I open my mouth to tell her to stop, but her hands stop short. Her mouth is still right there, so close I can see the plush softness of it, which is such a contrast to the bullshit she seems to always be spewing from it.

Her tongue darts out, pink and wet, and she licks her lips before reaching up to touch my cheek.

"One more thing you should know," she murmurs, her voice low and sultry. "I've come harder from a bicycle seat than whatever uncoordinated shit you were doing with your fingers just now. It was pathetic."

Before I can even process that, she rears back and slaps me across the cheek, then turns to walk away.

My body processes pain faster than most things, apparently, because a split second after the sharp sting registers, I reach out and grab her arm, yanking her back toward me.

Fury lances through me, dulling the edge of my arousal. I narrow my eyes at her, pinning her with my glare.

"Don't fucking push us, River," I growl. "Any of us. We don't have the patience to be gentle with you."

She laughs right in my face, as if the threat doesn't mean shit to her.

“What makes you think I've ever had things gentle?”

With those words, she yanks out of my grasp and goes back to the house, slamming the door closed behind her.

RIVER

THERE ARE six men standing in front of me, their faces twisted into grim masks of amusement and sadistic delight. Sometimes, when I try to focus on one or the other, the shapes and angles of the faces blur, making it hard to tell which one is which. They're just men, just tall and cruel, so much bigger and more powerful than I am.

I'm held in a room, my arms chained to the wall, my legs spread wide. I can feel my heart racing in my chest, beating so fast and so hard that it feels like it might explode. It's fear, and I can taste that in the back of my throat, but there's anger there, too. And disgust.

My sister is nearby, quiet tears running down her face where she's chained up next to me. Her face blurs and twists when I try to look at her, wanting to make sure she's okay. I can't tell. She won't say anything.

Beyond the men is a room, but I can't make out anything in it. That part is weird and nebulous, as if the details of it are shifting while I'm hunting for them. There should be a window just to the left, the curtains drawn over it, the latch fastened tight.

There's another window somewhere in the room off to the right, but that one is boarded up, and no amount of scrabbling at the wood with blunt nails will pry the boards loose.

The men laugh, telling private jokes to each other, talking about us—how we look, how we smell. Laughing at our fear and distress. We're just playthings for them. Captured and tormented to punish our father for the transgressions he committed against them. Even though we had nothing to do with it. Even though we're innocent in all of this.

We're paying for a man's sins, used as tools, which is apparently a woman's place in this world.

All I can think is that I have to protect Hannah. Whatever they do to me, I have to keep her safe. I can endure it. I can handle the pain.

The scene changes, reality shifting like sand around me. In this memory, they hit me with a flogger, the ends knotted into thick lumps that lash against my skin, leaving behind bruises and welts that will make it impossible to sleep later. The back of my shirt is torn open, and the front of it is barely hanging on, giving the illusion of modesty, even though there's nothing I can do if they decide to rip the whole thing away.

My back is just an aching mass of flesh, and they don't stop.

The flogger is just a warm up, an appetizer. I bite the inside of my cheek, trying to keep from crying out and letting them know how much it hurts.

Whenever one of them looks at Hannah, I snarl, lashing out.

"Coward! Asshole!" I spit. "Pick on someone your own size!"

And their egos make them fall for it. They can't allow me, a teenage kid, to make them feel small.

My sister stays quiet, the way I told her to.

Just let me handle it, Hannah. Let me do this for you.

Her eyes are closed, as if she doesn't want to see it. Like she'd rather be anywhere but here.

The torments feel so stark in this dream. Like I'm really there again, chained up in that dark room, heavy with the stench of sweat and fear and depravity.

I feel like I'm going to break as they put me through these horrible things, hurting me, touching me. Trying to break me. Every noise I make is a triumph for them. Every time a tear rolls down my face, they laugh. One of them licks the salty drops away.

I can't see which one does it. All of their faces are interchangeable, shifting and swapping like a fucked up game of musical chairs.

But it could have been any of them. Any one of them would have done it. Has done it.

It's a dream, but it feels so real. I feel that trapped, suffocating feeling that I remember so well. The one that makes me wake up in the middle of the night even now, thrashing under the covers in a desperate attempt to get free from anything holding me down.

I can feel the scream building in my throat, and I fight so hard to hold it back, biting my lip until it bleeds. I feel like I'm going to break, like each lash, each cut, each touch is driving me closer to the edge, and I'm just going to shatter into a million fucked up pieces.

Then the dream shifts again. The room clears, and I'm not chained up or being flogged anymore. I'm standing in the middle of the room, taller, stronger. More powerful. I'm the woman I am now, tattoos and silver hair, a gun in one hand and a knife in the other.

I can feel the difference, and the fear and desperation that were clinging to me before are now determination and righteous fury. With savage delight, I murder each of the men. I take pleasure in it. It's not quick and painless either. I shoot out their kneecaps, driving them down to the scuffed wooden floor. It's already stained with blood, and there's satisfaction in that.

Here in this place where they made me bleed and hurt and wish I was dead, I'm going to do the same to them.

I take my time, drawing out the torment, sending each one screaming to their deaths.

It's different from what they did to me. Hannah and I paid for the sins of someone else, but these six? The punishment they get is for their own crimes. Their own sins. The things they did with their own hands.

I stand over their bodies, out of breath but triumphant. There's a blazing light in the room, and I realize it's coming from me. As if I'm lit from the inside by what I've done.

For a minute, I'm the brightest thing in the room... but then I notice the shadows growing and changing. They're not just at the edges of the room. They lengthen across the floor until they're standing like people, solid and firm.

I can't make out any faces or forms. It's like a mass of people, a group I can't identify, reaching for me.

My heart stutters. I grab for my gun, but it's not there. The knife is missing too.

All I have is myself, but in the back of my mind, I already know that's not going to be enough. I feel helpless all over again, a sinking sensation in my chest that threatens to drag me down.

I still try to fight, lashing out with my fists, my feet, my elbows. Anything I can do to keep this new threat from overwhelming me. But it's not enough. They close around me, grabbing on to me.

Inky fingers of darkness wrap around my wrists, holding me tightly. My arms are wrenched behind my back, while another hand covers my mouth so I can't scream. There are fingers in my hair, running up and down my arms, ghosting over my face.

I feel just as helpless as I did when I was a kid, unable to fight back.

The hands keep pawing at me, the darkness swallowing all the light in the room. My heart is pounding again, and I feel like I can't get a good breath. My skin is clammy, and fear is sour in the pit of my stomach and the back of my throat.

It's like drowning, watching the surface and the light of it get farther and farther away as they drag me under.

I wake up with a start.

My heart really is racing, and I can feel the cold sweat on my skin. I struggle against the feeling of hyperventilating, trying to get a good, deep breath so my lungs stop burning.

It takes a solid twenty seconds for me to get my bearings. This isn't my bed back at home. If I was in my apartment, there would be a little light cast by the hanging paper lantern on the other side of the curtain that separates my bed from the rest of the studio.

Here, it takes my eyes some time to adjust to the darkness. The only light there is filters in dimly from the window and the streetlamps outside.

Right. I'm at the house with the four guys I'm working with now. Not in a basement, not chained to a wall.

I let out a shaky exhale, dropping my head back down to the pillow, then jerk in surprise when I realize I'm not alone in the room.

At first, all I see is a shadow near the door, and I flash back to the dream with a sickening lurch of my stomach, but then I make out the shape of Ash, standing on the other side of the room as if he's been watching me sleep.

"What the fuck do you think you're doing?" I demand. My voice comes out raspy, but with a sharp edge from all the chaos swirling inside me right now.

I feel like he can tell, like he was looking into my head and watching the nightmare play out. That's impossible, I know, but even the thought of it makes me uncomfortable.

"Nothing. Just standing here," he replies, flashing that charming grin at me, as if it's perfectly normal to sneak into someone's room while they're sleeping. "I just wanted to make sure you were settling in okay."

“Normal people do that when the person is awake,” I snap back. “Not while standing over the person’s bed like a creep. You must not get many houseguests.”

“Of course we don’t.” He chuckles. “You’ve met the others. Can you imagine Priest trying to be hospitable?”

“And yet they’re not the ones standing in my room in the middle of the night.”

He just keeps grinning and shrugs.

“What were you dreaming about?” he asks. “I could tell it wasn’t a good dream.”

“Uh-uh.” I rub a hand over my face and then push the wild mess of my hair back, shaking my head. “Gage and I made a deal. This is strictly a business arrangement. I’m not sharing my personal history or any stories with you assholes, and I don’t want to hear any of that shit from any of you either. Mind your own business.”

It seems like it’s pretty hard to faze Ash. The lazy smile never drops from his face, whether he’s getting what he wants or not. Or maybe he didn’t really expect me to answer. Either way, he doesn’t argue or push.

Instead, he crawls up into the bed and then moves so he’s hovering over me, looking right down into my face.

He licks his lips, and I follow the motion with my gaze. The strange sexual tension from when we were fighting before is still there, sparking between us, and I’m torn between the urge to knee him in the balls or drag him down into a kiss.

I do neither, just staring back at him.

“You know,” he says, and I can feel his breath ghosting over my face. “Unlike Gage, I’m a sharer.”

My body reacts to his closeness, drawn to him. I remember him pressed hard against my body during that fight, and I want to arch up and rub against him, to see if he’s just as hard now as he was then, or if he needs to be punched in the face a few times first.

As much as I fucking hate it, I can’t deny that I’m attracted to all four of these men. They wear their power and cockiness well, each of them rounding out a different role in their little foursome, and clearly doing it well. Even Priest, with his air of mystery and silent staring, is stupidly good looking. In different circumstances, I wouldn’t kick any of them out of bed.

Ash said he's a sharer, so I decide to push that, to see just how much he's willing to share.

"What's Priest's real name, then?" I ask. "Since you're in such a sharing mood."

He laughs softly, clicking his tongue against his teeth. "That's one of those secrets I'd probably get shot for sharing. And I'm too hot to be walking around with bullet holes in my ass. We call him Priest because he doesn't have sex. Like, ever."

"Why not? He just doesn't like it, or...?"

Ash just keeps grinning. "Priest contains multitudes."

So he's not going to tell me then. Fine. "What about Knox? What's his whole deal?"

"You've seen him. You know what his deal is."

Fair enough.

"I don't want to talk about them, though," Ash says. "They're not here, and I am."

"Fine, let's talk about you."

"I thought you'd never ask." He flutters his lashes at me teasingly and dips his lower half down more so it's resting right against mine. "My favorite food is nachos. There's just something about that really shitty, bright yellow cheese that really does it for me. My favorite color is green, because I look fucking amazing in it. I have this green sweater that I've never failed to pull in when I'm wearing it."

I roll my eyes. It's clear Ash has no issues talking about himself, but nothing he's saying really means anything. Probably why he's so free with giving the information away.

"Let me guess," I cut in, dead pan. "You like long walks on the beach too. Pina coladas and getting caught in the rain."

He laughs, shaking his head. "I'm not that cliché. Sand is a chore, and I hate the taste of coconut. There's something to be said about getting caught in the rain, though. With someone you like. Someone you wouldn't mind seeing all wet."

He draws out the last word, dipping his eyes down to where the curves of my tits are pretty visible through my thin tank top.

"What else can I tell you?" he asks, his voice lower now. "Maybe my favorite sex position?"

“Let me guess, something generic as fuck?” I suggest. “Doggy style or something because you like to pull hair?”

He chuckles at that, his lips curving crookedly. “You say generic, I say classic. There’s nothing wrong with a little doggy style. Having a woman’s ass right there, so you can slap it hard and make her get tighter. And hair is an effective leash. You know what I mean, I know you do.”

I roll my eyes at him. “Maybe I do, but I still think that’s pretty generic.”

“I didn’t say it was my favorite, anyway. It has its place, but I like having a woman on top of me. I like to be able to see every single inch of her while she’s taking my cock. I like to see it sink into her when she’s all wet and eager for it, watch it come out all slick from how turned on she is.”

He keeps talking in that low tone, and I have to swallow hard. He’s not even saying anything particularly revolutionary, but the fact that he’s holding my gaze as he says it all makes me want to shiver. It’s like I can feel each word brushing over my skin, and I can tell he knows it.

The air seems to thicken, making it harder to get a full breath. My heart is beating fast again, but this time it’s not from anything even remotely approaching fear.

My nipples are hard through the fabric of my shirt, and I know he can see that, too. I want to arch against him, or drag him down to me, but I force my stupid hands to stay put.

“What about you?” he murmurs. “What’s your favorite position? Wait, don’t tell me.” He studies me, his eyes tracing over my face and then down lower, as if he can read me like a book.

“You say you want to be on top,” he says. “So you can control the angle, the speed. So you can feel like the feisty bitch you are. But really, you’re the one who loves doggy. You just want someone to shove your face in a pillow and take you. I can tell.”

“Just try shoving my face in a pillow and see what happens,” I shoot back.

He grins. “Oh, don’t tempt me, wildcat. I can handle anything you can dish out and then some.”

“You keep telling yourself that.”

He gets closer to me, and if I leaned up a bit, just a little bit, I’d be able to kiss him. It would be so easy. It feels like all the tension between us that

started in that stairwell when we were grappling with each other is building to a peak, to the point of no return.

We're just a hair's breadth away. All one of us would have to do is make a move, but neither of us go for it, trying to wait each other out.

Ash dips just a bit lower, bringing his head down like he's going to kiss me—but he pulls away at the last second, pushing up onto his knees and climbing off the bed with the same ease as with which he climbed onto it.

"Have a good night," he whispers, flashing a crooked grin. "I hope your dreams will be sweeter now."

He winks as if *he's* the reason I'd have sweet dreams, then strides from the room, closing the door behind him and leaving me alone in the darkness.

My heart is still racing, and now that I'm alone, I can feel the edges of my nightmare creeping back in. It's one of those dreams that doesn't trickle away with distance from it, and the details of it all are still stark in my head. Probably because most of it was from memory.

Ash's presence still lingers too, even though he's gone, and I feel unsettled and off balance.

I'm not going to be able to sleep like this, clearly.

Sitting up, I rummage for the bag I stuffed into the drawer of the bedside table when Ash showed me to this room earlier. It has all my essentials in it, the things I'd grab if I needed to run and run fast.

I find the razor blade in the bottom of it, tucked carefully away in its plastic case. The metal is cold and solid in my fingers, and that's already a nicer feeling than where I was a second ago.

I pull one leg out from under the covers and trace the raised lines of old scars with my free hand before finding a clear patch of skin and drawing the razor across it.

The pain hits me, sharp and impossible to ignore, and I suck in a breath, closing my eyes as it settles in. It's grounding, and I keep going, marking up my leg and drawing blood. There's something about the pain and making the neat, sharp lines that settles me, and I sink into it, cutting again and again until I feel better.

As I grab a tissue from the nightstand to wipe off the blade, I think back to Ash's parting words. A humorless laugh gets stuck somewhere in my throat, and I shake my head. It's a nice sentiment, and his presence did

manage to drag me out of the cold grip of my nightmares for a little while,
something I wouldn't have expected.

But even so...

My dreams are never sweet.

RIVER

THE NEXT MORNING, I wake up late. At least this time there aren't any lingering nightmares to fuck with my head, and I know where I am when I open my eyes.

I get dressed quickly in shorts and a tank top and head downstairs, determined to keep acting like I own the place and not show any uncertainty around these guys. It might be their house, but they dragged me here, so I'm going to make the most of it.

The first person I see is Ash, grumbling as he steps out of one of the downstairs bathrooms. I don't think I've ever seen him not wearing a shit-eating grin, and I lift an eyebrow at him in question as I come to a stop.

"Don't start," he grumbles, scowling a little.

"What crawled up your ass and died?"

"Your fucking dog," he says. "You didn't say he wasn't house broken."

I just shrug. As far as I know, Dog has never even been in a house before. "What did he do?"

"He shit at the foot of the stairs, and I stepped in it when I came down this morning."

His lips turn down in a pout, like he expects some sympathy, and I just laugh in his face.

"Dog!" I call. "Come here!"

Even though he's definitely not trained to respond to commands, the dark brown mutt comes trotting over, his tail already wagging. This is probably the most attention he's ever gotten in his life.

"Good boy. Very good." I pet his head, and he looks up at me with adoring eyes. "You want some breakfast? Let's see what we can find."

“Pest,” Ash grumbles. “That’s what I’m gonna start calling him. Because it’s what he is.”

“Great idea. I’m sure that won’t make him shit directly into your shoes next time,” I say sweetly over my shoulder and head for the kitchen.

It’s one of those nice ones with plenty of counter space and gleaming appliances, and I half hope Dog shits in here too. I dig through the fridge and find some leftover Chinese food, which I drop on the floor in its plastic container.

Dog doesn’t waste any time, rushing over to it to start devouring the food. I pull a bowl from the dish rack by the sink and fill it with water, setting it down next to Dog for when he’s finished.

I don’t even know why I started feeding the damn mutt a few months ago, when he first started sniffing around me when I came and went from the apartment building. But the fact that having him around pisses off the guys just makes me like him even more.

There’s a pot of coffee already on, and I hunt down a mug and fill it, drinking it black.

Gage comes in a few minutes later, looking at Dog with distaste before zeroing in on me. “What are you going to do today about killing Ivan?” he asks right out of the gate.

I flip him off, taking a slow sip of my coffee before I answer him. “You don’t have to get up my ass about it,” I say. “I have some recon to do.”

“Like what?” he presses, clearly not satisfied with my answer. “Give me more than that.”

“Remember our deal,” I tell him. “I don’t have to give you anything.”

“This is allowed,” he insists. “It’s not about pasts, it’s about the present. About whether you have any valid leads on finding out where Ivan’s vulnerable points are.”

I curl my fingers tighter around my mug and huff at him in irritation. It sucks to admit, but... I don’t have any leads. Not that I want to tell Gage that.

He doesn’t seem to need the confirmation anyway. He glowers at me and marches out of the kitchen, coming back a moment later with a jacket slung over his arm. “Come with me.”

“I’m not your fucking dog,” I snap. “I don’t come when you say to. And this is my fucking mission, my project. Don’t think you can just take over.”

He just gives me a hard look, and I clench my jaw.

Shit. As fucking annoying as it is, I can't turn down any possible help getting to Ivan, so I follow Gage when he heads out to one of the cars he and the guys own.

I slide into the passenger seat, letting out a breath.

Not long now, Hannah, I think. I promise, it won't be much longer. I'll end this soon.

It sucks because it makes me feel like a liar. I already promised her that the other night, when I thought I was closer to being able to cross Ivan off the list. There's so much guilt in it taking so long, in not having finished getting my vengeance already, but I shove that aside, not wanting to dwell on it while I'm in the car with Gage and he could notice.

"Where are we going?" I ask, half for something to say and half because I do actually want to know.

"Just wait," he replies, starting the car and getting us moving.

I grit my teeth against the urge to tell him where to shove it.

There really isn't anything to do but wait like he told me, and I drum my fingers impatiently and settle into the car's plush seat, looking out the window. The nice part of town we were in turns gradually shittier and shittier as we go. It's even more crappy than the area I live in, which is saying something.

These are the real slums that we're driving into, and I can tell from the people hanging out on corners in broad daylight, doing things that would probably get them thrown in jail if the police happened to come by.

Of course, the cops don't usually fuck around in areas like this, either because they don't care or because they're paid not to, so whoever has the most power gets to say what happens.

I keep my wits about me, sitting up so I can pay attention as we head toward a run-down cluster of apartment buildings in the center of it all.

I know Ivan owns this property, so this must be his slum, which would explain what we're doing here.

We get out of the car, and Gage leads the way into the complex, walking with the kind of confidence that only comes from knowing exactly where you're going. He's been here before, clearly.

I narrow my eyes at the back of his head as I follow him, wondering about that and trying not to. Our deal is that we don't care about each other's pasts, even if I am curious about how he knows so much about how to get around one of Ivan St. James's slums. I could spin it that it's

important to the mission that he tell me, since it has something to do with Ivan, but then he could do the same to me about my own past, and I don't want to get into that whole fucking story with him. So I just keep my mouth shut and follow.

We head up the stairs to the top floor, stepping over shoes and clothes and unconscious people littering the halls. Eventually, Gage stops outside a door. He knocks twice in quick succession and then once more after a few seconds. Maybe some kind of code.

At first, there's no answer, then a thin voice calls out, "It's open."

I raise my eyebrows at that. What kind of idiot doesn't lock their door in a place like this? But then again, a lot of the time the locks are mostly just symbolic, and anyone who really wanted to get in would be able to without much trouble.

Gage leads the way inside, and I'm immediately struck by how dim it is in the apartment's cramped interior. It's as if someone here hates sunlight, since all the blinds are drawn and there's only one light on. The apartment is tiny, and we step right into the front room, where a woman is sitting in a chair that looks like it's molded around her.

"Gage," she says. Her voice is creaky in that way super old people's always are. Rattling around in her throat and coming out in a rasp. "It's about damn time."

"It hasn't been that long, Meredith," he replies, and there's something about his whole demeanor that changes with her. Some of the guarded anger that he always seems to wear like a shield falls away as he moves closer to her chair.

When we get close enough, I can tell that I was right about her being super old. She's a tiny thing, withered and wrinkled. Her hands are gnarled where they're clasped in her lap, and they seem to shake a little even though she's not moving.

She tilts her head up toward Gage, letting me see more of her face. Although her eyes might have been a darker color once, they're now a sort of milky white that makes me realize she must be blind. Or mostly blind, at least.

"That's what you say every time," she says, shaking her head. "No matter how long it's been."

To my shock, Gage just laughs a little. It's not even a mean laugh, more like the kind you'd use when an elderly relative scolds you for something.

Indulgent and amused, but with an edge of fondness.

“Are you still in one piece?” she asks, cocking her head a little.

“Last time I checked.”

“Well, check again. Make sure for me.”

It’s like I’m not even there, and Gage pats his chest loudly enough for her to hear it.

“All here.”

“Good. Then what can I do for you?”

Now he glances to me, and I shake myself from my surprise. The curiosity I tried to repress is rising inside me all over again. I have so many questions, but I shove it all down.

This isn’t the time. It’ll *never* be the time.

“We need information about Ivan St. James,” Gage says.

“Ah. You and your lady friend here?” Meredith asks, making me jump a little. I didn’t realize she knew I was here.

“She’s not my friend,” Gage tells her quickly. “More like an associate for the time being.”

“She walks like she can handle herself. You can tell a lot about a person by the way they walk, you know. Quick steps or slow ones. Heavy tread or light. I’ve learned.”

“Meredith,” Gage cuts in before I can think of what to say in response to that. “Do you have anything for us?”

She hums softly and then smiles, showing off a few missing teeth. “Might. Just might. Damon Sinclair. Low rent drug dealer from around these parts. He keeps tabs on Ivan, from what I hear.”

“Does he work with Ivan?” I ask, speaking for the first time.

Meredith turns to look in my direction, even though I know she can’t really see me. “Nope. He’s worried Ivan’s gonna kill him for dealing too near St. James’s territory. Helps to know the man’s movements ahead of time so he can get gone when he needs to.”

I smile, pleased at the info. Someone paranoid with a reason to keep track of what Ivan does. That’s perfect. Those are the kind of people who turn out to be the best sources of information, because they gather it to save their own asses.

“You tangling with Ivan St. James?” Meredith asks, turning her attention and milky gaze back to Gage. “You know what that man is.”

“I know,” he replies, not confirming or denying the tangling. “Thanks for your help, Mer.”

She flaps a hand at him and smiles. It’s the kind of smile that’s heavy with fondness, like she loves him and cares about his wellbeing. “You keep yourself in one piece, now. And don’t forget about me.”

“I could never,” he replies as he motions me back toward the door. “You’d never let me, for one thing.”

Her papery chuckle is the last thing I hear as we step out into the hallway.

Once the door is closed behind us, I glance over at Gage, resisting the pressing urge to ask my questions. Like why he’s so at home here, and how he knows this woman. It’s not weird to have informants scattered across the city, but Meredith seemed like more than that. She seemed like someone who cares about him.

But I don’t want to know. The more I know about Gage and the others, the harder it’ll be to untangle myself from their shit when the time comes. It’s not relevant to the mission, so I move on.

We head outside and get in the car, and I drum my fingers on the arm rest while Gage drives, mulling over the information we have now. It shouldn’t be hard to track down this Damon Sinclair guy, and getting him to give me the information I want will probably be a matter of making it worth his while or scaring him into it. I’m not fussed about which route I end up taking.

The slums fall away as we drive, the highway taking us back toward the side of Detroit where the guys and the other people with too much money and not enough sense live. I notice a sign pointing toward a strip mall with a pet store in the distance and grin.

“Take a left here,” I tell Gage.

“That’s not the exit,” he says, his guard back up and the familiar barely there civility firmly back in place. Just the way I like it. “I know how to get back to my own house.”

“I need to stop somewhere.”

“Where?” he asks, glancing over at me with an incredulous expression, as if I’m losing my mind for even suggesting it.

“Pet store.” I point in the direction of the strip mall off the exit. “Unless you want Mick Jagger to eat all your food and slobber all over your dishes.”

As much as I don't want to admit it, I kind of like Knox's idea of trying out different names for the stray animal. I've never called him anything but Dog before, but maybe I'll find something better.

"Well?" I press. "What'll it be?"

I phrase the question like it's up to Gage and smile when I see him clench his jaw. Saying no just to spite me will really only fuck over him and the other guys in the long run. I don't care either way. The stray dog is clearly used to eating whatever, so it's not like he'll say no to any leftovers I scrounge up from the fridge.

With an irritated noise in his throat, Gage signals and merges into the left lane, taking the exit for the shopping center. I smirk, relishing in my small victory.

"We don't have all day," he mutters as he pulls into the parking lot. "I have to get to the club eventually."

"Yeah, yeah." I brush him off, waving a hand at him. "I'll make it quick."

I hustle inside and grab a shopping cart, dodging sticky fingered kids whining to their parents about wanting bunnies or guinea pigs or lizards. The dog food aisle is massive and packed with too many options.

Food for hyper dogs, food for medium-sized dogs, food for overweight dogs. I'm pretty sure Dog will eat whatever the fuck I put in front of him, so I grab a big bag of something that seems mid-tier and throw a black dog bowl in the cart with it for good measure.

The next aisle over is just rows and rows of collars, with tags you can pick out and take to a little machine near the registers to get customized with the dog's name. I bypass all of that and head to the checkout counter.

The cashier smiles at me, giving me the once-over that basically all men and some women do when they see my hair and tattoos, assuming they're into that kind of thing.

"New dog?" he asks, leaning over to scan the bag of food so I don't have to haul it up out of the cart.

"Sure," I reply. "Something like that."

"We've got collars and tags on aisle seven," he tells me, as if I somehow missed the big sign that hangs over the aisle while I was back there. "Do you need to run and grab something?"

I shake my head and pull out enough money to cover what I bought. "Nope. I'm good. Thanks."

“Oh. Uh, okay.”

He stares after me once he hands me my change, and I start pushing the cart toward the automatic doors, ignoring his curious gaze.

Whatever. Dog isn't my dog, as far as I'm concerned. He's a stray on the best vacation of his life, but when it comes down to it, I'm just feeding him for now. No need to mess around with collars and tags when none of this is permanent.

Gage looks impatient and pissed off when I get back to the car, so I take my time loading the bag into the back seat and then pushing the cart to a little corral in the center of the parking lot.

He's practically grinding his teeth by the time I get buckled in, and he peels out of the parking lot like he can't wait to get out of there.

We drive in silence, which is fine with me. I don't have anything to say to him, and instead, I can observe him.

He's hard through and through. I got a glimpse of him letting his guard down earlier, something I've never seen before. Even with the other three men, people he clearly trusts, he's still guarded and sharp—but it works for him in a weird way. He's lethally gorgeous, not afraid to get his hands dirty or use his gun to make his points for him.

I remember the way he pressed against me yesterday, right outside his house, his cock hard on my ass while his fingers made me fall apart. He knew what he was doing. Knew just how to push my buttons and make me lose it.

As if he can sense my thoughts, Gage glances over at me, and I glance away. Neither of us say anything, like we have some unspoken agreement not to talk.

It's late afternoon when we get back to the house.

I drag Dog's stuff in and leave it by the door, half to piss Gage off and half because I can't be fucked to deal with it just yet.

Gage disappears upstairs to do who-knows-what, and a few minutes later, Ash comes down, looking satisfied and rumped. He has a redheaded woman on his arm, and she giggles as she almost trips down the last stair, leaning against him for balance.

It's clear what they were doing upstairs, and I roll my eyes when Ash winks at me and ushers his lady friend for the next five minutes out the door.

“I have to get to the club,” Gage says when he comes back down, and he leaves soon after.

That leaves me alone in the house, from what I can tell. It’s quiet, and it feels empty. I have no idea where Priest and Knox are, but I haven’t seen them all day. When I whistle, Dog comes running, the clatter of his claws on the hardwood announcing his presence from wherever he’s been.

I hope it was shitting in Ash’s shoes.

“Come here, you little hellion,” I say. “I got something for you.”

Dog just tilts his head to one side like he has no idea what I’m saying but is just happy to be here, which is probably the case.

After dragging his stuff to the kitchen, I fill his new bowl with the new food and put it in front of him.

He watches me for a second, looking at the food and then back up at me, like he’s confused what he’s supposed to do with it.

Huh. I guess he’s never really had dog food before, and the little kibble pellets look a lot different than the leftovers I’ve been feeding him for the last few weeks.

“It’s food.” I nudge the bowl with my foot. “I know it looks like shit, but it’s supposed to be good for you. Make your coat glossy or some shit. I don’t know. Eat it.”

Dog sniffs the bowl and then crunches into the kibble excitedly once he figures it out. He cleans the bowl in about a minute flat, and then licks his chops.

“See, not so bad, huh?”

He probably hasn’t been out all day if Priest and Knox aren’t here and Ash has been ‘busy,’ so I let him out into the backyard.

It’s more grass than either of us are used to, and Dog runs around in an eager circle for a bit, sniffing everything. It’s a whole lot different than the alley he usually lives in, and he takes it all in before doing his business.

“There you go,” I say. “Look at you. Shitting in the grass like some kind of fancy dog. Bet you never thought you’d be living this good, huh?” I smirk. “I should leave that somewhere for Ash to find. Really put a bow on his day.”

Instead, I take the dog back in and watch him flop on the rug in front of the couch as if a few minutes in the grass has really tired him out.

Hell, maybe it did. You get used to something for long enough, and anything else is just weird and a little exhausting.

I trudge up the stairs to the room the guys gave me to stay in while I'm here, which is the size of my little nook and the main area of my studio combined. My shit is still in the duffel I brought it in, and it's not like I'll be leaving anytime soon, so I take the time to unpack. Might as well get comfortable and not live out of a duffel bag for however long this is going to take.

Clothes go in the dresser drawer, and under them are my weapons. Knives and guns that I've collected and carried with me since I took up this mission.

I can tell the guys still underestimate me. They don't know shit about me or why I'm doing this. They don't know how far I would go to see it all done.

They've just inserted themselves into my life and my mission, and it wouldn't be hard to remove them if I wanted to. I flip one of the knives in my hand, catching it by the hilt. They all sleep sometime, and I could take them out one by one and rid myself of the problem.

But there's not enough reason to take that risk right now. At the moment, our objectives align. I can always reconsider later, but for now, I'll stick it out.

I get my room the way I want it, hiding the weapons somewhere they won't be easy to find in case Ash or whoever else decides to come poking in my shit. Then I flop on the bed with nothing better to do and scroll my phone for a while.

I'm not used to having nothing to do, and it feels weird. Especially being in a strange place. I don't know the area. Usually, if I wanted company, I could just walk outside and find people to shoot the shit with or scam out of a few dollars playing cards, but I don't think the neighbors around here would be very into that.

Eventually, the intense ups and downs of the last forty-eight hours catch up to me, and I knock out for a bit, taking a nap on top of the sheets.

It's dark in the room when I wake up, and I feel disoriented and groggy, not sure what woke me up until I hear noises downstairs.

Either the guys are home or there's been a break-in, which seems a hell of a lot less likely. Still, I leave my room and head downstairs to check.

"Come on, you fucker," I hear Knox say as I pad down the steps, and I come around the corner in time to see him and Priest dragging a big tattooed guy into the house between them.

The man struggles, but he's clearly no match for the combined strength of Knox and Priest.

"Alright," Knox says, grinning gleefully. "That's enough. Night, night."

He rears back and punches the guy right in the face, knocking him out easily.

Priest says nothing, and his face doesn't register any surprise or anything. He just helps Knox pick the guy up, and they drag him off toward the basement.

KNOX

THE GUY IS PRETTY BIG, but between the two of us, Priest and I get him down to the basement with no problems. It's easier when he's out cold like he is, not struggling and cursing and trying to bribe us to let him go like he was before.

Like that would have even worked.

He's a fucking idiot for even trying, and I would be pissed about it, except it means I get to play with him, which is fine with me. More than fine.

"Where do you want him?" Priest asks, his quiet voice cutting into my thoughts.

"Against the wall," I say. Sometimes I have a table I drag out and set up. I tie whoever needs questioning down and make them watch me get set up. But this time, I want the guy standing. I want him to be on the same level as me when I fuck him up. So he knows he's not too big or strong to get on our bad side.

There's that old saying about how the bigger they are, the harder they fall, and it's cliché as fuck but kind of funny in this situation.

I snort as Priest shoves the guy up against the wall and starts shackling him to it, using the ones for his wrists to keep him pinned before kneeling to do up the ankle cuffs too.

"Something funny?" That same flat voice he always uses just makes me smile more.

"Nah. Just looking forward to this."

Priest stands up and brushes his hands off on his pants, eyeing the guy. "You can handle this?" he asks me.

I roll my eyes. “Don’t I always?”

He nods, his cool blue eyes blank. “I guess so. Should I say have fun?”

I grin at him, and I know it’s sharp edged and feral. “Aww, thanks, Priest. You know I will.”

He nods again and leaves, shutting the door firmly before his footsteps retreat upstairs.

I don’t mind being down here alone, left to do my work with no one around. I know Priest doesn’t get off on this shit like I do, so I take point on things like this when they need to get done. It’s the way it’s always worked.

None of the other guys shy away from violence when it’s necessary, but I’m the one who finds joy and passion in it. It makes that excited feeling dance under my skin, and I already feel more alive just looking at the guy chained to the wall like he’s a canvas waiting for me to make some goddamn art.

I cross to the cabinet where I keep my tools and unlock it with a key I keep on me at all times. There’s so much to choose from. Knives and scalpels. Pliers and hammers. Lighters and tasers and ice packs. There are so many different ways to break a person. Some people respond to pain, some to discomfort. Some people are determined not to respond at all, and then you have to really get in there and get creative.

But there’s always a way. Everybody has a breaking point, and finding it is like an art. It’s like sex, when you’re trying to find all the places that make a person scream in pleasure—only instead, it’s pain.

But it brings *me* pleasure, and I shiver with excitement as I take my selections back to where the fucker is still out cold, head lolling to one side.

I’ve got what I like to call a sampler platter. A little bit of everything so I can see what he responds to best. Or worst, I guess.

A few minutes later, his eyes flutter open, and he shifts in the chains. I watch the realization come over him, his face going from groggy and confused to pissed and panicked in one second flat.

“What the fuck?” he demands, thrashing in the chains and making a whole lot of racket as they bang against the wall. “Where the fuck am I? What the fuck?”

“One punch in the face and you’ve already forgotten what you did?” I ask. “That’s kinda fucked up.”

“You,” he says, zeroing in on my face.

I grin and wave at him. “Me.”

“Fuck you,” he spits. “Let me go. You can’t do this.”

I laugh, and it’s not a happy sound. I’ve definitely seen people get freaked out when I laugh like that, and the guy stops struggling for a second, staring at me in silence.

I pick up one of the scalpels in my hand, rolling it between my fingers.

“See, that’s the thing,” I say, voice low as I step closer to him. “I can do whatever the fuck I want down here. This is my domain. My little playground, kinda. If you end up down here, there’s no one who can save you.”

I say all of it with a smile on my face, and before he can curse back, I draw the scalpel down his arm, cutting through the fabric of his shirt sleeve and the first layer of his skin at the same time.

The blade is sharp enough that it takes a second for the blood to start flowing. And for the pain to set in. When it does, the dude howls with it, like he’s never been hurt before.

I just laugh in his face. If he’s already screaming from that, then it’s going to be a long night for him.

I cut again, close to the same place as before. The guy jerks in the chains, but I don’t slip, cutting only as deep as I want to.

He’s shaking like a leaf, but my hands are steady. I’m good at this. It’s one of the only things I really am good at, and he’s about to see that first hand.

“See, here’s the thing. If you want to do business with the Kings, Reggie, then you should deal with us directly.” I move on to the other arm, giving it the same treatment. “You shouldn’t go bribing and threatening our fucking cage dancers. That’s fucked up.”

I don’t know his name. Didn’t bother to find out before we hauled him in. Knowing shit like that is Gage’s deal. So I just decide to call him Reggie while he’s here because he seems like the kind of asshole who’d have a name like that. Smug as shit when he’s on top and then crying like a bitch when he’s in trouble. Just like a Reggie.

“I didn’t—” he starts to say, but he can’t get more out than that.

I cut him off by stabbing the scalpel into his armpit, letting it stick there while I go to get another tool. The hammer this time.

Reggie screams in pain, and the sound echoes around us. Fucking beautiful.

“Don’t lie to me, Reggie. We caught you with your hand in the cookie jar. Only it wasn’t your hand, and the cookie jar was one of our girls. We don’t let shit like that stand.”

I grab his arm, digging my fingers into the cuts I left. My hand gets slippery with his blood, but I don’t mind that. It’s warm and slick, but it doesn’t affect my grip when I pin his wrist to the wall.

I can feel him straining, trying to break my hold, but that just makes him bleed more, and judging from his harsh breathing, it hurts a whole lot too.

The hammer is heavy in my other hand, and I aim it for his fingers, ready to break them one by one if I have to.

“No!” Reggie screams. He balls his hand into a fist.

I laugh at that. “You’re a fucking idiot, Reggie. You think it’ll hurt less if I smash through your fist with this thing?”

I draw back, ready to smash down with the hammer, and he jerks in my hold, opening his hand. His breathing is coming out in little panicked sobs already, and I can feel it affecting me.

My blood is pumping faster, hot under my skin, and I lick my lips at the sight of it. It’s like I can smell his fear coming off him in waves. He was so full of himself before, when we caught him and dragged him here, and now he’s already sniveling and trying to get away.

But we haven’t even really gotten started yet.

I smile to myself and play eenie, meenie, minie, mo in my head, picking a finger to break first. Then decide fuck it and go for the middle finger. Something tells me he gets a lot of use out of that one, smug little shit that he is.

The hammer catches the light over head as it arcs down and there’s a satisfying crunch when it slams into his finger, breaking the bone at the knuckle.

Reggie screams again, sounding ragged and already close to breaking.
Good.

That’s where I need him to be. I pick another finger, going for the pinky this time.

“Who else was in on this?” I ask him.

“W-what?” Reggie manages. He lifts his face, and it’s already wet with tears and snot. So much for him being such a big shot.

“Oh, Reggie. Don’t make me ask again.” I bring the hammer down on his pinky, and he screams right in my ear. For good measure, I yank the scalpel out of his armpit, soaking the tatters of his shirt with blood.

When he still doesn’t answer, I sigh and go for his index finger, spreading out the pain better. Just as I’m about to break that one too, he suddenly remembers how to talk.

“Wait!” he screeches. “Wait. Wait. I’m... it was...”

I break the finger anyway.

Reggie sobs, and it sounds like it hurts. He tries to curl his fingers into a fist, but then screams when the broken ones don’t seem to like that very much.

“You’re so close, Reg. Just tell me what I wanna know.”

I don’t say ‘and then it’ll be over’ because that would be a lie. There’s no point in lying. It won’t be over, and we both know that, probably. The thing he did has already been done. This is as much about punishing him for getting uppity and thinking he can do whatever he wants with what’s ours as it is about getting more information from him.

It’s not going to end easy.

“T-the Diamond Devils!” he blurts out, shaking against the wall. His eyes are wild and wet, red rimmed from his crying. Blood pours down both arms, and his chest heaves with trying to breathe through the pain. “I... I’m a member. We were—oh, fuck. We were getting tired of waiting for you to make a decision.”

“Oh, about the weapons.” I remember Gage debating that the other night. Before we got wrapped up in the mess with River and all.

Reggie nods, still trembling. “I wanted to... to get some things moving, so I—”

“So you decided to just make things happen yourself.” I shake my head, smiling. “Oh, Reggie. You’re so fucking stupid. Did you really think that was gonna work? That you could get around having to talk to us. That you could scam me and my brothers and fuck with our girls?”

“It wasn’t a scam!” he chokes out. “You were gonna get your cut.”

“You never got our permission, you fucking idiot.” I drop the smile and bash his ring finger, hitting it a couple times for good measure. That hand is fucked at this point, but I want to make sure I drive the message home. “And you fucked with our dancers. You tried to bribe them, and when that didn’t work, you moved on to threats. You thought we wouldn’t find out?”

“Money is money,” Reggie sobs. “I thought—”

“You didn’t think shit,” I snap, going for the thumb. His howls of pain are like music to my ears. “You just wanted to be the hero. You wanted to do a deal without doing the deal, and that’s amateur shit. Even I know better than that.”

“Please!” he screams.

“Please what?” I shoot back cheerfully. “Please stop? Please no more? Please have mercy?” I jam the hammer under his chin, making him look up at me. “Is that what the dancer you fucked said when she was trying to get away from you? Is that how she begged when you grabbed her and did whatever the fuck you wanted with her? Doesn’t feel so nice, now does it?”

He flinches hard when I draw the hammer back, like he’s afraid I’m about to smash him in the face with it.

I do think about it for a second, but that would be too easy. I’m not going to let him get off like that. Not when there’s so much more pain I can make him feel for what he did.

I step away from him, taking the hammer with me.

Reggie slumps in his chains, sobbing and taking deep, rattling breaths. I watch him try to move his fingers and then cry out when none of them bend the right way.

That’s his own fault for being an idiot.

All of this is his fault for being an idiot.

I pick up the hot stick.

It’s probably for something like burning designs into wood or some artsy shit like that, but I use it to burn warnings into people who should have already known better. Like Reggie.

Humming under my breath, I walk over and plug it in, letting it heat up.

Reggie just keeps crying.

“You know,” I say conversationally. “I woulda thought someone like you would have a higher pain tolerance. You’re out there fucking people over, grabbing up girls who don’t want you and generally being a piece of shit. I thought you’d be able to take a little pain without folding like a wet piece of paper.”

If he has anything to say to my taunts, he can’t get it out for the crying, so I shrug one shoulder and approach him with the hot stick.

The tip of it glows red, and I smirk at the sight. There’s already a dark part at the very tip, the remnants of other times I’ve had to use this.

When I come close to Reggie with it, he suddenly snaps his head up, eyes wide with terror.

“No. No! Please, don’t.” He tries to cringe away from me, but there’s nowhere for him to go. Every time he moves he ends up agitating his wounds more, until he’s a bleeding mess.

“Did you listen when the dancer said that to you?” I ask him, even though I already know the answer.

Before he can say anything else, I drag the tip of the hot stick down his chest, leaving a burning line. I just press it lightly enough that he’ll feel it, not so it’ll start burning through his skin.

Yet.

Just a little taste so he knows what’s coming and can get himself good and scared about it.

I lift it again, ready to go down that same line but harder this time, when the door to the stairs opens.

Probably Priest, coming to check on me or complain about the noise. But when I turn to look, I realize it’s not him. It’s River.

She walks into the room like she owns the place, looking rumpled like she was asleep before this or something. She doesn’t say anything at first, just stands there, watching.

I wonder what she sees. Some asshole chained up where she was not that long ago, bleeding and crying and broken. I remember our conversation when she was in his place. Well. Not completely in his place, but close enough. I didn’t hurt her.

I chuckle, not bothered by her watching. “I told you that you wouldn’t like it if Gage sent me to ask the questions.”

River just snorts and takes a step closer.

“So what’d this guy do?” she asks, jerking her head in his direction.

If the sight of him bothers her, she doesn’t show it, and I get the feeling she’s not too broken up about what she’s seeing.

“He fucked with our business,” I tell her. “Tried to use us like we’re little puppets for him, to reach his own ends. We don’t deal with shit like that. We look out for each other. Icing on the cake is he tried to threaten and rape one of our dancers when she wouldn’t go along with his bullshit.”

Up until this point, River has been watching with neutral eyes. Just taking it all in. But something about what Reggie tried to do to the dancer

seems to strike a nerve in her. I can tell by the way her eyes go sharp and she narrows her gaze on him.

She straightens up and comes closer, moving in so she can get a good look at him.

His eyes are glassy with the pain, and he stares past her like he doesn't even see her. But the way his nostrils flare tells me he does, and he knows this isn't good for him.

"He tried to rape a girl?" River asks.

"Yeah. Basically damn near got away with it until we caught him."

She takes a step closer.

Usually, I do this alone. This is my playground, where I have my fun and do my part for the group. But I'm intrigued watching River move in. Something about what this fucker did resonates with her, and I can feel it like it's dancing under my skin too.

I reach over and grab a knife from the table, then hand it to her.

She looks over, meeting my eyes, and I don't say anything. If she's got the stomach for it, then she knows what it's for. It's a silent offer. A chance to do whatever she wants to help me punish this guy.

River licks her lips and takes it from me, then steps closer to the man chained to the wall. There's no hesitation in her. She just jabs the knife right into Reggie's thigh, making him scream all over again.

I laugh at the sight and her technique. "You don't have a lot of finesse," I let her know. "But you could be good at what I do. You don't mind hurting people when they deserve it."

She looks up at me, and I can see something manic gleaming in her midnight blue eyes.

She likes this.

It's different from the anger and irritation she's shown since we first dragged her in from the alley behind the club. This is savage pleasure, and it speaks to me.

Without waiting for instruction or anything, she keeps going. She lifts the bloody knife and jabs it into the same thigh, this time closer to his groin.

Sweat beads on Reggie's skin, and I know he's worried about where she's going to stab him next.

"No!" he screams, in so much pain he can barely hold himself up. "Please, fuck! No, no, no, no, no."

River's response is to stab him again, even higher.

Damn. She's fucking hot like this. Calm and collected, but with that edge to her that says she means fucking business. My cock swells in my pants, getting hard just watching her do this.

Not many people share my passion for pain. Hell, most of them don't even understand it, but here she is, doing this because she wants to. Because she likes it.

"Come here a second," I say to her, and she steps away from Reggie to follow me over to the counter where I laid everything out.

"You ever seen most of these before?"

"In hardware stores and shit, yeah," she replies, eyes on the gleaming metal. "Damn, a hammer?"

I laugh and nod over to Reggie. "Can't grope anybody if his hand doesn't work."

Her eyes go dark at that.

"What's this?" She points to the hot stick.

"Burns him," I tell her. "I can make designs if I want to." I hold it close enough that she can feel the heat pouring off it.

She reaches out and runs her fingers over the scalpel I used before, and I pick it up and drag it lightly over the exposed skin of her arm. There's not enough pressure to cut her, my touch is so light, but she can feel how sharp the blade is.

River shivers in response.

I grab a different knife, this one with jagged edges, designed to leave a mess behind when you rip it out of someone, and let that trail over her skin too. I hold her gaze and follow the lines of her collarbones with it, watching her skin flush at the touch. She leans in closer to me, letting the knife dig just slightly into her skin, her eyes hazy and her pupils blown out.

Fuck.

My cock is getting harder and harder, just from watching her react to everything. Pain and desire blending the way they always do in my head.

Reggie's sobs and sniffles taper off, and when I look over, I can tell he's passed out from the pain and the stress and hopefully the shame of being a piece of shit.

But it leaves us in the quiet. Together.

I'm just focused on River now anyway, and I reach out, grabbing her jaw in a tight hold.

She doesn't jerk away, just stares up at me with those deep blue eyes, letting me see what this is doing to her.

I can't hold back. To be fair, I don't even try that hard. I just do what I want to, which is to drag her forward into a hot, hard kiss.

Instead of punching me in the dick or something, River responds. She kisses me back, making low, filthy sounds into my mouth. She fists the front of my shirt with one hand like she needs something to hold on to, and I plunge my tongue into her mouth like she plunged that knife into Reggie's thigh, trying to devour her.

"Fuck," I pant when I pull back for breath.

"Yeah?" she mumbles back. "Is that what you wanna do?" She reaches down and rubs my cock through the tent in the front of my pants, and I know there's no way I'm hiding how turned on I am by this.

I don't want to anyway.

"Yeah," I tell her. "Fuck, yeah. Wanna put my cock in you and fuck you until you scream."

"You going to hurt me?"

"Is that what you want?"

Instead of answering, she grips my cock a little harder, letting me feel the strength in her hand. My hips buck forward, and I choke back a moan of my own.

My blood beats through me, and I drop the knife that was in my hand to the counter with a clatter. Both hands grip her ass, dragging her in closer so I can grind against her.

She's just as hot as I am, and I know if I were to put my hand down the front of her little shorts, I'd find her wet.

The smell of blood and sweat is high in the air, mingling with the thick, musky scent of arousal. It's all so fucking good, and I dig my fingers harder into the flesh of her ass, letting her feel it.

"Fuck," she gasps, bucking against me.

I can feel the heat of her body, and I need to be inside her. My cock is so hard it's about to burst through the front of my jeans at this point.

Pulling away from her, I spin her around so she's bent over the counter. This puts her facing Reggie, who's slumped in his chains against the wall.

There's something hot as hell about that to me. The idea of her watching the product of what we did together while I sink my cock into her sexy little body?

I fucking love it.

And the craziest thing is, I think she loves it too.

RIVER

HOLY. Fucking. Shit.

I wasn't expecting this at all when I came down here, but I'm sure as hell not complaining.

Desire and arousal and plain fucking need rip through my body, and I'm more turned on than I've been in a long time. My head spins with it, keeping me off balance and breathless.

Good thing I've got Knox's counter of sharp shit to hold me up.

I can see the fucker Knox and Priest dragged in, passed out like a sack of potatoes against the wall.

Hurting him felt good. He nearly raped a woman, and making him feel agony for that gave me a sense of control and satisfaction that needed an outlet, clearly.

And then Knox started showing me his tools, and suddenly my body was on fire with need.

There's something about how easily he wields them. How he's out here giving out justice and making something that might as well be art when people deserve it. I barely even know this man. But I want him. It's lust, plain and simple.

Animal.

Hedonistic.

Both of us boiled down to our most basic aspects and desires.

Knox's hands are big and calloused on my skin, and he drags my shorts down, leaving me bare assed for him to see. I know I'm wet as hell, the proof of my arousal trickling down my thighs enough that they're slick and sticky.

I hear a belt clicking, and then Knox's pants must be getting pushed down too, because half a second later, the hot hardness of his cock is there between my legs, rubbing through my wetness. He's got a piercing at the tip, I think. I can feel it against my skin.

"Fuck," he hisses, dragging himself through my folds a few times.

I bite back the whine that wants to spill out of my mouth and spread my legs wider, trying to coax him where I want him without having to resort to begging.

My skin is flushed and my body just wants to be filled. It doesn't help that I can tell Knox's dick is as big as the rest of him, and it makes me even hungrier for it.

He doesn't make me wait much longer, thank fuck. He pulls away for a split second and then slams into me, making me take the full length of him in one go.

A cry spills from my lips at the sudden fullness and the slight pain of the stretch it takes to accommodate all of him. I asked him if he was going to hurt me, and I know he could see the gleam in my eyes as I said it, the little part of me that hoped the answer was yes.

I used to feel ashamed of the things I crave now, the things it takes to get me off. Someone with my fucked up past shouldn't *want* shit like this, right?

But I don't give a fuck anymore.

I've been to hell. I lived in the dark and the fear and the stink of it.

And I survived.

For so long, I was numb. Now I have to walk right up to the knife's edge to feel anything. So I take my moments of ecstasy whenever and however I find them—and if it doesn't look like other people's pleasure, then fuck them. They don't have to understand my pleasure, because they don't know my pain.

Knox fills me up and grinds forward a bit, making sure I can feel every single inch of him inside me, as if I had a choice about that in the first place. He feels even bigger inside me, and I clench around him, writhing in place against the table.

"You're so fucking tight," he pants behind me, one hand on my hip. "Fucking hell, you feel good."

"Fuck me," I gasp out, trying to work myself on his cock, but I'm caught between the counter and the hardness of his body.

Luckily, he doesn't need telling twice.

Knox draws his cock out slowly and then slams back in, setting an almost furious pace. It's like he can't get enough, and it feels so fucking good.

I can hear how wet I am every time his dick slams into me, making more of my arousal slide out and drip down my legs. The smell of it mingles with the blood and sweat and fear already in the air, and it's such a heady cocktail.

I feel like I'm high or drunk on it, taking Knox's dick like I was made for it.

Knox scrabbles for something on the counter, his body bending over mine for just a moment, pressing me down further. His hips don't stop moving, though. He keeps fucking me when he pulls back, and I can feel cold metal against my skin as he starts cutting my shirt and bra off with one of his knives.

Fuck.

Somehow that just makes it hotter. Knowing he has that kind of control that he can fuck me and use the knife and not hurt me all at the same time.

I wonder what it would feel like if he cut me a little. If he dragged that blade over my skin and made me bleed in even lines while his cock was buried deep in my cunt.

Just thinking about it makes me throb even more, and I clench around his cock again, earning a hissed "Fuck" from Knox.

My shirt and bra fall away, leaving me mostly naked down in Knox's torture room. My tits bounce as he fucks me harder, and I give up on holding back any noises that I make. It's just too damn good.

Across the room, the sound of rattling chains catches my attention, and I can see the asshole starting to come around. His head lolls on his shoulders, and there's a moment where he must forget where he is and what happened to him because he tries to move, and then his eyes fly open from the pain.

They're still glassy and out of it, and he's only barely conscious as he looks around the room.

Then his gaze lands on me and Knox, and I can only imagine what he sees. Me bent over, taking it hard as Knox drives into me from behind.

His eyes are heavy with pain, and something about that just ramps my pleasure up higher.

I feel like I'm spinning out of control in the best way, coming out of my body, losing everything that weighs me down and haunts me. In this moment, there's only me and Knox and the thick press of his cock inside me. And the would-be rapist who watches us and suffers for the shit he did.

Knox must feel it too, because he starts slamming into me even harder, taking me closer and closer to my peak. Judging by the way he's breathing, he's getting close too.

Our harsh breathing and moans echo in the room, drowning out the fucker's pained noises until all I can hear is the sound of us fucking.

I'm so close to the edge, so close to falling apart—and then I feel the sting of sharp metal against my back again. This time, Knox doesn't cut my clothes. This time, he presses that knife to my skin, drawing the sharp blade down my back in a straight line.

I can feel from the burn of it that he broke the skin, drawing blood, and for some reason, that's enough to put me over the edge.

I cry out, shaking myself apart as the full force of my pleasure slams into me with the same speed as Knox's dick. I writhe where I'm stuck between him and the counter, feeling myself clench around his cock, trying to milk it of everything it has to offer.

That's enough to get Knox to follow me over the edge, and he swears low and hot as he pumps himself into me, spilling his release in a mess inside my core.

For a little while, we just stay like that, breathing hard, waiting to come back to ourselves.

I still have that *out of my skin* feeling, like I've transcended something and become something else in the time it took me to come undone on Knox's cock.

One big hand squeezes my ass and smears the blood on my back. He runs his fingers over one of my tattoos, then pulls out with a wet sound, leaving the mess to drip out of me.

"Holy shit. You're distracting as hell," he says with a little laugh. "But I need to finish up here."

I glance up at the guy against the wall, having almost forgotten about him in my pleasure. He's passed out again, head slumped and body heavy like a sack of bricks.

I laugh along with Knox, the sound bursting out of me before I can stop it.

My body is still buzzing from the orgasm and the good feelings that came along with it. I pull my shorts up and grab the shredded mess of my shirt and bra, holding them over my chest.

I guess I'm going back upstairs like this.

Knox runs his gaze over me and then grabs me again, kissing me hard and dirty. It's a nice little bow on what we just did, and I smirk when he turns to go back to his work, making this shithead pay for his sins.

PRIEST

THE DOG STARES AT ME, and I stare right back at it, not moving an inch. There's no hostility, and it's not growling or raising its hackles like it wants to attack me.

It's just... staring.

I walked into the kitchen to get a snack and accidentally kicked the dog bowl that appeared on the floor sometime between now and this morning, startling the dog and catching its attention.

Animals don't really take to me, and that's fine. I don't get them either. They look at me like I'm an oddity. Like they don't understand what's going on in my head. I throw their instincts off or something, and that doesn't work to make it easy for me to be around them.

This fucking mutt that the girl brought with her is no exception, and he already seems to have taken up residence here like he owns the place.

I can't take the fucking thing staring at me, in my own home no less, so I get up, planning to head back upstairs.

Knox will be busy down in the basement for who knows how long, and it's nice to have the house quiet. Gage is at the club, I'm sure, and I don't know where the girl is. River.

Almost as if thinking her name made her appear, she comes up from the basement, shutting the door behind her.

She looks a mess, and I've lived with Ash for long enough that it's not hard to tell what she's been up to down there.

She's tousled and flushed and smells like sex. She's topless, which makes sense considering she's holding the shreds of her shirt to her chest,

barely covering her breasts. There's a thin trickle of blood running down her back as well, but she doesn't seem to care.

When she sees me, she stops, but there's no shame on her face, just surprise.

"What the fuck are you doing?" I demand.

River just smirks, not bothered. "I know you don't have sex, but you've still got to know what a freshly fucked woman looks like. Ash clearly bangs enough women that you must know all about the birds and the bees."

I don't react to her taunts about me not having sex. I can guess where she heard that, and I keep my mouth shut and my face impassive on that subject.

All those worries I had about her before are right there, staring me in the face. I knew she was going to be trouble from the second I laid eyes on her, defiantly telling Gage she wasn't going to give him any information.

I don't want her here. I don't want her causing trouble, and it's clear that's just what she intends to do.

"Don't fuck with my brothers," I tell her in a hard voice, trying to make sure the warning sticks. "We have business to take care of, and we don't need you being a distraction."

That doesn't do anything to dim her smirk. If anything, it just turns even more smug. "Knox didn't seem to have an issue with being distracted for a little bit," she tells me with a shrug. "But maybe that's the issue."

She steps closer to me, but I hold my ground, not giving her the satisfaction of letting her see me react to it at all.

"Would you rather I fuck with you?" she asks. "Are you jealous?"

River closes even more of the distance between us, lifting a hand to trail it down my chest and stomach, heading straight for my crotch.

I grab her wrist before she can get too far, not caring to be gentle with her when I push her away from me.

"Fuck off. I'm not playing this game with you."

"Who said it was a game?" she fires back. "And even if it was, you look like you could stand to remember how to have fun."

I can feel my anger rising, and I want to lash out at her, to tell her she's nothing and no one. She doesn't matter, and she's not going to push my buttons. But even doing that would be admitting she's getting under my skin. It would give her too much power. She stands there looking smug and defiant, as if she's above everything and everyone. As if she's untouchable.

“Drop it,” I snap.

“Are you *scared*?” She cocks her head, that twisted smirk growing on her face. “About what? That you don’t... measure up?” Her eyes dart down to my crotch and then back up to my face. “Must be hard. I mean, Knox is clearly proportional. Gage didn’t feel like he was a slouch either. And women seem to be throwing themselves at Ash left and right, so he’s either got a big cock or knows what to do with his mouth. Probably both, from what I can tell. That just leaves you.”

I don’t give her the benefit of a response, just watching her with the same expression on my face. River wants a reaction. That’s the kind of person she is. She wants me to lash out so she can tell herself that she won. But she’s not used to me, and she doesn’t know that I don’t play that game. I don’t give in to childish shit like this.

“You don’t know what you’re talking about,” I tell her, holding back my irritation.

“Oh no? Why don’t you tell me then? Why don’t you tell me all about it?” She leans in, giving me a look down her cleavage where it’s barely covered by the shirt she’s holding in front of her breasts.

It doesn’t even matter what she’s saying. I know she’s just trying to get a rise out of me. She just wants to see me look at her and react to what I see.

I don’t know why she cares so much. Apparently Knox is more than willing to give her what she wants, and if he wasn’t, then Ash would give it to her.

She wouldn’t have to beg for it.

So what does it matter if she doesn’t get it from me?

“No,” I say, stepping away from her, putting more distance between us. “Drop it.”

“What if I don’t want to drop it? What if I really want to know?”

“Then you should get used to disappointment.”

“Is that what you tell your partners? Or, *told* them, I guess. Back when you had them. Or are you a virgin? Is this whole constipated and annoyed act just because you’re pent up and don’t know how to talk to women? I’m sure Ash would let you have some of his sloppy seconds if you’re *that* hard up for it.”

River reaches out like she’s going to touch me again, and this time I slap her hand away.

“No,” I say again, more firmly this time.

She pouts, but doesn't try it again.

"Listen to me very carefully," I hiss, leaning so close that I can see the flecks of gray in her eyes that gleam like stars. "The three other men in this house are the only people in the world I care about. If you fuck with them, I will kill you."

My voice is low and leaves no room for doubt about whether I mean what I say.

Even so, not even that is enough to rattle her. River just rolls her eyes and steps away from me entirely, huffing out a breath. "You need new material. Every one of your so-called brothers has already threatened to kill me too. You sound like broken records. And I'm not afraid of death."

Maybe she's tired of toying with me, or maybe she's disappointed with the reaction, or lack thereof, that she got. Either way, she turns on her heel and heads for the stairs, giving me a view of the blood still trailing down her back from whatever she and Knox got up to downstairs.

I can guess.

I watch her go, my head spinning with the storm of my thoughts. She shouldn't matter. At all. She's just some woman who was in the wrong place at the wrong time, and now she's here until she kills St. James. She has nothing to do with me. Nothing to do with any of us, really.

But somehow, I can't get her out of my head.

It's like some kind of strange obsession that doesn't feel right.

Ash and even Knox and Gage all seem to be caught in her spell, and I knew she was going to be trouble, but I'm not usually affected by things like this. River is nothing like Jade.

Her attitude, the way she carries herself, everything about her is different from the woman I loved. The *only* woman I've ever loved. It's easy to hate her for all those differences and to tell myself that she's nothing, but at the same time... I desire her.

Even thinking it makes me feel unsettled, and my emotions are higher than they usually are, turmoil raging inside of me. I feel on edge, like I want to hit something just to get it all out, and for half a second, I think about going downstairs to where Knox is still entertaining the fucker we hauled in, just to blow off some steam.

But no.

The last thing I want to do is go down there and find the smell of sex and blood in the air, reminding me of what Knox and River did. It's not

worth it.

Instead, I go up to my room and shut the door, locking it with a click.

I feel like a lion pacing its cage, so much restless, unsettled energy gathered under my skin that it's impossible to stay still.

In a moment of frustration, I strip down to nothing and go into the attached bathroom, cranking the shower on. Ash has a running joke that I always take cold showers, to keep myself so cold and uninterested in anything that even seems like warmth, but he's wrong. I turn the water as hot as I can stand it, waiting until steam fills the bathroom before I get in.

I can't tell if my face is flushed from my mood or from the heat of the shower, and I like it better that way. I wash myself with quick, efficient motions, letting the soap suds swirl away down the drain. I watch them go, wishing they'd take the last of this mood with them.

Damn that woman.

Damn her for being... whatever she is.

Damn her for catching my attention and refusing to leave me the fuck alone.

My mind flashes to the thought of her tits, barely covered, pushed out because she wanted me to look. I bet Knox looked. I bet Knox looked his fill. Did he fuck her against the wall? The rough stone and brick digging into her back while he thrust up into her?

No, the cut down her back was too straight for that. A solid, continuous cut, not scrapes from stone. So he used a knife or something on her. That means he had her bent over something. Her ass up, his hand in her hair, maybe.

Knox doesn't do anything gently, so he didn't take his time with her. He probably shoved right in, making her feel every single inch of him.

I gasp out a breath as my thoughts spiral down that path. I can imagine it, the way they must have looked. The way she must have sounded.

My cock stirs between my legs, perking up when I think about River using that filthy mouth of hers to tell Knox just how much she liked what he did.

Giving in, hoping it'll do something to shake off this energy, I wrap my hand around my cock. I give it a squeeze, and I can feel a few traces of pleasure emanating through my body from it, a little dull and distant, but there.

I think about Knox, big and imposing, and River, slight and goading. I think about the sounds, the slap of their bodies, the way River must have moaned and arched when Knox drew a knife down her back. She definitely looked satisfied when I saw her. Pleased with what happened and pleased with herself.

My hand starts to move in fast strokes, the slickness from the shower and soap making it easier. For a half second, I think maybe it'll work. That I'll be able to lose myself in the feeling the way I want to.

But it doesn't. Of course it fucking doesn't. It hasn't for years. My cock doesn't go past half hard, and it softens in my hand, my erection dying along with my hopes of working this mood out naturally.

Fuck.

I snarl in fury, emotion rising in me faster than I can stamp it back down. Rage and frustration form a heady mixture, and I let go of my dick and slam my fist into the shower wall.

It hurts like hell, but I like that.

It's grounding.

My chest heaves, and it takes a good few minutes before I can get a grip on myself. But I do it. I drag in a breath and then another. I shut off the shower and reach for the towel. By the time I'm dry and crossing back to my room to get dressed, I have more control.

Brick by brick, I rebuild the wall I keep around those feelings, sectioning them away so I can get on with my life.

RIVER

WHEN I WAKE up in the morning, I can feel that soreness settling in from the rough sex with Knox last night. The cut on my back isn't deep at all, a testament to his skill with a blade, but I can feel it when I get out of bed and stretch slowly.

My body twinges with that low-down ache that only comes from being fucked into the mattress or the wall or a counter full of torture implements, and it makes me smile just a little as I savor it.

It feels good. Like being alive.

But I still need a shower.

I go crank the water up as hot as I can stand it and let the bathroom fill with steam while I work my fingers through the tangle of my silver hair.

When I get in under the spray, the hot water makes the cut sting, but it doesn't bother me that much. I soap up my loofah and go about cleaning myself up from the night before.

Last night was probably the hottest sex I've ever had in my life.

Knox is big everywhere, and he's not afraid to put his size to good use. I can still feel the way he stretched me open with his cock, slamming it into my body over and over again.

It was fucking good.

For the first time in a long while, I truly felt the heat of arousal and desire. It was primal and undeniable. His hands on me left little bruises behind, and I look at them while I wash my body, savoring the proof of what happened.

After Hannah died and I was finally released from the men who held us captive, I spent a year in a numb fog. After everything that happened to us,

and losing the only person I could really say I cared about, there wasn't anything I wanted to do. I didn't want anyone or anything to touch me.

Then, after my father died, when I made the vow and decided to wreak my bloody vengeance on the men who hurt me, it was like I came back to life.

Like the fog I'd been living in was suddenly gone, and I could see colors again. I wanted things again, even if it was mostly just to make the men who hurt me pay with their lives. But that was still better than existing in a haze where I was just going through the motions of survival.

Still, the person I came back as wasn't the same person who effectively died during that year of numbness. That person doesn't exist anymore, and trying to get her back is just a waste of time. You can't do anything to change the past, after all. All you can do—all *I* can do—is keep moving forward and keep staying on my path.

It's like... in order to feel anything, I have to go to the furthest extreme. Soft and gentle just don't do it for me. It may as well be nothing at that point. I've never found a guy who could please me, even though I've fucked several over the last five years.

It's been a good outlet, and sometimes a good tool to get what I want.

Seducing some guy and making him think I don't want anything in the world as much as I want his cock in me is a great way to get close to the men I wanted to kill. It opened doors that would have been closed otherwise, and got me in rooms I shouldn't have been in, so I could do the only thing that really mattered to me anymore.

But with Knox, there was something different. He wasn't a means to an end, even if the whole reason I'm here is basically a business transaction.

With Knox, it was intense as hell, and he made me come harder than I ever have before. He didn't hold anything back. Not pleasure or pain, and the combination of it was enough to bring me to the edge. He was right there with me, too. Not detached and aloof, but feeling everything he was making me feel, as lost in it as I was.

It's not something I'll be able to forget anytime soon, even when the ache goes away and the cut and bruises heal—the memory of the way he fucked me, the way he put his hands on me, the way he kissed me to within an inch of my life will definitely linger.

And surprisingly, I think I'm okay with that. This whole arrangement still pisses me off, but when it's all said and done and these guys are out of

my life for good, I don't think I'll mind hanging on to that memory.

Once I'm clean, I get out of the shower and towel off before throwing on some clothes and heading downstairs.

It's late enough in the morning that all the guys are in the kitchen. Priest has a plate of toast in front of him, and I'm surprised to see it's not just dry bread. Knowing him, he'd hold himself back from having butter or jam or whatever, just on principle.

He sees me looking at his plate and gives me a flat, cold stare. It's even more chilly than the ones he threw my way when I first showed up here. Clearly, he hates me.

Well, whatever.

"That's a hell of a look," I shoot at him, raising one eyebrow. "It's not my fault that you're stuck with me, remember? I don't have to be here at all. All you have to do is let me go, and I'll be out of your hair forever."

"No," Gage says, cutting in before Priest can either tell me to shut up or ignore me harder. "We have a deal, and you're not getting out of it."

"Sorry, River," Ash says, laughing as he sips his coffee. "I guess you're stuck with us until you finish your mission."

Knox laughs too, halfway through demolishing a plate of eggs and bacon. "I don't think she's too broken up about it." He eyes me, and his gaze is hot enough to leave a lingering burn.

I just look back at him, a little smile playing around the corners of my mouth. Usually, I wouldn't let a guy know how much he rocked my world after we fucked. Mostly because it's never happened before, but telling them they're the best at sex just gives them a big head. That's only useful if I want them to be distracted by their ego and not thinking about why I might really have been there.

But with Knox, it's different again. We were both down there in that room, and there was no acting on my part. All the noises of pleasure were real, and he knows it.

So instead, I just wink at him, hoping it'll piss Gage or Priest off even more.

"What happened to the fucker you had downstairs?" I ask Knox. "Is he dead?"

"Nah," he replies through a mouthful of eggs. He scrubs at the scruff on his jaw with one hand, his dark eyes gleaming. "Catch and release. Just a warning."

“A good warning. He won’t be fucking around with anyone else with that memory in his mind.”

He grins at me and returns my wink. “You get it.”

I *do* get it, and I wonder if it pisses the others off to know that Knox was telling me their business like that. Whatever. It was happening in their house, the one they’re making me stay in, so I was bound to find out eventually.

I walk around the table to make my own toast, loading four slices into the toaster and setting the toast level the way I want it before pushing down on the lever. The hum of the toaster and the smell of warm bread fill the kitchen, and I go to rummage in their fridge for butter and jam.

When I have everything I want lined up on the counter, I look back to the guys, watching them as they finish up their breakfasts.

Ash has a deck of cards in his hand, and he goes from shuffling them in the most show off-y way possible, to flipping single cards in his hand with a speed that’s almost impossible to follow.

“What’s with the cards?” I ask him, curious.

He grins that rakish grin at me and flips a card in his hand, letting me see it’s the queen of hearts.

I roll my eyes at that.

“You wanna see a trick?” he asks, crooking a finger at me.

“Why not?” I reply and move over to the table.

He spreads out five cards in front of me on the table and tells me to pick one.

“How do I know you don’t already know what they all are?”

With another grin, he gathers them all up and makes a show of shuffling for a good thirty seconds. “Alright, Ms. Skeptic. You spread them out. Don’t let me see them.”

I do so, picking two cards from the top and three from the middle and putting them on the table.

“Okay, now pick one,” he says.

I go for the second to the end on the right-hand side, and to my surprise, it’s the queen of hearts again.

“Put that one in the middle and put them all back in the deck,” Ash says, and I do it, handing the deck back to him.

He does more flashy shuffling, the cards moving between his hands almost like they’re formless. Like water. Ash doesn’t drop a single one, and

he does it without ever looking away from me, all muscle memory and reflex at this point, clearly.

When he's finished, he lays five cards out again, end to end.

"Pick one," he says, nodding at them.

I go for the last one on the left.

Queen of hearts again.

"Is that your card?" he asks, grinning brightly.

I purse my lips, not wanting to give him the satisfaction of being right. "Might be."

"Nah, it's not," Ash says. He narrows his eyes at me and hovers his hand over the cards on the table like he's thinking very hard. "This one's more you, I bet." With deft fingers, he flips over the last card on the right.

Ace of diamonds.

"Hmm, closer, but not quite."

This time he reaches for me, and before I can jerk back, he's pulling another card out of nowhere like it came from behind my ear.

The queen of spades.

Ash nods, like he's satisfied. "See, we got there in the end."

I can't help but smile at the show. His natural flair for being dramatic and charming definitely helps the little act, and he's actually damn good at it from what I can tell. I'm entertained by it, and actually a bit impressed, too.

I give him a little golf clap for his trouble.

"He'd fit right in at a circus," Priest deadpans, shoving his plate away in a sharp gesture. "He's already a clown."

"Aww, come on, Priest, that's mean," Knox protests. "He's not a clown. He's the con man outside trying to scam you out of your money with weighted dice or offering to tell your future with his cards."

"I don't hear either of you talking shit when I'm using my skills for your benefit," Ash shoots back. "Like picking pockets and appropriating things that don't strictly belong to me."

"You can't do that with cards," Gage says. "The cards are just for the trick of it. For the show. And you know it."

"It's not his fault he's hungry for the attention, I guess," Knox says.

"It's absolutely his fault," Priest returns.

While they give each other shit, I go get my toast and spread butter and jam on the slices, biting into one with a satisfied crunch. Clearly none of

their shit talking is meant to hurt Ash's feelings, and it's all the good natured kind of hazing that comes from knowing each other really well, I guess.

Ash defends himself by saying he can take Priest's wallet if he needs a demonstration of how useful his hands can be, and Gage cuts in to tell him to save his 'useful hands' for the women at the club. That sets Knox off laughing, and Ash just makes a lewd gesture and goes back to shuffling.

"It's not all card tricks, you know," he says.

"No, that's true," Gage allows. "You could also join the circus with your knife throwing act."

That catches my attention as I lick butter and strawberry jam from my fingers. "You can throw knives?" I ask him.

Ash looks up and grins at me. "With the best of them."

"This, I have to see to believe."

"Is that a challenge?"

"Sure. Because otherwise I don't know if I believe it."

He raises one eyebrow. "Okay. What'll you give me if I manage to throw five knives and not nick you?"

"If you can do that, I'll give you a kiss."

His eyes immediately flare with heat, and warmth spreads through me as if there's an open flame burning between us. Our eye contact holds for a long moment, and then Ash smiles slowly, making a show of licking his lips.

"Deal," he says in a low, husky tone.

"Don't use the fucking kitchen knives again," Gage gripes.

"I know, I know." Ash gets up and runs upstairs for a bit, coming back with a wooden box with knives laid out inside. They're not special, and he lets me handle one to prove they aren't trick knives or anything and that they are sharp.

Once I'm satisfied, I go and stand against the kitchen wall, ready to play my part.

Someone else might be scared of this. Even with his steady and tricky hands, throwing knives is a delicate art. One wrong move, and he could seriously hurt me.

But I'm not even worried. Maybe it's just because I have a bit of a death wish, or maybe it's because I've already seen how good Ash is with his

hands. I stand perfectly still as I watch him pick up the first knife, the challenge reflected in my eyes.

Ash lets out a breath and adjusts his stance, the knife's handle held loosely in his hand. He aims it with a glance and then throws.

It whizzes through the air and thuds into the plaster of the wall next to my left shoulder.

Before I even have time to fully process that, the next knife is in his hand and he aims that one too, letting it fly. Each knife comes easier than the next as he warms up, and soon there are four knives in the wall on either side of me, each one less than a half inch from my body.

I can tell from the look in his eyes that he knows he's won, and he's already looking forward to that kiss I promised him. Ash lets the fifth knife fly, and as he lets go of the handle, I move, just a little—just enough that the blade cuts my arm before it hits the wall.

I click my tongue in mock disappointment, hissing a breath through my teeth. "Aw. Too bad. You were so close."

Priest looks like he'd rather slap me than be in the room with me for another second, and Gage has that growing thundercloud of annoyance on his face again. Funny how they were giving Ash shit just a minute ago, and now they're angry on his behalf because I fucked with him. More proof that they really are brothers without the blood.

Knox, on the other hand, howls with laughter, hitting his fist against the table with amusement. "She got you good, Ash. You even had your serious face on, and she saw right through you."

Ash just shakes his head, but there's amusement on his face too. "Should've known you'd be a tricky one," he says to me, adjusting his glasses a little. "No kiss for me, I guess."

"Sorry," I tell him, shrugging. "A deal's a deal."

I can tell he's disappointed, but he's good-natured enough not to let it be a whole thing. Unlike Gage and Priest, who weren't even involved and look like they've been sucking on lemons over there.

"Anyway," I say, stepping away from the wall and going to put my plate in the sink. "I've gotta go. I have a drug dealer to find."

Meredith's tip is still fresh in my mind, and I have a few good ideas for where to hunt down this dealer. Once I find him, I have a few more ideas for how to get him to talk to me. Not all of them involve asking nicely either. I've never had an issue making people talk when I need them to.

The informant that got me into this mess notwithstanding. That was a one-time fuck up.

“You need a passenger on this little trip?” Ash asks, cutting into my thoughts. “I could tag along. I bet we’d make a great team.”

Honestly, he’d be more entertaining than being out with Gage, but I don’t know how useful he’d be otherwise. I don’t need the dealer to be flirted with or distracted with card tricks. Ash looks hopeful though, and I can’t tell if it’s because he wants to hang out with me or because he thinks there’s going to be a kiss in it for him somewhere down the line. Either way, I don’t need him distracting me with his flirting and whatever other nonsense he can get up to, so I open my mouth to shoot him down.

Before I can, Gage cuts in.

“No,” he says firmly. “This is her job. If we start helping her with it, then what’s the fucking point of the deal?”

Irritation flashes through me, and I bite my tongue to keep from telling him where to shove it. He helped me yesterday, after all, so trying to be a hard-ass about it now just makes him seem like a hypocrite.

He’s such a fucking control freak that he has to be in charge of my mission along with every other fucking thing in his life, and I think about telling him to fuck off and let me handle my business on my own, but in the end, I don’t say anything about it.

I didn’t want Ash along anyway.

I prefer to work alone.

RIVER

FIRST THINGS FIRST, I pack a bag and then take a taxi from the guys' house to my place again. It's weird doing the same trip that I did that first morning, remembering how I thought I was free of them. I remember coming out of the shower to find Knox standing in my living space looking through my shit and shake my head.

It's only been a couple of days since then, but it feels like a lot longer.

I find my shitty car where I left it parked in the abandoned parking lot next to my building and slide into the driver's seat. It's a piece of crap, held together with haphazard repair jobs and pure spite, but it's mine. It's not some sleek, high-end machine being driven by an asshole who thinks his car alone makes him better than me, so I'll definitely take it.

From what Meredith said, I know I'll find this dealer somewhere around Eight Mile.

Damon Sinclair, who keeps tabs on Ivan St. James. There are a lot of ways I can handle this, but I decide to go in neutral at first, just to scope out what's going on with him.

I drive over that way and park on a side street. It's not hard to find him. He matches the description perfectly, and I have to wonder how a woman who's probably blind as shit knew exactly what this low rate dealer would look like.

Either the blindness is an act, or she has an information network that's damn good. Judging from how Gage acted around her, it's probably the second one.

Either way, it got me what I needed, so I'm grateful for it.

I walk up to Sinclair, taking him in.

He's nothing special, your average small-time dealer out here in a world of small-time dealers. He's lanky and thin, skin pale and a little sickly looking. His hair needs washing, and his clothes hang off him like they never fit him in the first place and the problem just got worse over time.

His eyes dart around nervously, and whenever anyone gets too close, he looks like he's about two seconds from jumping out of his skin.

"Damon Sinclair?" I ask, even though I already know the answer. Just to see what he'll say or do.

For a second, he looks like he wants to bolt, but then he eyes me and nods shakily.

"Yeah. You looking to buy?"

"Not whatever you're selling. I'm looking for information."

"Don't have none of that," he says quickly, scratching at an already red patch on his arm. "Got other stuff though. Takes the edge off. Makes you feel good."

I raise an eyebrow, watching his twitchy movements. Just from the way he's acting, I wonder if he's breaking the first rule of dealing and sampling his own wares.

Fucking idiot. It's a wonder he hasn't OD'd or been killed by a rival yet if he's out here doing this shit in the middle of the day. But that's not my problem one way or another.

"Look," I tell him, keeping my cool. "I know you keep tabs on Ivan St. James. I need information about him."

Just the mention of Ivan makes his skin go even paler, and he looks around frantically, like he's expecting the man to melt out of the shadows and take care of him personally.

"Who said I know anything about him?" he asks.

"Someone with more sense than you, obviously," I shoot back. "Tell me what you know."

"Don't know nothing," he insists, but his voice goes high and reedy, and it's not even a good lie. "Don't know nothing about him. I keep to myself. Sell my shit and go home. That's all."

I roll my eyes and cross my arms. I might not be as intimidating physically as Knox or Priest, but I know how to make myself look like I'm fed up with someone's shit. Mostly because I *am*.

"Yeah, sure," I say. "And I'm a part time nun down at Old St. Mary's. Tell me what you know or it won't go well for you."

The threat gets his attention, and he stops looking at everything but me. “What do you mean?”

“I mean if you don’t tell me, I’m going to make sure Ivan finds out you’re dealing just a little too close to his territory. Everybody knows how territorial he is. How touchy he gets about those lines he’s drawn.”

Sweat beads on Sinclair’s brow, and I know I’ve got him. I’m an unknown entity to him, but it’s pretty much legend at this point how Ivan St. James deals with people who cross his lines. Or even get too close to them. Sinclair’s an idiot, but he’s not that stupid.

“Okay,” he says in a rush. “Okay, okay, okay. Don’t do anything hasty. Maybe I know something. A couple things.”

I smirk. “Imagine that. Tell me.”

He glances around and then leans in closer to me. “So. So, St. James. He’s got a meeting planned with the Mexican cartel to talk out a deal.”

“When?” I ask, cutting right to the point. “And where?”

“Soon. Couple days, I think. At that Italian place right off Grand River Ave. New fancy one. With the green awning. Uh, Romano’s.” Sinclair sags with relief when he gets it all out and then steps away from me. “That’s all I know, I swear.”

I nod, believing him. “Thanks. That’s helpful.”

And then I turn on my heel and head back for my car.

I’ve never been to this Italian place, and it’s interesting that St. James wants to meet somewhere so public, but I guess it makes sense. He likes to do his deals in his own space, but the other side wouldn’t be comfortable with that. Not if this is a fresh deal. It’s a place that will keep both sides safe, since attacking in public like that would be too risky.

It’s risky for me too, but worth it.

I pull away from the curb, checking the directions on my phone quickly before making my way to Romano’s.

From the outside, it looks like your average hole-in-the-wall place, but the fancy tablecloths inside and the smells coming from it mean it’s probably expensive and authentic. There’s a little patio out front with tables that have to be reserved ahead of time, and that seems more Ivan’s speed than meeting inside. It’ll let his paranoid ass keep an eye on everything, and makes him look good for having the best table. I wouldn’t put it past him to reserve all the tables in advance, to make sure there’s no one else to overhear them talk.

The neighborhood is one of those fancy, up-and-coming areas, but the place where Romano's is situated is relatively open. There are other restaurants and little shops further up the street, and I know they're usually crowded with people. It would be easy enough to bolt from the restaurant and blend in with the crowd, or slip into a little antique store or book shop and find a place to hide.

It's also not far from the highway, so getting away won't be an issue.

There are rows of buildings on the other side of the street, more shops and a couple of office buildings that stretch up tall. Perfect.

I use the fire escape that zig-zags up the back of the building to climb up to the top of one of them and lie low, opening my bag and digging around until I find my scope.

I find the right positioning that will give me a line of sight on the entire patio of Romano's.

Even better.

Doing this work makes me feel more like myself. This is how it's been for the longest time. Just me, working alone, figuring out my plans and how best to execute them. I relied on my own strength and cunning to get results, even if that meant finding someone else to do the final dirty work for me. Either way, I got what I needed and made it happen.

But now there are these four men in my life, getting under my skin. My back twinges a little when the thin cut pulls, and I think about Knox and what we did last night.

It's weird to be thinking about anything but the job. To have *people* in my life.

I used to go days without talking to anyone. I even had a one-night stand with a guy once and didn't say a single fucking word to him.

But now I go downstairs in the morning and they're all there. Sitting around the table, joking and shooting the shit. Doing fucking card tricks and wolfing down eggs like they're going out of style. It's weird, and I don't like it.

I had a routine. A life I was used to. Where I rolled my ass out of my shitty, lumpy bed when I needed to and then had cereal or toast and went about my day. None of these conversations in the morning or dealing with Ash wanting kisses.

Well, whatever. It'll be done soon. That's what I have to remember.

It'll all be over soon. They'll be out of my life, and I'll be out of theirs. And on top of that, I'll be free of my demons. Every man on the list will be dead, and I can finally move the fuck on with my life. Whatever that looks like.

I drag in a deep lungful of the slightly smoggy air and nod to myself, reaffirming myself in my mission. This is all that matters. Anything else is just a distraction.

I've got my target, and I've got my spot.

It'll all work out.

So I take the rickety metal stairs down from the roof, hitting the pavement and heading for my car so I can get out of here. On the way back to the street where I parked, I see a woman walking quickly, her heels clacking on the sidewalk as she power walks away from a man in a hoodie and jeans that seems to be following her at a fast pace.

Her hair is blowing around her face in the breeze, and she doesn't even reach up to brush it out of her face. She doesn't turn around to look at the guy, and her tense, worried posture makes it clear she wants to get away from him as soon as possible.

"All I'm saying is you're too pretty to be walking around here by yourself, baby," the guy croons. He's not slurring his words, and he doesn't look like he's high or anything, which means he's just a run-of-the-mill shithead who can't take no for an answer and doesn't have anything to hide behind as an excuse. Not that it would be different if he did. An asshole is an asshole whether he's sober or not.

"I'm not interested!" the woman shoots back, not turning around.

The man doubles his pace and catches up to her, reaching out to grab her arm and bring her to a stop. "You need to hear me out," he says. "I'm trying to help you, and you're being a bitch. That's why bad things happen to women these days. Because you won't stop for a second and let a nice guy help you. Let me give you a ride home, gorgeous. You won't regret it."

"I said no," she shoots back, tugging her arm out of his grip. "Leave me alone, please."

It's the *please* that makes me fucking sick. I can see she's angry and scared, and even so, she still feels like she has to practically beg this fucker to leave her alone.

The guy narrows his eyes, and I can see the anger there, too. The rage at being rejected when he thinks he's God's gift to women or some shit. He

pulls back like he's going to hit her or grab her again, but before he can, I'm across the street and grabbing him myself, yanking him hard away from her.

He didn't see me coming, and I have the element of surprise on my side, so he stumbles back, and I have a chance to draw my knife and press it against his side, wrapping one arm around his chest from behind.

"No is a complete sentence, asshole," I mutter to him, making sure he can feel the point of the blade pricking his ribs through his hoodie. "If a woman tells you to fuck off, then you should just do that. Because when you don't, bitches like me have to step in, and trust me. You don't want that."

"What the fuck?" he splutters, trying to turn around so he can see my face.

I dig the knife in just that bit deeper, cutting through his hoodie so it meets skin. I think about how good it felt to jam a blade into that guy's leg last night. How it was exactly what he fucking deserved, and how this fucker could be in the same boat.

I drag the knife down lower, cutting through more of his clothes and letting it bite through his skin. I can tell from the pathetic little whimper that it hurts, and I roll my eyes. "You're not so tough now, are you? You're only a big, brave predator when you're chasing someone who won't fight back. But when someone does? Then you want to go crawling home with your tail between your legs. Pathetic."

It would be so easy to keep cutting. To make an example of this asshole and leave him in the middle of the street for everyone to see. But the woman is watching with wide, frightened eyes, and I only wanted to prove a point anyway.

So I shove him away from me, letting him go. As soon as he's free, he turns and runs off, stumbling over himself to get as far away as possible.

"Thank you," the woman says, sounding breathless. "I didn't... I mean, I wasn't sure if I should run or try to fight him or what. I didn't know what he'd do. Thank you."

"It's whatever," I tell her, brushing her thanks away. I didn't do it because I wanted her praise or gratitude. I did it to send that fucker a message. "Assholes like that are a dime a dozen."

Before she can say anything else, I'm walking away, crossing the street and getting back into my car so I can finally get out of here.

I roll the windows down as I drive so I can feel the wind rushing over my skin and hair and think about how good it'll be to finally have all of this behind me.

On the way back to the house, I pass a sign for an outlet mall and decide to stop. There's one thing I need to make this completely perfect.

There are a bunch of stores for clothes, housewares, and electronics, but I find one that specializes in shoes and walk inside. It's blessedly quiet and mostly empty, and I wander the shelves, looking for the perfect pair.

In the years since I got out of that room and started this mission, nice shoes have become my one weakness. They bring me comfort, soothing me and keeping me grounded. Another little ritual, like the cutting and hunting down everyone who tormented me and killed my sister.

There are a lot of shoes on display, but I need them to be perfect. Sexy. Deadly, almost.

Then I find them.

All black with sharp stiletto heels. I can tell from a glance that they'll fit me perfectly and also make my legs look killer, so I grab them up and head for the register.

The girl behind the counter grins as she rings them up and wraps them in tissue paper before putting them in a bag. "These are great," she says. "Is there a big occasion coming up?"

I think about standing on that roof and putting a bullet right through Ivan's head, and I smile.

"Yeah. There is."

ASH

I SIT in the kitchen at the table, idly flipping one of my knives back and forth between my hands. I throw it up in the air and catch it by the blade, not cutting myself at all. It's practically mindless at this point. Muscle memory from years of practice, and I do it to keep my hands busy while my mind wanders.

Annoyance is still eating at me from this morning. I wanted to go with River, to see her in action and spend more time with her, but of course Gage had to go and shit all over my parade because it's not our job to do her job for her. Or whatever.

It's not like I was going to do the work anyway. I just wanted to ride along. To see what she's like when she's not here.

I'm into her. Everyone can see that, I bet. She's fucking sexy as hell, and she has this mystery around her that makes me want to know more.

I flip the knife and don't catch it this time, letting the blade sink a little into the wood of the kitchen table just because I can. My phone vibrates in my pocket, and I pull it out, smirking when I read the text.

Are you home right now? I'm in the neighborhood.

It's from Sam, a woman I've fucked a few times. She added a little winky face at the end of the message that clearly means she wants to hook up. There's no other reason to be in this neighborhood, so I know what she came for.

Sure, I send back. Come on over.

She's been here before, and she must actually have been in the neighborhood when she sent the text, because it takes her less than ten

minutes to make it to the front door after I hit reply. She knocks once, and the dog starts losing his shit.

He's barking and running in a circle in front of the door, clearly not feeling the fact that there's a stranger here.

"Calm the fuck down, mutt," I mutter under my breath. I'm still not clear on what the dog's name even is, since River calls him something different every time she sees him, and Knox seems to be doing the same thing. "She's a guest, not an intruder."

The dog doesn't seem to understand anything I'm saying, but he sits back on his haunches and watches the door when I open it.

Sam's on the other side, and usually she has some seductive look on her face when she comes over, but now she just looks worried. She twists her dark hair around her fingers, fidgeting with the strands.

"Did you... get a dog?" she asks, glancing around.

"Yeah, you could say that," I tell her, grinning my most charming grin. "Why? Are you afraid of them?"

"No," she answers, too quickly. "It was just loud. Unexpected."

As if on cue, the dog barks again, and she jerks back from the door.

All at once, I'm amused and annoyed all over again. River wouldn't be standing there cowering in the doorway because of a dog. She's the one who brought the damn thing into our house in the first place.

I shoot the dog a look that I hope conveys that if he fucks this up for me, he'll be sleeping outside in the fucking dirt. The happy expression on his furry brown face suggests he isn't picking up the hint.

"He's harmless," I tell Sam. "Come on in."

I lead her to the living room, not bothering to fill the silence with small talk. We both know what she's here for. We settle on the couch, and even if I did want to talk to her, she's on me before I would have been able to get a word out.

She climbs into my lap, wrapping her arms around my neck while she straddles me. Her mouth is soft and plush when she leans in to kiss me, and she tastes and smells sweet. My hands go to her hips automatically, and I kiss her back, biting down on her lower lip just to hear the sound she makes when I do it.

It's low and needy, and her hips roll against me as she grinds down.

Usually, this is all I need. A hot woman in my lap, kissing me and making it known that she wants me. My cock would usually be rock hard

and ready, but for some reason, I'm just not feeling it the way I usually do.

I can't get out of my own head, can't lose myself in the feeling of her body on mine.

I pull back from her, and she gives me a puzzled look. Her lips are kiss bruised and shiny, and that gives me an idea.

"Why don't you remind me what else that mouth can do?" I ask her with a smirk.

She grins and gets up from my lap, sliding to the floor eagerly.

I watch her as she spreads my legs wider and settles herself between them on her knees. Sam already knows what to do, and she goes for my pants, getting them open and sliding her slender hand into my boxers to pull my cock out.

I'm still only half hard, and she seems to take that as a personal challenge. She looks up at me through her eyelashes and then swirls her tongue around the head of my cock, licking it like it's an ice cream cone and she doesn't want to lose a drop of the sweet cream.

She's so eager to please, and she moans softly when she seals her mouth over me and then works her way down, taking me all the way to the root and holding there before she comes up spluttering.

Too eager to please, honestly.

Sam has a lot of talents, but deep throating hasn't ever been one of them. Still, I let her do her thing, leaning back with my arms spread along the back of the couch, my eyes closed. The sound of Sam slurping at my cock is the only noise in the house at the moment, and I let myself feel it, trying to get into the moment and out of my fucking head.

I focus on the heat and wetness of her mouth, the tightness of her throat when she tries to take me all the way down again. This time she doesn't choke, at least, but she doesn't try it again, instead using her hand to make up for what she can't take in her mouth, making lewd noises to show me how much she enjoys it.

And it's good. I mean, it's a hot woman with my cock in her mouth. There's not much to complain about there.

But for some reason, it feels like... not enough.

In the middle of it, I hear the front door open, but I keep my eyes closed. I'm expecting it to be one of the guys, who aren't new to coming home and finding me getting it on with someone in a random room of the house. Priest or Gage will be cranky about it, while Knox won't really care.

But when I open my eyes and turn my head to see who it is, River is standing in the doorway. She's got a backpack on and a shopping bag in one hand, and when I look at her, our eyes lock.

I can't read her expression at all. Is she disgusted? Interested?

Either way, my cock is suddenly a lot harder than it was a second ago, and I let out a soft noise, thrusting my hips up and burying my cock deeper in Sam's mouth.

I can feel my orgasm building, that heat that's been slow and steady so far growing into something that's more like an inferno than anything else. Sam moans with pleasure, assuming I'm reacting to something she's doing.

I don't look away from River. There's no shame on my part in having a woman suck my cock right in front of her. If she didn't want to see it, she could just leave.

But she doesn't go anywhere.

Instead, she arches an eyebrow, and her face settles into a sneer. "It would probably be better if you could get him all the way down your throat," she says to Sam. "And twist your hand more. You're supposed to be making him feel good, not chafing his dick."

Sam nearly chokes on her own spit with shock, and she squeals in surprise, trying to pull off my cock. But I bury a hand in her hair to keep her down there.

"Don't stop," I tell her, my voice low and husky.

Her brow furrows with annoyance, but she doesn't fight it.

River keeps watching, tilting her head a little as her gaze zeroes in on Sam's lips wrapped around my dick. After a second or two, she rolls her eyes.

"Wow. I don't think I've ever seen anyone make sucking a cock look as boring as this," she says in a flat voice. "It's like you're so desperate to make him come that you forgot you're actually supposed to be enjoying it yourself, too."

Sam looks up at me through her lashes, her eyes flashing with irritation, but I don't say anything as River keeps going, critiquing Sam like a seasoned pro. She calls out how dry her mouth seems, the way she can barely take all of me, how her technique is sloppy and half-assed.

Finally, Sam has had enough. She pulls off me and gets to her feet, her cheeks flushed. "I don't fucking need this," she snaps.

She looks down at me like she's expecting me to defend her or beg her to stay, and when I don't do either, her jaw drops open in shock. With a furious huff, she turns on her heel and marches out, slamming the front door behind her.

River watches her go and then turns to look back at me. I just laugh and raise an eyebrow at her. I wrap my hand around my cock, slick with spit and still hard as fuck and throbbing.

"Are you going to do something about this?" I ask her, fisting my dick and lifting my hips up into it.

She shrugs, making her silver hair shift a little and catch the light. "Fuck no. You had someone right there to suck your dick. You should have let her finish."

Arousal is still pounding through my body, and even though I'm amused at how this afternoon has gone, I'm still super turned on. I can feel River's gaze on me, watching me, and I can feel the heat in it.

"If you know so much about sucking cock, you should keep talking," I tell her, my voice going a little rough as I stroke myself slowly. "Tell me how you'd give me head."

For a second, I think she's going to tell me to fuck off instead, but then she licks her lips, watching my hand as it moves up and down my cock.

"For one, I'd take you all the way down my throat," she says. "And hold you there. Swallow around your dick so you could feel how tight my throat is."

Fuck.

Just hearing her talk about it is enough to have my cock throbbing even harder in my hand. I can imagine the way she'd do it, too. With that smug look on her face while her mouth was wrapped around me, the tight heat of her throat holding my cock in a vise grip.

I mimic that pressure with my hand, squeezing it and fucking up into my own fist.

"Keep going," I pant out. "What else?"

"I wouldn't neglect your balls either," she says. "I'd play with them, suck on one and then the other when my jaw needs a break from taking your cock. You'd never have a second to relax. I'd jerk you off with my hand, using my own spit as lube. Then when you're getting close, I'd fucking devour your dick. Suck it like it was the most delicious popsicle of my life."

“Fuck yes. God.”

My hand works faster, and I keep watching her, looking for signs that she’s just as into this as I am. She keeps her face still, but her dark blue eyes flash heat, twin spots of color appearing on her cheeks as she flushes a little.

“I’d milk you good,” she murmurs, her voice going low and quiet, as if she’s saying this more for her own benefit now than to turn me on. “Swallow everything you have to give me, and then make you give me even more. You wouldn’t have the energy to walk when I’m done.”

That’s enough for me. I can just imagine the way she’d suck me dry, and I thrust up into my hand twice more before spilling my orgasm, coming with a ragged groan.

I imagine that it’s not my hand I’m spurting into, but her mouth. Hot and wet and sassy as hell.

Fuck. Oh, fuck...

RIVER

MY STOMACH CLENCHES TIGHTLY, my clit throbbing as my gaze stays glued to Ash. Talking to him like this seems to have done a lot more for him than the woman who was going down on him when I walked in. His amber eyes are glazed behind his glasses, and he thrusts up into his hand, spilling cum all over his fingers.

It's hot as fuck. I watch him stroke himself through his release, and without even meaning too, I find myself licking my lips again.

I was just saying all that shit to fuck with him when I first walked in. I thought he'd be pissed and kick me out for interrupting him and that woman, but instead, he basically chose me over her, letting her storm out and not doing anything to smooth things over.

He played along with my little game, clearly turned on by my words.

My clit throbs in my panties, and I can feel myself getting wetter as I stand in the doorway, watching Ash work through the last of his orgasm.

When it's finally done, he doesn't even bother tucking his cock away or cleaning up.

Instead, he gets up and stalks over to me. His eyes are burning, and even though he just came, I can tell he's not finished yet.

Before I can say anything, he picks me up and deposits me on top of the bureau against the wall where they keep their DVDs and shit, tugging my backpack and shopping bag out of my hold and setting them aside. His hands find the waistband of my pants and drag them down along with my panties, then he grabs my hips to pull me right to the edge of the bureau.

"Wha—"

That's all I get out before Ash drops to his knees in front of me and buries his face between my legs.

I can't even pretend I'm not interested. I'm soaking wet, and I can smell my own arousal from where I sit. I know it's clear to Ash that I want it.

He doesn't waste time teasing or trying to get me worked up. He knows I'm already ready for it, and he makes use of that.

His tongue is hot and wet when he licks along my slit, and I tip my head back and moan, watching through heavy-lidded eyes as he goes to town on me.

This guy knows what he's doing, I'll give him that. He's not one of those assholes who expects the woman to do all the pleasuring while he sits back and enjoys it. His mouth is skilled, and he keeps a tight grip on my thighs while he feasts on me, licking and slurping up my wetness before finding my clit with the tip of his tongue and circling it with slow, even movements.

"Fuck," I gasp out, rocking my hips forward.

I can practically feel the smugness radiating off him, feel him pressing that shit-eating grin into my core, and I roll my eyes and decide he doesn't get to have it that easy.

"Is that the best you can do?" I ask, slipping back into the tone I used earlier, ready to critique his work. "All the women you've slept with, and you can't even eat a girl out properly?"

Ash just hums, unbothered by my taunt, but he works a bit harder, lapping at my clit and lifting one hand from my thigh to probe at my hole.

It's the hand that he came all over, and he uses his cum covered fingers to fuck into me, filling me up while his tongue keeps working me over.

I choke on my moan, my toes curling a little from the feeling of being full. It feels fucking good, and he's no slouch, but I keep up the commentary anyway, giving in to the game we're playing.

"Do you think that's all I can take?" I ask, trying to sound bored and just about managing it. "I'm not some fucking virgin over here. You can give me more than two fingers."

There's a muffled chuckle from between my legs and then a third finger presses into me relentlessly. He doesn't ease it in or take his time, and I can't help the cry that spills out of me at the feel of it.

"That's—that's more like it," I manage, but my voice is shaky and breathless.

Ash seals his lips over my clit, and the next comment dies on my lips when he sucks, thrusting in hard with his hand at the same time.

It feels so fucking good, and it sends heat burning through me, getting me right to where I want to be. But before I reach the release I'm building toward, he pulls back, taking his fingers away and licking his way down to my now empty pussy.

His tongue feels good when he spears it into my throbbing core, and I rock my hips a bit, like I'm trying to fuck myself on his tongue. It's not as good as his fingers, not as thick and filling, but it's close enough, and I moan softly, getting worked right back up again.

He keeps me there on the edge, fluttering his tongue against me like someone who knows exactly what he's doing.

"Ash," I choke out. "Fucking—stop teasing."

Once again, I feel that smirk against my sensitive flesh. He's enjoying himself, the asshole, keeping me on the brink but not doing enough to push me over.

Every nerve ending in my body feels primed, ready. On alert, ready for the one thing that will be enough to tip me into my orgasm.

And then he gives it to me.

He shoves his fingers in once more and thrusts them in deep and hard. They hit that perfect spot inside me, and I see stars as pleasure rushes down on me with full force. All the while, he keeps eating me out, tongue working like he's trying to lap up every single drop he can from me.

I scream, arching and thrusting myself forward, grinding hard against his face and smearing my wetness everywhere. Neither of us seem to give a shit about it. Ash doesn't stop his movements, and my first orgasm keeps building, the aftershocks blossoming into a second climax that leaves me breathless.

I keep expecting him to pull his fingers out, to smirk at me and make some smug dick comment about how he knows what he's doing with a woman or whatever.

But he doesn't stop. He doesn't pull away. Not even when I'm panting, barely keeping myself upright, and so sensitive that even his breath puffing against my clit is enough to have me quivering with sensation.

His fingers keep pumping into me, the wet sounds of them squishing in and out of my pussy obscenely loud in the living room. The sound, the smell, *everything* is enough to keep me poised on the brink, and when his

fingers find that spot inside me again, combined with his tongue flattening against my clit, I'm off on another orgasm, crying out my pleasure once more.

His face and his hand are slippery and wet, and he only stops when I can't come anymore. When I'm so spent that I have to lean back against the wall and try to catch my breath and slow the rate of my heart.

Finally, Ash gets up. He looks a little dazed, even though I'm the one who just had marathon orgasms. He lifts one hand, showing me the mess of his fingers. His cum and mine mingle together, practically dripping down to his palm.

"You're messy," he teases with a smirk. "Help me clean up."

Ash holds his hand to my mouth, and I curl my tongue around each finger, savoring the salty tang of our combined arousal. Each lick makes him shudder, and I take my time, sucking his fingers into my mouth and swallowing everything I collect on my tongue.

"You know," he says, grinning at me as he lifts an eyebrow. "That's definitely not how I thought this afternoon was going to go."

I snort a laugh, but he's right. It's not what I expected either. "What, you thought you were going to get off with what's-her-face? It didn't look like that was going very well."

He shrugs a shoulder. "She tries too hard sometimes. And she doesn't like your dog."

"She can kiss my ass. I don't give a shit."

That makes him laugh, and he leans against the edge of the bureau next to me, his dick still hanging out of his pants, which are slung low on his hips.

"I don't think she's the ass kissing type. Maybe if I made it worth her while."

"Do you always just fuck whoever you want in the middle of the living room?" I want to know.

Ash shrugs again. "Everyone's used to it by now. Gage gives me that look, but he never tells me off too much. Priest is usually all 'you have a bedroom, you know.'"

I laugh because that's actually not a bad impression of Priest and his flat tones. I can just imagine the sour grapes look on his face if he came in and saw Ash getting his cock sucked out in the open. Even worse if he'd come in and seen Ash going down on me with my bare ass on their furniture.

His threat from last night is still clear in my mind, even though I don't give a shit about it. I meant what I said then. They need new material, and I'm not afraid of dying. But I know seeing what Ash and I did would just push him closer to the edge of wanting to make good on that threat.

That thought sparks a new one, and I voice it before I can think better of it. "The four of you are all pretty protective of each other."

"Yeah, we are," he answers. "We're brothers."

"Pretty sure most brothers don't walk around with their dicks out in the house they all live in."

He laughs. "I mean, we're not all related. We're not actually brothers, although we consider ourselves a brotherhood. We all chose each other. Only two of us actually share DNA."

My eyebrows twitch upward. Now that is a surprise.

None of them really act enough alike to seem related at a glance, so it's interesting to think that two of them actually are. Brothers? Cousins?

"Which two?" I ask, curiosity getting the better of me.

Ash just grins, amusement lighting up his eyes. "I thought you didn't give a fuck," he says. "Isn't that what you told me? You don't care about what's going on with us, and we don't ask any questions about you? You made a whole deal with Gage about it."

He looks delighted to point that out, and I roll my eyes, resisting the urge to scowl at him in irritation.

I am curious about it, but I did say that—that I don't care about their pasts and we aren't sharing stories. All that matters is what we have to do in the present.

Ash's grin turns shit-eating, and I know it's because he knows he's got me.

I don't want to talk anymore, about him or the rest of his brothers. Don't want to be reminded that I keep breaking my own goddamn rule about keeping them out of my personal shit and staying far away from theirs. So instead, I lean in and kiss him, gripping the front of his shirt to drag him down into it.

Ash chuckles against my lips but kisses me back eagerly, his tongue sliding along my lower lip.

I part my lips for him, letting him push his tongue inside my mouth to tease at my own tongue. My hand flattens against his chest where it was

holding onto his shirt and then slides down. Lower and lower until I find his crotch.

His cock is still out and getting hard again, from the kissing and from going down on me, probably. He seems like the type to get off on knowing he made someone else get off.

I wrap my fingers around him, stroking slowly, and I can feel my own body responding. My pussy is still sticky from the first round, but it gets wet all over again, eager for more. It's like I was starving for the past several years, and now I'm at a buffet, ready to gorge myself just because I don't know when I'll ever get to have this again.

I scoot closer to him, wanting to trap him between my legs with my thighs.

"Come on," I mutter into the kiss, trying to guide his cock to my dripping pussy with one hand.

To my surprise, though, Ash doesn't go for it.

He smirks and pulls away, putting a little bit of distance between us and sliding his cock out of my grip.

It throws me off balance, and my stomach tightens a little as I blink up at him. I definitely wasn't expecting him to turn me down. Not with how much shit he's been talking since I got here about wanting to kiss me and fuck me and whatever else.

I'm not used to being rejected. Usually when I go for something, it's a sure fucking thing, and it stings that it wasn't in this case. It makes me feel vulnerable, and I fucking hate that.

So I shove Ash away and get down from the bureau, yanking my pants back up. Without looking at him, I snatch up my backpack and shopping bag and walk out of the room, leaving him behind with his dick out.

G A G E

THE BASEMENT IS USUALLY Knox's domain, unless we have reason to be down there, interrogating prisoners ourselves or having private conversations that don't feel right to have in the other parts of the house.

The rest of the house is an actual space to live, and it's nice to have a little separation from the place where the real dark shit happens.

I don't know what Knox did to the man we hauled in down here in the basement, but at least he cleaned up after himself when he was done and let the fucker go. I can still smell the sharp, crisp scent of the cleaning products he used to get rid of the blood.

"Did we ever get the guy's actual name?" Priest asks, his arms folded and his back against the wall as usual.

"Derrek," I tell him, pacing the floor in the center. "Did Knox not say?"

"He didn't know. Kept calling him 'Reggie.'"

"Sounds like Knox."

Priest reaches up to brush his fingers through the short blond hair on the side of his head. "The Diamond Devils are getting bolder, if they have their men doing deals behind our backs because they think we're taking too long. That's not a good attitude for them."

"It's not," I agree. "But it remains to be seen if it's all of them or just that one who got too ahead of himself and wanted to prove he could be a big man and handle it."

"Letting him go in the state Knox left him in will be a good warning either way. Fucking with us isn't a good idea."

I nod in agreement with that. Knox could have easily killed the guy, and none of us would have thought twice about it. He crossed us in a big way,

threatening people who work for us, making our club into an unsafe place. People have died for less and no one batted an eye.

But it sends a much more pointed message to have him go staggering back to his people. To have to show them the marks on his body. I didn't see Derrek/Reggie when Knox was done with him, but I know the way my friend works. There's no way that asshole from the Diamond Devils would be able to explain away his injuries as anything other than what they were.

"It's still risky, though," I point out. "They might decide to come after us for torturing one of their members."

Priest shrugs a shoulder. "If they do that, then they've decided they don't want to do business with us after all. It's not like we started this. If they still want a shot, then they'll take the message and get their shit in order, and they won't try to go behind your or any of our backs again."

"Let's hope they're using their heads, then."

"If they do decide to come after us, then we'll deal with it." His sharp features shift just a little, a micro-expression that anybody who didn't know him well would probably miss. "The way we always do."

"We will. If it comes to that. But I've got my sights set on bigger things for us than petty feuds with biker gangs, so I fucking hope it doesn't."

He nods. Priest has a violent side just like the rest of us, but it manifests differently than with Knox, or even Ash or me. Knox would be happy to fight almost anybody, and to torture them too, if there was a good reason to do it. Priest doesn't seek out violence, but he's one of the most protective people I know. If someone threatens the few people my friend has chosen to love, well... they might as well say their fucking prayers, because they're as good as dead already.

"Either way," I continue. "Letting Knox do some work on that guy was the right call. We have to keep tight control of our shit, and if it got out that some fucker came in and tried to undercut us with no consequences, it'd be bad for business all around."

Priest's mouth turns downward just a little, and I arch an eyebrow at him, waiting for whatever he's going to say to that.

"There's one thing we don't have control over," he grinds out, showing more anger than he usually does. "That fucking woman. I don't want her here, Gage. She's a mess, and she's going to end up fucking things up."

I sigh and run my fingers through my hair. Priest talks to me more than he talks to anyone else, and that makes sense, I guess. Ash is too jokey, and

Knox isn't really clued into certain emotional things. He's more of a physical person. With everyone else, Priest is closed off and unemotional, blank faced and neutral. But around me, he'll show a little emotion from time to time. It's ironic, since Knox is Priest's cousin, but... Knox is the way Knox is.

We all have each other's backs, but Priest is more similar in temperament to me than the others. He doesn't fly off the handle or leap into the first thing that seems like a good idea. Without the two of us to balance out the other two, this wouldn't work as well.

It makes it easier for Priest and me to talk about things that matter, and I can tell he really is pissed off about River.

"What did she do this time?" I ask him.

"She doesn't take anything seriously," he says, his nostrils flaring in and out in a quick motion. "She struts around here like she owns the place with her damn dog. Making jokes and working Knox and Ash up. She's going to start something she can't finish one of these days, and we're going to be left holding the pieces. I don't know why we even have her here in the first fucking place."

"Yes, you do. She's here so we can keep an eye on her. She's supposed to kill Ivan, but I don't want her to fuck up the things we have in the works in the process. She was already at our club by chance. I don't want her stumbling on anything else and causing trouble."

"So have someone tail her," Priest says. "Ash would probably fucking leap at the chance."

"I need Ash to focus," I insist. "And you and I both know if I sent Ash to watch her, he'd just end up fucking her and that wouldn't accomplish shit."

"How do you know he hasn't already fucked her?"

I shrug. "I don't. If that's what they're doing, it doesn't matter." I don't mention that River and I have already had a run in like that because it'll just piss Priest off even more. "I trust her to want to kill Ivan enough to not let anything distract her. I don't trust Ash to be as focused."

Priest makes a face like he hates that. "Never thought I'd see the day that you said you trust some random woman over one of us."

"You know what I mean. You'd do the same thing in my position."

"No, I would have killed her when she refused to talk the first time. She's a liability, Gage."

“That’s the whole point of keeping her here,” I remind him. “*Because* she’s a liability. At least this way, we’re minimizing the damage.”

“Yeah, the damage out there,” he insists, pointing as if to encompass the world outside this house. The muscles in his neck are tense, standing out in corded lines. “Not the damage she can do while she’s here. She’s already distracting Ash and Knox. She’s trying to work her way through us.”

“To do what?”

“I don’t know,” he growls. “To make us... unstable. Tear us apart. Something.”

I shake my head. “I don’t think that’s it. I think she’s just toying with us because she wants to think she has the upper hand here. Because we’re forcing her to stay. Killing Ivan is her main goal. Everything else is just incidental.”

Priest doesn’t like that explanation, I can tell. He pushes off from the wall and takes a step closer to me, but it’s not threatening. More like he just needs to be moving.

“And what about after she kills him?” he asks. “What happens then?”

“Then Ivan’s dead,” I reply. “And thank fuck for it.”

He scowls at me. “You know what the fuck I mean.”

“I know. You’re worried someone will connect Ivan’s death with us, even if it’s her who carries it out.”

He nods, his light blue eyes glinting. “We’ve had issues with him in the past, and people know it. It could get pinned on us because of that.”

He’s right, and it’s something I’ve considered a little bit since River’s been here. Ivan St. James is a powerful person with as many allies in Detroit as he has enemies. Fucking with someone as big as him in the underground of the city will upset the balance of the whole thing. Being seen as the ones who killed him could get us a new kind of respect, but more than likely will just paint a big-ass target on our backs.

“Well,” I say after a long moment of silence, speaking as I think. “We won’t be the ones who killed him. So we’ll make sure people know who did.”

Priest’s eyebrows lift at that. “Pin it on her?”

“It’s not pinning it on her if she’s the one who did it. She was going to go after him with or without our intervention. We’ll just make sure credit goes where it’s due. It’ll keep our names out of it and keep us from having to deal with the fallout.”

“Yeah. That’s a good plan.” He nods, relaxing for the first time since we came down here to talk in private. “They’ll eat her alive. All the bottom feeders and the idiots who were hanging on to Ivan will come after her.”

“It would have happened anyway,” I say.

There’s a part of me that... doesn’t like this. We have no way of knowing if River had some plan to make sure Ivan’s death was discreet and no one would find out it was her. Getting mixed up with us strips her of that, but that’s not our problem, so I shove the mixed feelings aside.

Above all, I’ve got to protect my family. These men are my brotherhood, and I’ll do anything to protect them. Even if that means sacrificing someone else to make sure none of us go down for this.

Besides, River already made her bed. Whatever she might have had planned, she’s been aiming to kill Ivan from the start. And she said before that she’s not afraid of death, so it’s not like she doesn’t see what could be coming in her future if she goes through with this.

Still, part of me feels like a monster anyway.

RIVER

I CAN FEEL the angry energy roiling under my skin after my encounter with Ash, all the sated, relaxed feeling from the orgasms nothing but a distant memory already. I'm on edge and pissed off, and I hate it. It's like the ground is shifting out from beneath me, like I can't find solid footing anywhere, and that unbalanced sensation makes me want to lash out.

It would make the most sense to go up to my room and hide out until I feel better, but for some reason, I don't want to do that. Being idle sounds shitty, so after depositing my shit upstairs, I stalk around the house instead, feeling defiant.

So far, I haven't poked around their space too much. I go from the room they gave me to the kitchen and sometimes to the living room, but not really beyond that.

Now I don't stop myself from doing what I want, striding from room to room as if the whole house is my personal domain. I yank open a door down a corridor off the main entryway and find a well-kept baby grand piano inside.

I roll my eyes at the fucking luxury these assholes clearly live in and look the instrument over. One of them must play. Even though they have so much nice shit, it would be stupid to have a whole-ass piano in here if it didn't get used. Which one is it, I wonder?

Staring at it doesn't yield any answers, so I march back out, closing the door behind me.

Another couple of doors just lead to closets, and I bypass them, not caring enough to rifle through coats and boxes and shit. But the next door I try reveals a small library.

That's the only good word for the room full of books. There are shelves lining three of the walls, and an arm chair with a small end table beside it tucked into a corner. It looks like the kind of place that gets a lot of use, which is surprising as hell since none of the guys seem like the intellectual types.

Just the thought of Ash or Knox sitting in that chair with a cup of tea and a thick book is almost enough to make me laugh. It's a toss-up with Priest, and Gage could go either way too.

There's a set of encyclopedias on one of the shelves, and I roll my eyes because apparently we're back in the dark ages or some shit. I move on from those and find a stretch of classic books.

The titles stand out in gold on the spines, things like *The Works of Edgar Allen Poe*, *The Prince*, *The Odyssey*, and *The Iliad*. Books like they make you read in high school, full of shit you'll never care about again.

I take a couple off the shelves and check them out, running my hands over the smooth leather of the covers and the embossed letters of the titles. I flip through one, *The Odyssey*, and am surprised to see little notes in the margins.

Whole passages have been underlined, and the handwriting is cramped off to the side, but I can just make some of it out.

I don't know anything about books, but reading the stuff in the margins feels like getting a peek into someone's soul. Whoever wrote these notes had a soul full of rage and pain, and they were connecting with the pain felt by the characters in the books.

Each book I pull off the shelf to look through is like that, with little notes off to the side and underlined parts. Some words are circled, others crossed out. It's like whoever did it dedicated themselves to reading each book and finding the parts that either pissed them off or resonated with them the most.

I'm putting a few of them back and reaching for another one when someone steps into the room.

"What the fuck are you doing?" a deep voice intones behind me.

Gage.

And he's pissed. As usual.

I turn around to look at him, and something in the way his face looks so guarded and angry makes me pretty damn sure these books are his.

I'm still on edge, feeling exposed from what happened with Ash. I hate that these men have gotten under my skin. That was never supposed to be part of the plan. I was just supposed to fuck with them, not let them fuck with me back.

"Just exploring," I tell him, shrugging. "Seeing what there is to see in here. Found these books."

"You shouldn't go poking around in other people's shit," he snaps, his broad frame looming in the doorway.

I shrug. "It was all just here, so I figured, why not? They're yours, aren't they? Or at least, you're the one who wrote these things in them."

His jade eyes flash with irritation, and I know I'm right. He wouldn't care so much if they weren't his and he wasn't the one who'd gone through all the trouble to make these notes.

"So what's all this about, then?" I ask, flipping open one of the books to a random page. It's got so many notes on it I can barely make them all out, and I lift an eyebrow. "There's some heavy stuff in here. One of the characters is talking about... I don't even know what. The suffering they're going through. And then you wrote a whole tiny little paragraph about how they don't even know what true suffering is."

"Stop it," he grits out, a warning in each syllable.

I don't stop, though. Because this feels good. More addictive than any drug. I want to poke at him, want to get under his skin the way they've all gotten under mine.

"This part right here about the 'darkness that you can't escape' is pretty poetic," I say with a little smirk. "Maybe you're in the wrong business. You should stop abducting women from alleys and take up writing full time. It seems like you'd have a lot to pull from for inspiration, judging from what you wrote here."

That seems to be the last straw. Gage moves forward, marching up to me and yanking the book out of my hand. He crowds into my space, pressing me up against the shelf until the wooden ridges of it dig into my back.

"You don't know what the fuck you're talking about," he hisses. "So you should shut your mouth."

He's so close, but I don't back down. "Maybe I don't want to. Maybe I want to know more. Maybe I want to figure out what makes you work, Gage. How you ended up the way you are."

“That wasn’t the deal,” he snaps.

“Fuck the deal,” I reply. “I’m guessing you used to live in that shithole apartment building you took me to.”

“What?”

“I’m not an idiot. You knew it way too well for it to be somewhere new to you, or somewhere you only go when you need information. Plus, Meredith talked to you like she cared. That shit takes time. What’s up with that?”

“None of your fucking business.”

I can feel the rage pouring off him, but I don’t back down. He’s not going to hurt me—that wouldn’t be in his best interests, considering he needs me alive to kill Ivan—and if he did try to, I could just hurt him back.

So all he can really do is stand there while I push his buttons, getting more and more pissed off with no real outlet for it.

It feels good to be on the instigating end, finally, to be the one doing the pushing instead of getting pushed. And I keep riding the waves of that, leaning into Gage and not letting him get away with his non-answers.

“What was it like?” I press. “Living there? How old were you? Young?”

“Shut up.” His expression closes down some, fury blurring out any other emotion. He’s uncomfortable, but relying on anger to get through it is a tried-and-true method. I know that well myself.

“Why don’t you want to talk about it? You took me there, so it’s not like I don’t know.”

“That was for a purpose,” he spits. “Not for you to go digging around in my life.”

“Oh, it sucks when the shoe’s on the other foot, huh?” I shoot back. “Maybe I don’t want to let you off the hook that easily.”

“Maybe I don’t give a fuck what you want.”

“Well, that’s obvious. If you did, I wouldn’t be here. You’re holding me hostage in your fucking house, and you won’t even give me anything entertaining to keep myself occupied. Tell me why these books.”

“I’m not telling you anything!” The words rip out of him, and there’s pure rage behind them. His eyes are snapping with it, and he’s practically growling at me.

“Just a little hint?” I ask, putting on a pleading face. “Small one? Were you some kind of nerd in school? You don’t seem like the type.”

Before I can get out another taunt, he grabs my upper arms in a tight grip. I can feel the strength and anger in the press of his fingers, and I know I'll have marks there later.

I half expect him to shove me forcibly out of the room, but instead, he drops his head and crushes his mouth to mine, kissing me hard enough to bruise.

RIVER

GAGE KISSES ME HARD, biting down on my lower lip and dragging it into his mouth to suck on it before releasing it with a loud pop. A little noise of frustrated pleasure spills from my mouth, and I grab his shirt, hauling him back in for more.

He doesn't resist, devouring my mouth with his, hot and slick and messy. It's the same thing I did with Ash earlier, kissing him to get him to shut up and stop saying shit I didn't want to hear. I know that's what he's doing right now.

But somehow, I don't care.

His hands roam over my shoulders and down my arms, finding their way around to fit in between my back and the bookshelf I'm still pressed against. He manages to grab twin handfuls of my ass, groping me hard, and I moan into his mouth all over again.

I can't control my reaction to it, and I don't even try that hard, really. It's all happening too fast.

All the anger and hate between us is coming out as this hot, intense sexual desire, and I feel like it would burn me up if I tried to ignore it.

I can feel how hard Gage is as he presses forward, grinding into me. I press back against him, rubbing against the hardness of his body.

With a little growl of desire, his mouth moves from mine down to my jaw, leaving biting, open-mouthed kisses as he blazes a trail to my neck.

I gasp when he bites at just the right spot, arching against him and tipping my head back.

That seems to give him an idea, and one hand releases my ass to fist in my hair, yanking it enough to one side that he has complete access to my

neck. His mouth is hot and wet, and it feels like it's everywhere as he kisses me, my body responding eagerly to his touch no matter what my mind might think about him.

My nipples go hard and tight, and my pussy throbs with need. It still feels too empty from when Ash rejected me, and it's almost like it can sense that there's a chance to fix that right now.

"Fuck," I groan, pulling against Gage's hold on my hair just to feel the sharp pain that comes from the resistance.

He doesn't say anything, releasing my hair after a moment and letting the silvery strands fall over my shoulders as his hands start roaming again. They find my nipples, and he pinches and tweaks them through my shirt at first before sliding his hands under the fabric and shoving my bra out of the way.

His mouth trails down lower, and he presses those hot, feverish kisses along the skin of my chest and my tits, tugging down the neckline of my shirt until he finds one nipple and takes it between his teeth, biting down and none too gently.

I cry out at the sharp sting of it, squirming against the shelves while he practically feasts on my tits, leaving even more biting kisses in his wake.

Pinned in place, it's all I can do to stay upright against the shelves, letting him run his mouth over my skin and my nipples. My pussy is wet again, so desperate to be touched or filled or something, and I grind even harder against him, searching for the friction to take the edge off.

Gage finally looks up again, and his jade green eyes are dark now. There's still anger there, but it's being crowded out by the raw lust emanating from him. It's a damn good look on him, and I reach up to grab ahold of the back of his neck, pulling him down so I can kiss him again.

He grunts out something that might be a curse or might be my name, but I swallow the sound either way, shoving my tongue into his mouth and almost daring him to keep up with me.

And he does. He kisses back with equal intensity, matching my pace until we're both breathless.

I'm the first one to pull back, needing to catch my breath while my head spins. Gage takes advantage of the moment and rips my shirt over my head, exposing my bare chest to the air of the room.

He yanks my bra off, and I half expect him to go back to my tits, but instead, his hands go down lower, undoing the button and zipper on my

jeans so he can drag them down.

Gage's already dark eyes turn almost black as he stares down at me. Without saying a thing, he drops to his knees in front of me and takes those kisses down to my pussy.

He sucks and licks at it like it's the best thing he's tasted all year, his tongue working itself along my folds and circling my hole with precision. I can't help the way I shiver at how it feels, the heat and pleasure of it shooting through me. I still feel sensitive from Ash making me fall apart so many times less than an hour ago, and Gage's mouth on me feels amplified, as if every sensation is turned up to eleven.

He's messy with it, eating me out and making his face and my thighs slick with my arousal.

I look down at him while he drags his tongue over me, breathing hard and still feeling spiteful. "You're lapping up Ash's cum, you know," I taunt breathlessly.

That's enough to get him to jerk back, but he doesn't seem disgusted or squeamish about it. Instead, his eyes are dark with anger again, and his face twists into a mask of fury.

"You fucked Ash?" he demands.

I can't tell if he's mad about me fucking Ash in general or me fucking Ash instead of him. I could easily lie and say that yeah, we fucked, but it bothers me for some reason that the answer is no.

I was right there, mostly naked and still a mess from the rolling orgasms Ash gave me, and he didn't want to finish what he fucking started. It sits sourly in my belly, the sting of rejection still present and irritating.

So I refuse to answer Gage, just raising an eyebrow and shrugging one shoulder. Let him think whatever he wants about that.

He narrows his eyes, a hard look coming over his face. Then he slaps my pussy hard with one hand. I jerk and moan in surprise, taken aback by the sudden harshness. When he does it again, harder, a flash of pain bursts through me before my clit starts to throb with need.

"Fuck."

It's basically the only thing I can think to say to express that it felt fucking good, but Gage doesn't seem to need more than that. He dives back in, hands gripping my hips hard while he licks me with even more vicious determination than before.

Even with the knowledge that he's licking the remnants of Ash's cum out of me, he doesn't stop. He doesn't seem like he's put off at all. It's more like he wants to lick me clean or something, to overtake what Ash did to me and wipe it out of my memory.

And he's fucking good at it, too. I don't know where Gage falls on the spectrum of Priest to Ash in terms of how often he likes to fuck, but he knows what he's doing.

His tongue curls along my clit, teasing it and working me up. I thread my fingers into his hair, holding on tight and rolling my hips as the sensation builds and builds and builds.

I can feel my orgasm rising, threatening to overtake me.

And then, when I'm right there on the edge, about to tip over into a fucking amazing orgasm, Gage stops and pulls back.

"What the shit?" I gasp out, sounding hoarse and breathless. "I was close."

He doesn't say anything, just gets up, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand.

My legs are shaky, and I'm ready to be pissed off as hell if he thinks he's going to walk away without getting me off after all that. But then he grabs me again and turns me around so I'm facing the bookshelves. He grabs my hands and braces them against the wood, moving me where he wants me.

I should be pissed off. I *am* pissed off. But that's not the only reason my heart is racing.

He grabs my pants where they're pooled around my ankles and pulls them up just enough that they wedge my thighs together, keeping my legs tightly closed so I can't open them. Just how he wants me.

I'm about to turn around and tell him to get the fuck on with it, when he drives into me hard enough to leave me breathless.

Like this, with my legs pressed together, I'm even tighter than usual, and it's like I can feel him everywhere, pressing against my walls, filling me up.

Gage isn't gentle with it either. He grabs my hips hard, fingers digging into my flesh as he fucks me even harder. His cock drives into me with punishing force, the sound of our skin slapping together ringing out in the room.

I don't bother to hold back my sounds of pleasure. I probably couldn't even if I wanted to. Not with the way he's fucking me hard and dirty, making sure that each thrust sends the whole length of his cock slamming into me, hitting that spot inside me that makes me cry out almost every time.

Heat and electric sensation curl through me, radiating out from my center to spread into my whole body. I was already on edge before, from his mouth on me, and this is just another step closer to throwing me into an orgasm headfirst.

I move my hand, ready to rub at my clit until I come from it all, but Gage growls behind me. He grabs my wrist and puts my hand back where it was, holding it down with almost bruising force.

"No," he pants. "You don't get to touch yourself."

It flashes through my mind to tell him where he can shove his bossy bullshit, but then he slams into me so hard that it's all I can do to stay upright.

My heart is pounding almost as forcefully as the way he's fucking me, bashing against my ribs and making it hard to catch a full breath. Books fall from the shelves around us as my tight grip on the bookshelf makes the whole thing shake. My back is arched, my eyes half closed. My whole body is on fire.

I'm so close, right there on the edge, ready to tip over into that well of pleasure that's been building steadily, but Gage doesn't let me. He doesn't give me that last little push I need.

Instead, he starts fucking me more shallowly, letting his cock dip in and out of my pussy without driving all the way in.

A noise of helpless frustration spills out of my mouth, and I ball my hands into fists against the wood of the shelf.

Gage doesn't say anything. He doesn't even taunt me for being needy and desperate. He just keeps his hips moving, turning those shallow thrusts into long, slow ones that still don't give me all that I need.

He's holding out for as long as he can, clearly, and it's driving me fucking insane.

I thrust my hips back, trying to take him to the hilt, trying to get more, and he just makes a low noise and digs his fingers in harder. Maybe it's a warning, maybe it's a reaction. I don't know and I don't fucking care. All I know is that if I don't come, I'm going to go insane.

My core throbs, spasming around his dick like it's desperate to milk it dry once I'm allowed to come, and I whine low in my throat, feeling all that sensation keep building like it's going to snap.

Finally, he seems to be at the end of his tether. I can feel his hips stuttering, the stamina he's been using to drive me nuts finally giving out. He reaches around and down and pinches my clit hard.

The pain and stimulation are enough to set me off like a bomb, and I nearly scream, getting a hand up over my mouth in time to muffle it as I explode in pleasure.

I can barely breathe, barely keep my body from shaking itself apart as I come, gushing on his cock and squeezing it hard.

Gage follows me over the edge, letting out a low groan as he pumps me full of his release.

I'm breathless, slumped against the shelves, trying to remember how to move or do anything. My body is still trembling from the force of my pleasure, and I nearly stagger when Gage pulls out and steps back.

By the time I can turn around to look at him, he's pulling his pants up and tucking his cock away. Even though I'm positive he was just as into that as I was, he looks more put together, since he's dressed and not oozing cum the way I am.

"Clean up the fucking books," he says, back to that angry, flat tone.

Then he turns and walks out, leaving me there with the mess.

Whatever bliss I was feeling a second ago evaporates instantly on the heels of my anger, and I'm pissed off all over again.

Not about fucking him, but about the fact that it feels like he's won something. Like he's the one who came out ahead and has the higher ground now, even though I'm the one who instigated the confrontation.

He walked out like he was fine and nothing had changed, but I'm the one slumped against a shelf like I've lost my equilibrium. Gage definitely had the upper hand while we were fucking. I needed him in that moment, and I hate that more than anything.

He practically had me begging, poised on the edge of an orgasm I could only get from him, and he knew it.

"Fucking asshole," I spit, even though there's no one there to hear it.

I don't need anybody. Least of all Gage. Or any of these fucking guys.

"I'll pick up your stupid books," I mutter under my breath.

I gather up the ones that fell off the shelves and make sure to smear his cum on the pages before slapping them shut and putting them away. The pages will get stuck together, and it'll serve him fucking right.

I pull my pants back up and put my shirt back on, leaving the library and stepping into the hall.

All I want is to go back to my room and not have to see or think about anyone for a little while. So of course, Dog comes up to me, whining for attention.

Something about this creature, who needs me, who makes me feel things, just pisses me off even more. I never agreed to be responsible for anyone or anything. I took care of Hannah the best I could, and I failed her. Ever since then, I've always relied on myself and made sure that was all I had to deal with. And now somehow I have this whole list of people that I have to answer to, and I hate it. It makes me feel like I'm suffocating, like there's nowhere I can turn where I don't have someone poking at me, wanting something.

"Come here," I snap, grabbing the mutt's scruff.

He perks up immediately, his tail wagging hard enough that it thumps into the wall. I don't know what he's so fucking excited about.

I haul him to the front door and fling it open. "Go on," I tell him, pointing at the open door. "Get out of here."

Dog just looks from the outside to me and then back again, like he doesn't understand.

"Get the fuck out, you stupid dog. You don't belong here." I shove him out the door, and he trots a few steps down the driveway before turning around and looking at me again, like he's expecting me to follow.

I move to shut the door, but before I can, he comes running back.

He plops down in the doorway and looks at me plaintively, his furry dark head cocked to one side.

"No!" I snarl. "Go. I don't care where, but get out of here."

My tone makes him whine again, and this time when I push him out the door, he doesn't even go anywhere, just stands on the stoop watching me with a sad look on his face.

"Jesus fucking Christ. Fine. Whatever." I step back from the door, and Dog comes rushing back in, tail wagging all over again. I shut the front door and turn to head into the kitchen, and he follows with an adoring look on his face.

“This doesn’t mean I like you,” I mutter under my breath as I grab his food bowl and go to fill it with dog food.

His tail just keeps wagging like he couldn’t care less.

KNOX

IT'S a quiet night at the club, which just means there's no drama going on, really. It's never actually *quiet* at the club when it's open, and it's packed with people on this particular evening. They're all drinking and dancing, having a good time, and the energy is high. It's almost infectious.

Unless you're Gage.

If you're Gage, then you're being a moody fuck, sitting in the back office with a scowl on your face as you read over some papers.

"Who pissed in your cornflakes?" I ask him from where I'm lounging on the couch, tossing a ball against the wall and catching it in one hand.

"What?" Gage asks, and the word comes out with a bitter edge to it.

I catch the ball and roll it around in my hand. It's nowhere near as cool as all those fancy coin and card tricks Ash always does, but fuck it. I don't have the patience to learn that shit.

Craning my neck a little, I glance over at Gage. He's always kind of moody, kind of pissed off, but he's been worse lately.

"What's your issue?" I rephrase. "You've been glaring at that paper for the last ten minutes."

"I don't have an issue," he bites out, not even looking at me. A couple strands of his dark brown hair fall over his forehead as he glares at the papers in front of him.

I just laugh. "Yeah, okay. Sure. This is you all sunshine and rainbows. You're having a great day."

"Fuck off, Knox," he snaps, and I just laugh again.

"It's River, isn't it?"

"What part of fuck off do you not understand?"

That's basically him saying I'm right. This little silver-haired fox is reaping chaos in our lives, and if I'm being honest, I kind of like it.

It's something new. Something that shakes up the routine, and there's nothing wrong with having someone around that keeps us on our toes for a change. We *are* the Kings of Chaos, after all. Maybe we've just been waiting for our queen all this time.

I don't say any of that to Gage, though. I might not be the brightest bulb in the box, but I know better than that. He's in a mood, and he's not above taking it out on other people.

I can practically see the vein in his head threatening to explode each time I toss the ball and it thwacks into the wall, so I do it a couple more times just to be an asshole and then get up before he decides to cut my balls off.

Gage doesn't stop me when I leave the office, and I make my way out of the club, leaving the flashing lights and thumping music behind for now.

It's been quiet since I let Reggie go, and I almost wish the Diamond Devils would fuck with us again, just to have something happen. I want to let my monster out again. Ever since I fucked River in the basement, I can feel it closer to the surface than ever, just coiled there, waiting to be able to strike again.

The crazy thing is, she doesn't even seem scared of it. Most people are. Even the other guys keep their distance when I'm in that mode, letting me handle things and coming in later when they know it's over and done with.

But River was right there in the middle of it. She saw what I was doing and wanted to join in. She was fucking turned on by it, and the sex we had while Reggie hung there in chains was some of the hottest I've ever had.

Maybe that's why I want to ruin her even more. Maybe I want to see what it would take to make her scared of me. To see fear flash in those vivid blue eyes.

I head home, and when I arrive, I find River in the kitchen.

There's a sniper rifle on the table, and she's got a maintenance kit spread out around it while she cleans it. I smirk and walk up behind her, leaning down to lick the shell of her ear.

She goes stiff, then melts a little into it, then goes stiff again. Like she was into it for a second, then figured out a reason not to be.

Her hands go for the gun and she turns around with it in her grip like she might use it, but I just laugh.

“You’re not gonna shoot me with that.” It’s a long-range weapon, and she knows it.

Her eyes narrow, but she puts it back on the table anyway, admitting wordlessly that I’m right. Her nails are painted a different color than they were yesterday. I’ve noticed she changes her nail polish a lot, and I kind of like it. It’s fun to try to guess what color she might pick next.

I move to sit down across from her and run my hands over the gun, checking it out. It’s good quality, and I’m not really surprised. River seems to know her shit.

“You’re gonna shoot him from a distance,” I say, leaning back in my chair.

She glances up, her expression guarded. “Yeah. So what?”

I just shrug. “Just wondering what your plan is.”

She lets out a breath. “He’s having a meeting at some Italian place. Out in the open. It’s the best way to get to him and take him out.”

“You scoped the place out?”

She nods. “Yeah. There’s a roof in the right spot. He won’t see me, and he’ll get a bullet in the brain.”

“Quick,” I reply. “Neat.” My tone is neutral, but she can hear what I’m not saying. I can tell by the way she glances at me.

“You don’t think it’s enough.”

I shrug again. “It’s not my plan. I’m just thinking... Ivan St. James is a piece of shit. Maybe he doesn’t deserve quick and neat. Maybe he deserves to suffer. He’s definitely made a lot of people suffer who would rather have had quick and neat.”

Something flashes through her eyes, but I can’t figure out what it is before it’s gone. “You’re right,” she says. “He does deserve to suffer. But I’m ready to just end it. I’ve been trying to get through his guard for way too long. I’m not going to pass up this chance just because he deserves worse.”

“Worth it just to have it done with,” I say, and she nods.

“The others... they weren’t this difficult,” she says, staring down at the table. “Not as well guarded. There was always an in somewhere. I moved through them like a ghost. Sometimes I didn’t kill them myself, but I was pulling the strings to get it done, one way or another.”

“Playing mastermind instead of getting your hands dirty?” I ask, cocking my head.

She shrugs. “Whatever it took. I had to make sure they died. You know the Black Roses in Fairview Heights?”

I nod. The Heights are just a couple hours away from Detroit. With all the tabs Gage keeps on other gangs in the area, we heard all about their rise to power.

“There was a girl named Mercy who was working with them. I gave them insider information about a rival gang called the Jackals and let her take down their leader. Hugh.”

She says the name like it tastes bad in her mouth.

“Mercy did the dirty work for me, but I got the feeling she needed that. That she needed to be the one to take him down, so I let her have it. Two birds with one stone or whatever. It was easier for me, since she had an entire crew backing her up.”

“How’d you get the info to give them in the first place?”

“I got close to him the best way I knew how.” She gives me a look, and I can tell what that means. She fucked him or one of his seconds and got them to open up to her or something. Usually seems to work. Especially when you’re as hot as River is.

“But... it’s not the way I’d do it if I had my choice,” she admits.

I lean forward a little over the table, getting close like we’re about to share a secret. “How would you do it?”

“I’d kill them all face to face,” River tells me, and her tone goes cold. “I’d rather make them bleed, cut by cut. I’d make them suffer like they deserve to suffer, and I’d kill them in the end, but only after they were begging for death.”

Fuck.

I’m out of my chair before I even realize it, crossing around the table to reach her and grabbing a fistful of her hair. I drag her head back and lean down to devour her mouth, kissing her hard and hungry.

Hearing her talk like that got to me. I can feel my cock stiffening in my pants, my blood pumping. I can feel the connection between us, that spark of two souls who understand each other. I don’t know the details of her situation, the specifics of her past, but I don’t need to know them to recognize exactly how she feels.

That’s how I would have wanted it too, if I was hunting down a bunch of fuckers who deserved it. I’d want them to know it was me, to know they were going to die because they were stupid enough to fuck with me, and I’d

wait until they were begging for it in the end. Until death was almost a mercy.

I kiss River again, taking what I want, plunging my tongue into her mouth like I want to savor every single thing about her. I can feel her moan as it vibrates through her chest, and she kisses me back, one hand fisting in my shirt to hold on to me.

When I pull back, I feel flushed and breathless, but more alive than I have in a while. The monster is there, pacing just under my skin, and I go with it.

With a smirk, I go to the bar cart and grab the whiskey.

I plunk the bottle down on the table along with two shot glasses and fill them both up, sliding one over to River.

She takes it and knocks it back like an old pro.

I watch the way her throat bobs when she swallows with hungry eyes and then take my own shot.

“I did that, you know,” I tell her, holding her gaze. “What you want to do. I killed my uncle, and I made him beg for it. I made him want death more than anything else in the world, and then I gave him what he wanted.”

“Why’d you kill him?” she asks, studying me as I down my shot.

A grin tugs at my lips. “That’s not important right now. We can each keep our secrets.”

I pour another round of shots and we both drink them, thumping the glasses down on the table at the same time.

I lean in, still hungry for her. There was no disgust on her face when she heard about me killing my uncle. No look of pity or her telling me that he was family and you’re not supposed to kill family or whatever the fuck.

She just accepts it for what it is and knows he probably did something to deserve it. She doesn’t know my story either. But she knows enough.

I grab her around the back of the neck and crush our lips together again, kissing her hard.

There’s teeth and tongue in it, and she licks into my mouth with a low noise of pleasure.

Heat pumps through me, and I’m running on pure instinct at that point. Just going from one motion to the next, doing whatever feels good.

I grab the bottle of whiskey and pour some down her front, slopping the liquid against her chest. Then I rip her shirt open, showing off her wet tits.

Her chest is so fucking nice, and I drag my tongue down her skin, savoring the sharp taste of the booze. But it's not enough. I want more.

I grab a shot glass and smash it against the table, choosing one of the big shards and dragging the sharp edge of the glass down the space between her breasts.

She gasps at the edge of pain but doesn't pull away. Instead, she arches closer to me, like she's daring me to cut her deeper, to push her harder.

River never fucking backs down, and it calls to something in me that I can't ignore. It riles up that monster, making it pace like a predator trapped in a cage. I want to fucking devour her, I want to make her scream.

I spill more whiskey down her body, chasing the line of it with my mouth until I get to her pants. It's quick work to shove them down and bare her pussy to me, and I lap up the whiskey that drips its way down to her crotch.

When I glance up at her, River's eyes are dark with want, and she doesn't pull back. She spreads her legs as wide as she can with her pants around her ankles, like she's tempting me to dive in and give in to the beast that wants to eat her.

So I do. I drag my tongue from her belly button to her core, tasting booze and the sweet salty hit of her skin. She's already wet for me, and I can smell it when I get close.

It's fucking intoxicating, and I don't waste any time getting my face in there, letting my tongue slide into her to caress her folds and lap up her sweet arousal.

"Knox," she moans, her fingers delving into my hair. She tugs me in closer, and I go with it, giving up on the casual exploration shit and letting myself feast on her.

I lap at her clit, her hole, the taste of all of it driving me wild. The whiskey puts a haze over things, and the sweet taste of her just makes it even better.

I could lose myself down here, between her legs, making her moan and shake for me. She's the best fucking thing I've ever tasted, and it's like I can't get enough.

Like I'll *never* get enough.

Pain and whiskey and sex and blood.

Fucking perfect.

RIVER

THE NEXT MORNING, I feel a little bit like I've been hit by a car. My head is a bit fuzzy with a hangover from doing shots with Knox, and my body feels wrung out from... everything, mostly.

But there's an excitement buzzing through me, too.

I roll onto my stomach and root around in the nightstand drawer beside the bed until I pull out the picture of my sister that I've kept there since I arrived. It's a little reminder of why I do what I do, and I like to look at it when I feel overwhelmed. It's where I keep my list, the constant force that drives me these days.

I trace a finger over her face and then flip the picture over, reading over the six names that are written on the back. Every one is crossed off except for the last one.

So close. I'm so close.

This is almost over.

One more name and then I can finally say I've completed my mission.

I drag myself out of bed with a low groan, body protesting when I force myself to go shower. The hot water feels good on my sore muscles, but not so much on the cut from Knox that stretches down my chest, right between my tits.

In addition to that, I've got bruises on my hips from Gage that I poke at as I wash up.

It's weird having those visual reminders of the men. It's harder to forget that they're around, and the things we did, when all I have to do is look down and see the evidence of it. I almost like the marks. Almost. It would

be proof of a job well done in any other circumstance, but I won't let myself have that thought.

I dry off and get dressed, heading downstairs.

Priest and Gage are in the kitchen when I come in. Both of them look up at me and then away, and I can practically feel the coldness coming off them in waves.

I snort under my breath. As if I give a shit. I'm happy to ignore them too. There are more important things to focus on today.

After eating a banana so fast I barely even taste it, I fetch my bag from the living room and start loading my gear into it, grabbing a few things I forgot last night from the kitchen.

"Where are you going?" Priest asks.

I consider telling him to go fuck himself or just ignoring him the way he would if I asked him a question like that, but whatever.

"Ivan's having a meeting today. At Romano's." I don't know why the hell he cares either way. "Give us a smile, Priest," I tease him flatly. "I'll be out of your lives soon."

I don't wait to see what he has to say in response to that. Whatever it might be, I don't really want to hear it right now. My mind is already racing ahead to what's coming, anticipating every little detail and eager to get on with it.

Striding from the room, I snatch up my bag of gear and head for the door.

Excitement keeps stirring up in me as I drive to the site of the meeting and park a few blocks away. I walk the rest of the way, then make my way up to the rooftop I picked and get comfortable, ready to wait for this rendezvous to go down.

It only takes about an hour or so for movement to start happening.

People have been coming and going, of course. It's a busy street. I watch as patrons of the restaurant inquire about the patio only to be directed inside since, like I thought, the whole space has been reserved.

Some of them go with grace, some of them look pissed off.

I chuckle a little at that. If only they knew that the person responsible for booking the whole patio will be dead soon. I wonder if that would make them feel better about it.

It's easy to tell when the meeting is happening. The cartel guy rolls up first with his entourage, looking around like he's waiting for Ivan before he

lets himself get comfortable.

The host shows him to a table, and he sits, tapping his fingers on the polished metal surface.

Ivan and his crew show up a few minutes later.

There are the usual pleasantries between the cartel guy and Ivan, and the usual posturing of their backup. They're probably all packing hidden weapons, but everyone tries to play it cool. They're in public for a reason.

From my spot across the street, I can't hear what they're saying, but there seems to be a lot of gesturing with breadsticks. Who the fuck knows what point the cartel guy is trying to make.

Time ticks by slowly as I wait for my moment. I need them all to be relaxed, close to thinking the deal will be done, gone off without a hitch.

I pull out my rifle and line it up, sighting down the scope to get the perfect shot.

Just seeing Ivan's face makes my stomach turn, and the thought of putting a bullet in his brain makes me so damn happy.

I can see his stupid forehead, clear in my sights, and I narrow my focus, letting out a slow, controlled breath. There's a place of inner peace I tap into, finger curling on the trigger. This is it. With one shot, the list will be all crossed off. My sister will be avenged. Everyone who thought they could fuck with me and get away with it will be dead.

One more breath. *In. Out.*

As I finish the exhale, I take my shot, pulling the trigger.

There's always a moment whenever I snipe someone where time seems to slow down. I feel the kickback of the bullet leaving the gun, and even though it happens in a split second, it feels like I can watch the path as it streaks through the air.

In my mind, I've pictured it a thousand times since I picked this spot. The bullet whizzing through the air and slamming into Ivan's skull, dropping him in an instant. Then I disappear, and no one will ever know it was me who did it.

That isn't what happens.

In the split second after I pull the trigger, Ivan moves. A fly or something flies into his face, causing him to knock over his water glass. He leans back from the table, and the cartel guy leans forward, putting him right in my line of fire.

Instead of the bullet dropping Ivan, it hits the side of the other guy's head, killing him instantly.

He slumps over the table, bleeding from the wound, and time seems to freeze and then kick into overdrive.

My heart slams against my ribs, and Ivan and all the men gathered around react immediately, realizing they're under fire.

I scramble to pull myself together, trying to get a clear shot of Ivan so I can at least do what I came here for, but he runs for the cover of the restaurant, and I miss my chance completely. There won't be another shot.

Dammit. Fucking goddamn.

I was so fucking close.

The cartel guy's men have been scrambling around, going to their leader to check his pulse, to keep people from getting too close. Before I can duck down and hide myself and the gun, one of them looks up, right at me.

Fuck!

I hear a shout and he points at me, directing the others. They take off, pelting across the street, and I scramble to get off the roof before they get here. All my escape routes won't mean shit if they catch me.

I throw my sniper rifle back into the bag and run down the fire escape, nearly tripping over the metal stairs in my hurry. I can hear them shouting in Spanish, and when I get low enough that I can think about jumping down, I see that they've fucking boxed me in. They'll catch me in a second.

There's no time to think or be careful. I just jump for it, and as soon as I do, I know it's too high. I land poorly, hitting the pavement at a bad angle and twisting the shit out of my ankle as I roll.

There's no time to care about that either. I pop back up as fast as I can and take off running down the alley, shoving aside the pain and trying to put distance between us so I can try to slip away into a crowd or a shop or something. It doesn't even matter. I just have to get out of there.

Running hurts on my twisted ankle, and my bag jostles against my back, but I don't slow down as I break left down a side street and then into another alley, searching frantically for another fire escape or something I can climb up. Maybe if I can get up onto another roof or something, I can lose them.

The sound of furious footsteps catches up with me faster than I'd have liked, and it only takes another few seconds before the goons are too close for comfort, shouting at each other and probably at me.

I skid into another alley, my ankle throbbing with pain. I grit my teeth, chest heaving and lungs burning. Before I can choose a direction to go, those footsteps come thundering into the alley behind me, and the jig is fucking up.

“There you are, you little bitch,” one of them says, his accent thick. He has a gun in his hand, aimed right at me. “You killed Diego. Who the fuck are you?”

For once, I don’t have a smart, snappy comeback for someone threatening me. My body is exhausted, my heart is hammering in my chest, and every nerve in my body is wired for escape.

There are three of them and only one of me, and the rifle in my bag won’t be any help. I don’t have anything but the knife I keep on me at all times to try to defend myself against these fuckers.

I hear the sound of metal on metal, and my gaze darts sideways to see that one of the others has flicked open a switchblade. He advances on me, murder in his eyes, and I back up slowly, not taking my gaze off him. It would be smarter to look for an exit, to find some way out, but then the first guy would probably just shoot me in the back. I’m sure the only reason he hasn’t popped me off already is because he wants answers before I die.

No more running.

I’ll have to fight my way out of this.

Adrenaline is crashing through me, making me feel hopped up on something. Switchblade guy lunges, and I dodge out of the way, tripping him up and sending him sprawling as I move.

He curses at me in Spanish, and the guy with the gun grabs me roughly and shoves me back against the wall, sending me stumbling into it so hard that my head hits the brick with an audible crack.

Pain splinters through my skull, and I blink, swallowing down bile as he takes a wide-legged stance in front of me. He levels the barrel of the gun right between my eyes, his own eyes wild and his chest heaving.

“Fucking cunt. You think you can mess with us and get away with it?”

The guy I tripped has recovered, and steps up behind his buddy, glaring at me. The third man is standing a little off to one side, his hands clenched into fists like he’d rather beat me to death than watch his friend shoot me.

My heart clenches, a burst of cold certainty chilling my skin.

Ivan St. James didn’t die today.

But I’m about to.

PRIEST

LOW VOICES and rough grunts catch my attention, and I veer in the direction they seem to be coming from, urgency beating inside me like a drum. The voices grow more distinct as I approach. There are only so many ways someone can call someone else a 'little bitch' in English, and it's not hard to translate the furious Spanish either.

Shit.

I pick up my pace, running toward the alley up ahead.

When River left the house, I followed her, maintaining my distance but keeping an eye on things. I don't know why I did it. But as soon as she left, I was in my car, following her to the restaurant I know more by reputation than anything else.

Now the place will have a different rep, I guess.

I round a corner into the alley and find River with her back pressed against the wall and three large, muscular men bearing down on her. One of them has a gun aimed right at her head, and the others look like they're ready to watch her die.

I narrow my eyes and draw my weapon, which has a silencer attached. The first man drops without either of the others noticing at first. He goes down like a sack of bricks. When the second one goes down, the last catches the movement in his periphery, and he whips around to look at me, mouth open like he's about to shout or curse.

He doesn't get the chance. I pop him like the other two, and he slumps to the ground in a heap, landing right on the body of one of his buddies.

River just stands there, her chest heaving and her eyes wild. She meets my gaze, and I can see the shock in her blue irises.

“What the fuck are you waiting for?” I snap. “Let’s go.”

She shakes herself out of her daze and nods. “Right. Right.”

I pivot on my heel and stride away, sensing her behind me but not turning around to check. We hurry back to my car, which I left parked a couple blocks away.

When she draws up beside me, I notice that she’s hobbling a little, but it doesn’t slow her down much, and she doesn’t complain. She slides into the passenger seat of my car and slams the door closed. Once I’m in beside her, I fire the engine up and we peel out, beating tracks back toward the house.

We drive in silence, neither one of us saying a word.

River stares straight ahead out the windshield, her jaw tight. There’s a bruise on the side of her face—from the fight, I’m guessing—and just looking at it makes fierce anger snap under my skin.

It’s irrational. It makes no fucking sense. I try to keep my eyes on the road, because every time I glance over at her, I feel myself wanting to snarl like a caged beast.

“What about the bodies?” she asks finally, her voice sounding almost too loud in the otherwise quiet car.

“We’ll leave them there,” I reply shortly.

She glances over at me, raising an eyebrow in a silent question, and I shrug.

“No one in that neighborhood will be surprised to find a few bodies in an alley. And they were all gang members. The cops will barely investigate.”

The neighborhood where the restaurant is located is one of those places that has the veneer of being a fancy shopping district, but just behind all the shops and restaurants are the kinds of alleys where drug deals, gang wars, and whatever the fuck else go down all the time.

No one will blink twice.

River just nods, seeming to accept that answer. She goes back to staring out the window, clearly lost in her own thoughts.

I keep my eyes on the road until we get back to the house, not sure why my heart is beating so fucking fast. Before she came along, I was better at this. I could control myself and my emotions. It was what I was practically infamous for.

But by the time we pull up to the house, I feel like there’s too much happening under my skin.

I screech to a stop in the driveway and do the usual glance around to make sure no one followed us. The street is clear, so I get out and head into the house with River following me. The dog bounds up to us as soon as we walk in the door, circling around River excitedly.

Ash and Knox are in the kitchen when we walk in.

Knox has a massive burger in front of him that he's practically inhaling, and Ash is fiddling with a coin in one hand while he leans against the counter.

Gage comes walking in when he hears us arrive, and all three of them look surprised. I could kid myself that they're surprised River's back so soon or something, but I know none of them expected her to come walking in with me.

"What happened?" Ash asks, glancing between the two of us with that damn coin still flicking over his fingers faster than the eye can track.

River lets out a breath and drops into a chair at the table. She puts her hands on the wood, and I wonder if anyone else notices that they're shaking.

Her nail polish glints under the light as her fingers slowly curl into fists, and she glares down at the wood of the table before she finally speaks.

"I fucking missed him," she says hoarsely. "I had the perfect shot all lined up, and I fucking missed him."

Suddenly, her eyes flash up and find me.

A spark of... something goes up my spine, and she finishes the rest of the story without looking away.

"The fucker spilled his water, and Diego—the cartel guy—ended up getting in the way of my shot. I dropped him instead of Ivan. He had a few guys there with him as backup, and they caught sight of me on the roof. Ivan's paranoid ass ran for cover, so I couldn't get another shot at him, and I had to run for my fucking life."

She swallows hard, not looking away from me. "There were three of them, and they caught me in an alley. There was no fucking way I was going to be able to fight them all off, but then... Priest showed up."

I can tell she's looking at me because she's waiting for me to chime in with something helpful. Something that will add to the story or explain why I was there in the first place.

But I don't say anything.

I don't know why I did what I did, so I don't have anything to add.

“Priest killed the guys who were about to take me out, and we drove away,” River says, finishing up her story.

Ash and Knox are busy paying attention to her, but River’s eyes are still boring into me, and I can feel Gage looking at me too. They both have the same question, I’m willing to bet.

I glance at Gage, reading it there in his eyes.

We talked about this before, down in the basement. About how it was for the best to let River take the fall for killing Ivan. How it would keep us out of trouble with the rest of the criminal underworld, and get her out of our hair at the same time.

And I agreed with him at the time. River is fucking trouble, and it was for the best that we do things Gage’s way. But for some reason, when it came time to go through with it... I couldn’t. It didn’t sit right with me.

I wasn’t willing to let her take the fall for the attempt on Ivan’s life.

I wasn’t willing to let her die trying to kill him.

Gage narrows his eyes and tips his head a little to one side, and I can see the moment he realizes it. We both know what was said down in the basement, the conversation fresh in both of our minds. At no point did we discuss me following her on her mission to play hero or whatever the fuck I thought I was doing.

My friend is clearly processing it all, and I can’t tell from his expression what he thinks about my actions. He’s almost as good as I am at hiding his feelings behind a mask when he wants to.

He gives me one last considering look and then turns his focus back to River.

“Did any of Ivan’s guys get hurt?” he asks her.

She shakes her head, her silver hair shifting over her shoulders. “No. They all ran to keep Ivan safe.”

He nods at that. “Well, it’s not as bad as it could have been, then. Since you killed this cartel guy, and Priest took out the others, Ivan will probably think *they* were the target, not him. So at least he won’t be after whoever did it, and he won’t think he needs to ramp up his own protection too much.”

That makes sense. It’s the only silver lining in this whole fucking mess.

“We’ll have to keep our eyes open,” Knox points out with a savage grin. “In case anyone else comes sniffing around looking for revenge. If the cartel finds out who killed their guy, it could be trouble.”

“You look way too happy about that, Knox,” Ash groans, flipping the coin into the air with a flick of his thumb and then catching it.

Knox just shrugs, his dark eyes gleaming. “I like trouble.”

“We don’t want this kind of trouble,” Gage insists in a hard voice. “Hopefully no one else saw anything and no one can pin it on you. Or trace it back to us.” He glances between me and River.

My jaw tightens in irritation.

Everything this woman does just spreads. Her first fucking entrance into our lives was by killing a guy in the alley outside our club, and now we might be dragged into some feud with a fucking cartel. Everywhere she goes, she just brings trouble.

No.

That’s not it.

She’s the trouble. She’s like a poison, this silver-haired woman. Like a disease. She’s infecting our lives little by little.

Infecting *us*.

RIVER

GAGE AND KNOX fall into a discussion about what will happen if the cartel members decide they want revenge for their dead friends, and Priest just stands there several feet away from me, anger radiating off him. Ash gets sucked into the conversation about the cartel, although he glances over at me with something almost like concern in his eyes.

I let them all have at it, helping myself to some food when my body reminds me that I barely had breakfast and spent the late morning and early afternoon going from planning mode to adrenaline mode in quick succession.

I bolt down a sandwich and an apple, then get up and leave the kitchen.

They're all watching me, but I don't have anything to say to them. I told the story and listened to them talk about the possible fallout. I'm fucking sore and tired, and the last thing I want to do is go over the play-by-play of my goddamn failure with them again.

So I hobble my way upstairs to my room, wincing a little as I take the steps on my tender ankle.

It's late afternoon now, going on early evening, and I feel like every hour of the day since I left the house this morning is weighing on me.

I strip out of my sweaty, dirty clothes and leave them in a pile on the bathroom floor before getting in the shower.

My body aches, and I feel beat the hell up.

I've got cuts and bruises from the fight, and my back is sore from where that one asshole shoved me into the brick wall. The hot water makes it all worse for a little bit, until it manages to settle the pain into a dull ache rather than several sharp stings.

My ankle is swollen and sore, but I can tell from putting weight on it that it's not broken, just sprained.

I wash off the blood and grime, watching it all swirl away down the drain while my thoughts swirl through my head. I can feel the soreness and exhaustion from the day, but on top of that is a deep, relentless confusion that eats away at me. I was fully expecting to die today.

Those cartel thugs could have killed me in that alley without a second thought.

They *would* have.

But they didn't get the chance to... because Priest saved me.

Priest, who has never been shy about letting me know how much he hates me since the second I showed up in their lives. Of all of the men, I would have most expected him to just stand back and let it happen, so he could finally be rid of me like he always seems to want.

But he didn't.

For some reason, he was already there when I needed help. He must've followed me to the restaurant before I was even in trouble, or there's no way he would've gotten to the alley in time to take the cartel members down.

Why?

What the fuck does that mean?

I go around and around in circles with it, trying to figure out some motive or hint as to why on earth he'd do that. I can't make heads or tails of it.

There are all kinds of reasons he might have done it, but none of them are clear to me. None of them making any fucking sense.

Usually, I can make pretty accurate guesses about people's motives and why they do the shit they do. Not being able to do the same with Priest makes me feel unsettled and unhappy about it.

He's like a closed book, a block of ice. Anything he might be feeling, other than the occasional spike of anger, is kept locked up tight, and there's no way to see through the mask he wears to find out what's going on with him.

I finish cleaning up and get out of the shower, drying off and throwing on a pair of panties and a big t-shirt to sleep in.

Slumping down onto the bed feels good, especially considering there was a moment there where I didn't think I'd ever get to lie in a bed again.

My body sinks into the mattress, and I close my eyes, trying to let the tiredness take over.

It's impossible, though. My muscles, my limbs, and my sore ankle all seem grateful for the rest, but my brain won't stop turning long enough to let me drift off.

I roll over onto my side and let out slow, calming breaths, trying to slow the churn of my thoughts and the agitation that creeps under my skin.

It doesn't help.

My eyes pop open, and I stare at the slightly open bathroom door in the dusky light coming in from the window.

I just can't lie still, and the restless energy isn't going to go away, clearly.

"Goddammit," I swear under my breath, getting up and stretching. It already doesn't hurt as bad to walk on my ankle, so I open the door to my room and head downstairs.

It's late enough in the evening now that I don't see any of the guys. Gage is probably at the club, and Ash is probably off somewhere getting his dick sucked.

I think about checking to see if Knox is downstairs with anyone, but when I walk in that direction, I catch the sound of music floating down the hall. It's piano music, haunting and beautiful, and I follow the sound to the room I found the other day with the baby grand in it.

The door is open just a crack, and I ease it open even more so I can peer inside. At least that'll be one question answered tonight—which of the guys is the one who can play piano.

I can't tell if I'm surprised or not to see Priest sitting on the low bench, fingers moving over the keys with practiced ease.

He seems the least likely of the men to be able to have such beautiful music inside him, but he's also the one I know the least about. The one who's been the best at shutting me out and keeping me at arm's length, no matter how much I try to rile him up.

There's a look on his face that's not quite peace, but it's not the empty blankness I'm used to, or the open hostility. It's neutral, but naturally so because he's so caught up in the music, I guess.

I step the rest of the way into the room, and even though his fingers don't stop moving over the keys, I know he knows I'm there. Neither of us speak, though, and he keeps on playing.

I watch and listen in silence, letting the music and its soothing tone ease the twisting and turning of my brain.

"I wouldn't have pegged you for a musician," I say after a bit, wondering if he'll tell me to get out or lash out at me.

He doesn't do either.

His shoulders tense, but he doesn't look away from the piano, doesn't still his fingers as they dance across the keys. Priest plays on like I'm not even there, ignoring me entirely.

"But then, I guess I don't know anything about you at all," I continue, cocking my head. "You're not as easy to read as the others, but you already know that, don't you?"

This one-sided discussion is like every 'conversation' we have together, if you could even call them that. He's ignoring me, not letting me get to him, and I'm pushing for answers.

"Why did you follow me, Priest?" I ask after another moment of nothing but haunting music, getting right to the heart of the matter. "Why did you step in to save me?"

He just keeps playing, acting like he can't hear me.

The music isn't that loud, and I know he's not in some zone where he's deaf to the world around him. He's just deliberately being a dick.

So, nothing new.

I take another step closer, closing the distance between me and the piano. "It doesn't make any sense, you know. You're the one who's been throwing threats around that if I messed with you and your brothers you were going to kill me. You're the one who wanted me gone. You would have gotten your wish today. Those fuckers were going to kill me, and I would have been gone for good."

The music stumbles for a split second when his fingers hesitate on the keys, and in that fraction of time, I think he's finally going to answer me.

But he doesn't. Of course he fucking doesn't.

He keeps on playing, picking up the melody again as if he never stopped, continuing to act like I'm not even here.

My eyes narrow in frustration, and I move even closer, waiting for him to snap at me or something, the way he usually does when I get too close.

Still nothing.

It pisses me off, anger and irritation rising like a hot tide in my chest. I hate that he's so good at brushing me off and pretending like I'm not in the

room. I want to crack his fucking ice king façade and see what's under it. See what makes him do the things he does. Like leaping in to save me today when he's spent all this time claiming to want me dead.

I move until I'm right next to the piano, hands braced on the shiny black veneer of it.

Priest just plays on.

With a glare, I climb up on the instrument, making myself comfortable and hoping the mistreatment of his precious piano will piss him off. All I'm wearing is my t-shirt and some panties, and I know my bare legs are right in his field of vision. There's no way he can't see them—can't see that I'm right here.

When he still doesn't say anything, I pivot on the shiny black surface and slide closer, until I'm perched on the piano right in front of him. There's something urging me on. Some impulse I don't understand, but one I don't question either.

I spread my legs slowly, giving him ample time to realize what I'm about to do and make some kind of protest.

Of course, he doesn't.

He's too good to talk to the likes of me or what-the-fuck-ever. He just keeps playing, his fingers moving smoothly over the keys as if he doesn't have an audience at all.

So I let my hand wander down to my crotch, touching myself through my panties. Even with the irritation and confusion curling through me, my fingers feel good when they skim over my clit through the fabric of my underwear, and I huff a soft little noise of pleasure at my own touch.

I'm not even sure what drove me to do this, but all I know is I want to push Priest. I want to *force* a reaction out of him, because I'm sick of this blank-faced bullshit he's pulling. He wasn't fucking blank when he strode in and shot those cartel members, and yet he can't find the goddamn decency to tell me why.

I keep my eyes on him while I let my fingers rub over the dampening crotch of my panties, silently daring him to give a shit one way or the other. I don't care which way he picks. I just need *something*.

He can't help but look at me, even if he doesn't want to. I'm right there in his face, legs spread, fingers moving, and even though his attention is on the music he's still playing, I can feel it every time his eyes land on me.

It's like a physical touch on my skin, searing and intense, and even if he hates what he sees, hates that I'm here, it's affecting him. Those minuscule cracks I can see in his mask push me to keep going, even though I still haven't figured out what I'm doing yet, or why the hell I'm pushing him like this.

I thrust my hips forward with a low groan, grinding against my fingers as music fills the room. My clit throbs behind the soft cotton of my panties, aching to be touched without the barrier in the way.

My core clenches, reminding me that it's still empty, and just from the way my fingertips are getting wet, I know there must be a visible damp spot on my panties that Priest won't be able to ignore.

He tries though.

I'll give him that.

His nostrils flare, like he's smelling my arousal, and his eyes flick to me again before going back down to the piano. The song has shifted from the one he was playing when I came in to something different.

It's still slow and melodic, still haunting in a weird way, and since he doesn't have sheet music in front of him, it has to be something he either wrote or memorized a long time ago.

Either way, it becomes the soundtrack to this little moment.

It blends in with my soft moans as I spread my legs wider and roll my hips, low key humping my own fingers right there in front of him.

It doesn't have exactly the effect I want, so I up the ante a bit, pulling the crotch of my panties aside to show him more. So he can see how wet I am, the shine of my folds as the scent of my arousal fills the air.

Something about the way he looks at me every now and then just spurs me on. I wanted his attention, and these are little snippets of it.

But it's not enough. I need something else. I need *more*.

Priest keeps playing, and I work my fingers over my clit, giving in to that burning need to stimulate myself more.

"Fuck," I breathe in a low voice, bucking up to press harder against my hand. "Feels good."

He didn't ask, and he doesn't react to my words. He just keeps playing, so I keep going.

I push one finger into the hot tightness of my hole, feeling my silky smooth inner walls cling to my finger when I try to work it back out. Just that finger isn't enough, so I add another one, pressing them both in deep.

My breath is coming in sharp, harsh gasps, and I can't hold back the way I'm trembling a little as heat rushes through me. This is about getting a rise out of Priest, but it's also actually fucking hot to do this on top of his piano.

I can tell I'm going to come soon, so I don't back down. I fuck myself on my own fingers, letting the obscenely wet noises echo in the room right alongside the music.

My moans and harsh breathing add an odd harmony to the mix, and I arch sharply when I feel that pleasure rising and threatening to spill over.

I shove my fingers in deeper, fucking myself as hard as I like it, and that's enough. That bubble of pleasure pops, sending it all cascading over me and through me. I have to bite my lip on a loud cry, and my toes curl as I shake my way through an orgasm.

Priest finally reacts to that, at least. His fingers fly over the keys of the piano, the music turning fast and frantic. He's practically slamming his hands into them, and then all of a sudden he actually does.

Both hands come down hard, the harsh chord making me jump.

Priest stands up all at once, knocking the piano bench backward and staring at me with eyes that burn.

RIVER

AFTERSHOCKS OF PLEASURE are still rippling through me, but my orgasm is already forgotten.

I feel like I'm holding my breath, waiting to see what the viciously beautiful blond man in front of me is going to do. The look in his ice-blue eyes doesn't make it clear whether he wants to kiss me or kill me, and when he grabs me roughly and lifts me off the piano, I'm still not sure.

Without saying anything, he carries me over to the couch that rests against one wall and throws me onto it.

He braces one hand on the back of the couch and leans down to hover over me, his body practically vibrating with some emotion I can't even name. There's probably anger in there, because if Priest is showing an emotion it's usually anger, but there's so much intensity in it that I have no fucking idea.

He lets out a harsh breath and reaches for me, one hand gripping my throat in a harsh hold.

I gasp instinctually, but he doesn't cut off my air. Not quite. Close, though. Close enough that it sends a thrill of adrenaline through my body that makes my heart race and my clit throb, even though I just came.

With his nostrils flaring, he stares down at me. His free hand moves down my body, and he shoves it into the front of my panties. I know he can feel how wet I still am, and he closes his eyes and groans low in his throat. He sounds like he's truly tortured by it, and I shiver at the sound.

Priest drags his fingers through my folds, exploring me roughly. Like he wants to map out every inch of my pussy with his fingertips and doesn't

care to be gentle about it. He doesn't kiss me or touch me in any other way, just keeps that hold on my throat while he lets his fingers do their work.

I feel pinned in place... but not in a bad way.

His touch is harsh, but he's not hurting me. Not more than I've come to like, anyway. It feels *good*, the way he holds me here, working his fingers through my mess before shoving two long digits inside me.

I gasp out and arch up against him, my eyes fluttering closed for a second.

There's no gentleness, no hesitation. He slams his fingers into me again and again, working me up and working me open while I writhe beneath him.

I grind against his hand, and he squeezes my throat a little tighter, making it a little harder to breathe.

My chest tightens from the lack of oxygen, but there's no flash of panic or worry that he's going to kill me like this. Instead, there's just the slow, heady burn of arousal, curling through me and growing like a fire starting to spread.

Priest adds another finger, all three of them stretching me to the point where I can feel the burn of it. He fucks me with them the same way he might with his dick, hard movements that make wet noises echo in the room.

It's such a contrast to the beautiful music he was making before. His rough touch, the callouses I can feel scraping against my sensitive walls. The guttural, quiet sounds I make as I let him do whatever he wants to me.

I buck beneath him, trying to get more pressure, unable to hold myself back. I feel raw and primal in a way I like. Not thinking, not trying to be sexy or intimidating or anything. Just reacting to the way he touches me, the way he forces me to feel this pleasure.

It's fucking amazing, going to my head with every thin breath I manage to suck in.

All through it, Priest doesn't say anything. He stares down at me, watching, waiting. His face is twisted into a slightly different version of his usual neutral mask, but I can tell he's focused on this. His breathing is as harsh as mine, and his bright blue eyes burn like they're lit from within.

I choke out his name when he hits that spot inside me just right, and he lingers there, slamming his fingers into it again and again. Until I can't

form words at all anymore. I writhe and buck, my body moving on pure instinct.

His hand tightens just that bit more on my throat, cutting off my air enough that darkness edges my vision as my orgasm hits me hard. It rolls through me and over me like a truck slamming into me at a hundred miles an hour, and I can't even scream.

All I can do is shake myself apart as pleasure ravages my body, leaving me limp and gasping.

It takes a few long minutes for me to come down from the shock of that high, and of our encounter. My pussy feels a little sore from how roughly he handled it, and when he releases me, it's like I can still feel the phantom touch of his fingers at my neck.

Priest backs off, letting me go and standing up. He leaves me sprawled on the couch, still trying to catch my breath.

His features are back to that perfect expressionless mask once again, and he looks down at me with cool eyes. All trace of anger or passion or whatever I saw in them completely gone.

I half expect him to turn around and walk out, or spit some threat at me, but instead he just takes a breath and keeps looking.

A few seconds pass before he speaks.

"You want to know why I went after you? Why I saved you?" He lets the question linger on the air for a moment, then shakes his head. "I don't know."

I don't say anything back to that. Just watch him.

"You don't mean anything to me," he adds. "You're not—"

Priest breaks off that sentence harshly, like he's snapping it in half abruptly.

I can think of plenty of ways he might have ended it, but as I gaze up at his angular features, a sudden realization shoots through me. He wasn't going to insult me, to say I'm not worth it or something. He would probably have just finished his sentence if that were the case.

I sit up, pinning him with my stare.

"I'm not *who*?" I ask.

The stone-faced man looks away, and I can see the muscles in his jaw tense.

So I'm right, then. There is someone. Or was someone.

Someone he maybe loved or who at least meant a lot to him. Someone he lost? It explains a lot about him when I really think about it.

He's not just a heartless asshole or a cold, callous motherfucker. He's broken just like I am. All the way to his bones. Down to his soul. In a way that can't be healed or fixed.

I stand up, letting my shirt fall back down around my thighs, and he looks at me again. I hold that inscrutable blue gaze and get right up into his personal space.

Without kissing him or touching him in any other way, I spit on my hand, then reach down his pants and touch his cock. It's warm, but soft. Even after he just fucked me with his fingers on the couch after watching me touch myself on the piano, he's not hard.

His cock is completely limp, and when I wrap my fingers around it and stroke it, it doesn't respond immediately the way most guys' would.

Priest narrows his eyes, but he doesn't shove me away. Doesn't tell me to fuck off.

I keep stroking him, twisting my hand a little, really working at it, and after a bit, he starts to get hard. I can feel his cock growing against my palm, the heat rising as blood rushes downward.

His features tighten a little as his cock stiffens. His breath catches, and then, all at once, his shaft goes soft again.

Something passes over his face, although I can't read the expression. He's still breathing a little harder than usual, and his Adam's apple shifts up and down as he swallows, but other than that, he doesn't move at all.

I release him and step back. There's a slight ache in my chest, as if some part of me is connected to some part of him, a wire stretching taut between us. I can't help but feel as if somehow that small moment was more intimate than anything that came before it.

It's like that sometimes, when broken people reveal their broken parts. Like finding some little bit of connection that you usually don't let the rest of the world see.

But I've seen it in Priest now—I've felt it. And I understand him better because of it.

"There's nothing wrong with being broken," I tell him quietly. He blinks, his long lashes sweeping down over his bright blue eyes and then back up again. "Some things aren't meant to be whole. And some things don't need to be fixed."

Taking another step away, I turn and slip out of the room.

ASH

SIN AND SALVATION IS HOPPING, like it usually is. The music is loud, and the people are loose. There are bodies grinding on the dance floor, hands wandering, and the air is thick with the feeling of anticipation and arousal.

It's my element, and usually I'm right there in the mix. Tonight, I'm working, so I wander over to the bar, watching as Celia, the bartender who also manages the bar, makes drinks for a giggling couple with her usual flair.

They pay and hurry off to find a corner, and I step up, taking their place.

"Business or pleasure tonight, Ash?" Celia asks.

She knows me well, and while it might not be like Gage to drink on the job, I've never had a problem mixing the two aspects of my life.

"Business tonight," I say, flashing her a smile. "Just checking in."

"All quiet tonight. Well, quiet as it can be. We're running low on the good gin, though."

"I'll make a note for supply. Anything else?"

"Can I get a raise?"

I roll my eyes. "Anything else realistic?"

Celia makes a face at me and then shakes her head. "Not that I can think of. It's shaping up to be a good night."

"Great. That'll keep Gage happy." I rap my knuckles against the bar and she gives me a little salute before heading down the bar to take someone else's order.

I make my way through the crush of people to the hallway that leads to the back office. The door closes behind me as I enter it, muffling the noise

of music and people enough that I can hear myself think again, and I go sit at the desk to finish up some paperwork.

It's usually Gage's place to sit. His 'throne' as Knox usually jokes. But we all pull our weight around here. I'm better with people, so I tend to be the one to check on the dancers and bartenders, making sure they have what they need. Every once in a while, though, I get my hands dirty with paperwork.

I go over the supply lists for the next week, adding a note about the gin and upping our usual order since we're going through it faster.

Every so often, I pause to spin the pen in my fingers, twirling it in intricate patterns with ease before writing down something else.

Usually, this kind of work is boring but at least active enough that I don't fall asleep doing it. It's the kind of shit that has to be done one way or another. But tonight, my mind doesn't want to focus on numbers and neat little budgeting columns.

Instead, I'm thinking about River. And Priest, of all people.

I'm thinking about how River looked on Priest's piano, spreading herself open and touching herself just inches from his face like she wasn't afraid he might snap and kill her right there.

She's a brave little thing, that's for sure.

It was hot as fuck, watching her through the gap in the door. She didn't close it all the way when she went in there to bother Priest.

I was ready to intervene when he got up from the piano like he was going to hurt her, but instead, he just threw her down on the couch and made her fall apart. Just seeing her arching and gasping for breath while he held her down and made her come was...

Fuck.

It was hot as hell.

Not everyone could take that. Or would get off on it.

But River was into it. It looked like it made her come harder, how rough he was with her.

It's just more proof that there's something about her brokenness that fits with ours.

I've known Priest since we were both young, but he hasn't been the same for years. He just shut down after Jade died. None of us have pushed him by trying to make him change or telling him he needs to move on. Just

like none of the others really give me shit for being a man whore. We just accept each other as we are and have each other's backs no matter what.

But without even trying to, without even knowing what she's changing, River is changing us. All of us.

Priest wasn't wrong when he said she would be trouble, but I still think it's good trouble. She seems like she gets it, like she's just another part of the group that's been through some shit and is handling it and living her life as best she can in the aftermath.

There's something really fucking appealing about that.

I twirl the pen between my fingers while I think and then sigh. The fucking paperwork isn't going to get done if I keep daydreaming my way through it, so I go back to work, filling out forms and signing off on shit that needs to go out.

Part of running a business—even one that deals in illegal shit under the table—is actually needing to *run* the business. Who knew?

As I'm working, the door opens. I look up, expecting one of the other guys to come in, but instead it's Bethany, one of the dancers.

I've hooked up with her before, and I can tell from the smirk on her face that she's looking for a repeat of that tonight.

"Whatever happened to employees only?" I ask dryly, lifting an eyebrow and jerking my chin at the sign on the door.

"I'm an employee," she practically purrs.

"You know that's not what it means."

She giggles and shrugs. "It's not clear. I heard you were back here, and I wanted to come say hi."

"Hi, Beth."

"Aww, is that all I get?" she asks with a pout. "Not even a kiss for coming all the way back here to see you?"

"We both know you want more than a kiss."

"And we both know you're not complaining."

Usually, I wouldn't be. Bethany is hot as hell, like pretty much all the dancers we have working here. I picked most of them out myself, after all.

She's tall and leggy, with great tits and a killer ass. Her hair is a mess of curls that she keeps pushed back out of her face with a little cat ear headband, and she's barely wearing anything.

It's not the first time she's come in here and tried to seduce me, and I've fucked her on the couch and over the desk before. Both times when I knew

Gage wasn't going to be coming in for a while.

But tonight, I'm just not feeling it for some reason. I'm not in the mood.

Even looking at her tits practically spilling out of her skimpy little bikini top when she leans over the desk doesn't get me in the mood.

"Not tonight, sorry," I tell her. "I got work to do. The boss hates it when I leave paperwork undone."

Her pout just gets bigger, and she comes around the desk to my side of it, letting one hand trail over my shoulders.

"You could take a tiny break," she suggests, tugging her bottom lip between her teeth. "Just a little one. Too much work is bad for you, you know? I could... massage your shoulders. Or something else."

"Any other time, I'd love to see what you can do with those hands, but I'm busy right now."

She laughs, pulling the rolling chair back enough that she can drape herself over my lap. "Sure. You're so much more interested in paperwork than me."

Her weight is familiar, and she smells good. Like perfume and whatever she uses in her hair, with that undercurrent of sweat and sex that always seems to linger around this place. She starts mouthing at my neck, kissing over my pulse point while her hand drags down my chest, heading lower.

"I know what you really want, Ash," she whispers. "You don't usually play so hard to get, though."

"Yeah, I'm not playing," I tell her, putting a bit more firmness in my voice. "Not tonight. You should be working, anyway."

Bethany pulls back, surprise and disappointment gleaming in her eyes. "Um... I was on break, but okay. If you wanna be like that, I'll just go."

I don't stop her as she crawls off my lap a bit less gracefully than she climbed onto it and walks out, letting the door close with a snap behind her.

I'll have to smooth things over with her later, just to make sure there's no unnecessary drama at the club. But actually... her words give me an idea.

River is back to square one with finding an opening to take out Ivan St. James after the botched assassination attempt of a couple days ago. But maybe there's a route we haven't considered yet.

I finish up the page I was working on and then leave the club, heading home.

The house is mostly quiet when I arrive, but there are lights on in the living room, so I head in there and find River on the couch, watching something on TV.

She's curled up at one end of the large couch in some little shorts and a tank top, and I like the way she looks. It's not just that her skimpy clothes show off a good amount of pale, tattooed skin, and the scars she wears like fine jewelry. It's that she looks... *comfortable* like this. She looks like she belongs here.

She looks at home.

I prowl toward her, and she doesn't react at first, keeping her eyes on the TV. She only looks up when I get right in front of her and lean over her, bracing one hand on the back of the couch and getting right in her personal space.

"Well, well," I murmur, my voice low and seductive. "I didn't expect to find you down here."

"I figured I should make use of your stupidly big TV while I have the chance," she fires back, making a face.

Of course she doesn't seem intimidated. I'd think I didn't have any effect on her at all if it weren't for the fact that I can look down and see how her nipples are hard against the thin fabric of her tank top.

"You sure you weren't waiting up for me?" I tease her.

River rolls her eyes. "Why would I do that? We all know you probably fucked yourself out at the club. Waiting up for a slut is just a waste of time."

I press a hand over my heart. "I'm wounded. Maybe I came right home for you."

"Sure. That's why you smell like perfume and have lipstick on your collar. Because you were so chaste tonight."

Her tone is dismissive, but I grin and shake my head. "Nah, I didn't hook up with anyone tonight. There was even a very hot dancer in the office trying her best to get in my pants, but I turned her down. The only hole I want to fuck right now is yours."

I expect her to come back with something snarky or tell me to fuck off, but instead, it's like her eyes go cold and shuttered. The smirk drops from her face, and she pushes me away from her, standing up to leave.

I grab her wrist before she can go, sitting down on the couch and tugging her back down in the same gesture. River ends up in my lap, facing away from me, her back pressed to my chest.

She goes stiff but doesn't immediately move away, so I let my hands wander, ghosting over her sides and down her thighs before I slip one hand into her shorts.

I can feel the heat from her pussy through her underwear, and I rub the front of them teasingly, feeling her squirm. I don't know what pissed her off a second ago, not sure what I said that struck a nerve, but whatever it is, it seems to have passed. Her body melts into mine a little, and I love the feel of her curves pressed against me.

"I had an idea," I murmur, keeping my voice soft and letting it vibrate against her back. "Something that might help you."

"With what?" she asks. She sounds tense, but not pissed. I'll take it.

"Ivan," I say, working my fingers past the waistband of her panties and then down. I rub my middle finger against her clit, smirking when she inhales sharply. Hard to tell whether it's about my mention of Ivan or what I'm doing, but I go ahead and flatter myself to think it's me and my touch that's making her gasp like that.

"I was thinking about the ways to get close to him. You either have to be in his inner circle or be one of his bodyguards to get that close."

"Yeah. I know that, dumb ass," she snaps, her hips bucking forward as my index finger circles her hole.

"But that's not the end of the list," I point out. "We should find out where he gets his sex from. It's not just from his wife, if the rumors are true. So he's gotta be getting sex from hookers or girls looking for a sugar daddy or something. Hookers are simplest, easy to find and easy to pay off, so it seems most likely."

"Not everyone is as—ah!—obsessed with sex as you are," she fires back, but her tone is breathy and she arches against me as I slip a finger into her tight channel.

I smirk against the back of her neck, teasing it with a light scrape of my teeth. Her silver hair tickles my skin, and I turn my head to inhale the scent of it. "True, but I know you've heard the rumors about Ivan. It's not like he's hurting for pussy, and his wife isn't giving it up that often. So he has to be getting it from somewhere. A man that powerful?"

She hums, either in agreement or arousal. Either one is fine with me.

River is wet now, and it eases the way for me to add another finger, pressing it inside her as deep as it can go.

“So what?” she says, pulsing her inner walls around my fingers. “You think we can use that some kind of way?”

“Yeah,” I breathe back, groaning a little when she grinds down on my lap. “It’s the one area where he won’t be as covered, I bet. Where he’ll slip up. People get messy when it comes to sex.”

“You’d know,” she retorts.

I just laugh and pull my fingers out of her to rub harder at her clit. Any more smart-ass comments are cut off with a moan as she presses up against my hand.

Seems like I’m not the only one who gets messy when it comes to sex, considering how she’s bucking against me like a needy little thing.

“It’s something we haven’t tried yet,” I continue. “And at this point, you can probably use any lead you can get, right? Since the other one is gone now.”

“Fuck you.” There’s no heat in her curse, and she’s panting more loudly, squirming in my lap as she gets closer to coming.

I rub harder at her clit, moving my hand faster. “What? I’m not blaming you for what went down, I’m just saying that door is closed now. So I’m offering you a window you might be able to climb through instead.”

It’s getting more difficult for me to speak coherently, since I’m pretty sure all the blood in my damn body has migrated down to my cock. I’m hard as hell just from the feeling of her softness pressed against me, the way she writhes on my lap.

She’s so responsive, her body attuned to every touch, every press of my fingers.

River opens her mouth to say something, but whatever it is doesn’t come out. Instead, she moans and closes her eyes, and I can feel her core pulsing as she comes.

I rub her through it, taking her over the edge until she finally finishes riding out the waves of her release. She slumps against me for a second, her head lolling on my shoulder. Then she gets up and turns around so she’s on my lap facing me.

Her eyes flash with heat, dark and intense like the night sky, and she reaches down for my pants and the bulge of my erection pressing against them. I know what she wants next. She’s ready to ride me, ready to see me make good on the comment I made earlier about only wanting to fuck her hole.

Instead of giving in to the desire screaming through my body, I grab her around the waist and switch our positions again so that she's sitting on the couch and I can stand up.

Her mouth opens silently in surprise, and I give her a little smile, pressing a tiny kiss to the tip of her nose. "Just think about what I said. It could be worth something."

It feels almost impossible to walk out of the room, leaving the gorgeous silver-haired vixen panting on the couch. My cock is throbbing and my balls ache with desire, but I don't let myself look back at her.

If I do, I won't be able to resist.

RIVER

THE NEXT AFTERNOON, I'm in my bedroom, sitting on the bed painting my nails. I take off the old color with a cotton pad, watching the vibrant orange be stripped away by the acetone, leaving the smeared color on the cotton and my nails bare.

I'm going for a sea green this time, and I shake the bottle up, thinking about what Ash said last night.

Honestly, every time I think about it, it's hard for me to remember the conversation without thinking about the way he made me come. And how bad I wanted his cock.

He's such a fucking asshole about it, and I don't understand why. He always backs away at the end, always punks out before it's time to close the deal. He gets me all worked up, makes me come some other way, and then won't fuck me when I want him to.

I know he's a fucking man slut, giving it up to any other woman who wants him, so what the hell? If he can't tell I'm interested by now, then I don't know what to say to him. If I wasn't, I would have knocked him out for touching me the first time.

It's just... weird. I'm not used to pursuing men. Usually, if they want me, they just come to me, and I can choose to accept or reject them however I please. I don't like this shit with Ash, where I'm the one who keeps feeling rejected every time.

But I shake that off. In the grand scheme of things, it's not important. I'm not here to get Ash to fuck me, or even *like* me. I'm here to kill Ivan, and after the first attempt got fucked up, I need a new angle.

Ash was right about that.

He might also have had a point about finding a way in if I can figure out where Ivan gets his sex. It does kind of seem like it could work. It's a vulnerable point for a man, since it's probably not something he keeps his bodyguards around for. Especially if he's fucking around on his wife. He's not bringing them along for that.

So it could be a time when he'll be alone and vulnerable. With his pants down—literally and figuratively. His guard will be lowered, and he'll be focused on getting his dick wet, not keeping himself alive.

It's a good lead.

Once my nails are dry, I head downstairs.

The dog is waiting at the foot of the stairs, staring up at me with those big brown eyes like he's been waiting for a thousand years. His tail starts wagging as soon as he sees me looking at him, thumping against the side of the wall.

"Alright, alright," I grumble under my breath. "I'm coming. Keep your fucking tail on, Mick Jagger."

He trots ahead of me into the kitchen, and I fill his bowl up with the dry food. It doesn't look appetizing at all, but he gobbles it up eagerly, licking his chops and slobbering all over the place.

I don't give a shit if he gets kibble drool all over the guys' floor. It's not my problem.

After his breakfast, Dog starts jumping around in the kitchen, which I take to mean he wants to go outside to run around and play, so I let him out into the backyard.

While he runs around at breakneck pace, I sit on the back step, watching him. Every so often, he comes back, stands in front of me until I pet him, and then dashes back off to roll in the grass like a weirdo.

He really seems to be getting attached to me, and he already looks healthier and more well fed than he did before. Not hard to do, I guess, considering he lived in an alley before and ate whatever scraps he could get from the trash or whatever I gave him.

"Don't get used to this shit," I call to him, and he turns at the sound of my voice and gives a joyful bark, clearly not taking in any of my words.

"You either," I mutter to myself. "Don't get used to this shit."

Whatever the fuck *this* is, living at the guys' house, fucking with them and getting fucked by them, none of it is going to last. I have to remember

that. When I kill Ivan, it'll be all over, and I'll go back to my life. They'll go back to theirs, and that'll be the end of it.

"And you'll go back to your alley," I tell the dog when he runs back over. "So you'd better be ready for that."

I take him back inside where he curls up under the kitchen table and decides to take a nap.

His doggy snores provide the soundtrack while I make myself some lunch, throwing shit in a pan that I can use to make stir fry. It's easy and quick, one of those things I used to make all the time back at my place when I was low on either food, funds, or fucks to give.

It's good enough, and I even clean up after myself before heading back up to my room for the rest of the afternoon.

Later in the evening, I get dressed and head out, driving to the red light district to follow up on Ash's idea.

It's possible Ivan is hiring more expensive call girls, and fuck knows he could afford it, but I figure I'll start here and see what dirt I can dig up. Working girls always know what's going on around them, and at least I can probably get a few leads to work off if I pay attention and ask the right questions.

There are always girls on the street, hanging out at cross walks or walking up and down in front of the shady businesses, trying to attract customers. I spot a couple of them sharing a cigarette and head over.

"Hi," they greet me, eyeing me up. I can tell they're trying to see if I'm going to be a customer or if I'm competition.

"Hey. I just wanted to ask you a couple of questions."

That makes them relax, which is funny, because asking questions is usually a bad idea around here. But I can tell they know I'm not a cop or someone trying to get them in trouble.

"Whatcha wanna know?" one of them asks, blowing smoke away from me and her friend.

"You see a lot of what goes on around here, right? Who gets hired, who's hiring who?"

"Sure," she says. "People like to think they're slick and being sneaky and all that, but we see shit. And we talk, so we know what's going on. If one of your friends goes missing, it helps to know who she went with last so you can find her, you know?"

I nod, because that does make a lot of sense. It's fucking gross that there are people out there making it necessary, but it makes a lot of sense.

"You looking for someone in particular?" the other girl asks. "A friend of yours or something?"

"Something like that," I say.

"Hey!"

Before either of us can say anything else, someone shouts from farther down the street. I turn and see an angry guy marching over to us. Their pimp, probably, judging from his tacky jewelry and the way he swaggers over like he owns the place.

"What the fuck do you think you're doing?" he demands.

"Who the fuck are you talking to?" I snap back.

"You, bitch," he snarls. "Get the fuck out of here. You're fucking with my business."

"*Your* business? Are you the one going out there making money? Or are you just harassing girls into doing it for you?" I fucking hate guys like him. Assholes who abuse and use women for their own pleasure and profit. Without them, he'd have nothing, but that doesn't stop him from treating them like shit just because he can.

He's in my face, acting like he owns the goddamn street, and I despise that shit.

"We were just talking," one of the women says, speaking up. "She wasn't bothering anything."

The guy turns on her and backhands her across the face.

"Did I ask you shit?" he demands. "Did I tell you to talk back to me?"

It takes everything I have to keep from fucking this asshole up. I can feel the weight of the knife I keep on me at all times, and I want to lunge at this fucker and make him regret every woman he ever raised a fucking hand to.

The woman shrinks back, bringing a hand up to cradle her cheek. Her pimp turns back to me.

"Fucking get lost," he snaps, and instead of letting him have it, I grit my teeth, then turn and walk away.

There's a diner just down the street, a little hole-in-the-wall place where people go to get coffee and burgers that are more grease than anything else. I order a coffee and a piece of pie and take a seat by the window because it

offers a great view of the street and the place where those two women wait to be picked up by their customers.

I watch as their pimp yells at them a bit more, but he doesn't hit either one of them again. He leaves after he thinks he's made his point, I guess, and they straighten themselves up, going back to work.

One of them walks a little bit farther down the street, leaving the one who got hit alone.

She doesn't have long to wait before a car slows to a stop right in front of her. She puts on a smile and walks to the window, and after a minute or so of talking, she gets in the vehicle.

About an hour later, the same car drops her back off on the corner and then drives off into the night.

This plays out more than a few more times, and it's kind of impressive the amount of business this woman is doing. I guess she probably has to work in volume to make up for whatever cut she has to give her shitty pimp, and I keep an eye out for him too. If I meet that fucker in a dark alley, it might be over for him, depending on the mood I'm in.

The evening goes on and then starts to wind down, and after being dropped off one last time, I can tell the girl is done for the night. She waves to her friend and then heads in the direction of the diner, about to walk home or something.

I get up quickly and slip outside, intercepting her before she can leave.

"Hey," I say, flagging her down. "I just wanted to say sorry. For getting you in trouble with that asshole."

"Oh." She looks surprised to see me since the last time we spoke was several hours ago, and she glances around warily like she half expects her pimp to materialize out of the shadows and hit her again for talking to me. "It's okay. It's not your fault. He's just... like that."

"A raging piece of shit?"

She laughs a little, still looking nervous. "Something like that. He'll be over it by tomorrow. I had a good night."

"I could tell."

"Were you watching me?"

"Not in a creepy way. I just wanted to talk, and I didn't want to get you in trouble again."

She gives me a cautious look and then smiles, still a little unsure. "Um, yeah, okay. We can talk."

“I’m River.”

“Avalon. Did you try the pie?” She nods at the diner behind me. “It’s amazing.”

I nod. “Had a slice of the apple. It was good.”

“The blueberry is the best. Buy me a slice and we can talk about whatever you want to.”

As deals go, it’s not a bad one, so I agree, and we go into the diner. She settles in the booth at the window with me, and I order more coffee and a slice of the blueberry pie for Avalon.

Under the fluorescent lights inside the diner, she looks tired, slumping back against the shiny red cushioning of the booth. She kicks her heels off under the table and drums her fingers on the table.

“So is that standard around here?” I ask her. “Dickholes running the show while you do the real work?”

Avalon laughs. “For the most part, yeah. I wish I didn’t have to have a pimp, but around here, that’s the only way to make a living.”

I make a face, and she breathes another quiet laugh, although there’s not really any humor in it.

“It’s not always so bad, I guess,” she says with a shrug. Then her brows pull together. She has delicate, pixie-like features that give away more of her emotions than is probably good for her. “But I’m guessing you didn’t buy me pie just to talk about that.”

As if on cue, the waitress comes over and brings the coffee and pie, setting it on the table and moving away quickly. Maybe she’s used to people having clandestine conversations in the middle of the night at this place. It seems like the kind of establishment where that would happen.

At this hour, there’s no one really around other than working women at the end of their nights, and people working graveyard shifts, grabbing something before they have to head to work.

Avalon picks up a fork and has a bite of the pie, licking the sticky blueberry filling off the back of her utensil.

“I’m trying to figure out if you or any of the girls you know have been picked up by someone,” I tell her, getting down to the real reason I waited all night to chat with her.

She lifts an eyebrow. “We’re not really supposed to talk about it...”

I can hear the ‘but’ in there, so I don’t let her words stop me. “Ivan St. James,” I say. “I’m pretty sure he’s picking up girls from somewhere in

Detroit, and I'm just looking for a place to start."

Up until that point, Avalon has been pretty open. She's been relaxed, eating her pie like she's comfortable. As soon as I say Ivan's name, she goes tense, her eyes getting wide and then shuttering, her expression closing off.

"I-I can't really talk about it," she says quickly.

It doesn't even seem like she really means she *won't* talk about it. She looks scared. Her face is pale, and her hands tremble when she goes to take another bite of pie.

It makes her look younger than before, and this woman sitting across from me might as well be a different person from the one who was leaning in car windows and flirting with potential customers for the past several hours.

For just a minute, she reminds me so much of Hannah that it hurts. Like a sharp ache in my chest that I can't ignore.

"Okay," I finally say. It doesn't seem like a good idea to push her. Especially not here in the open. I grab a napkin and scribble my number down on it, pushing it over to her when I'm done. "Call me if you want to talk. If you know anything, you could really help me out."

Avalon just nods. She still seems so small and scared, hunched over the table and her plate like she's worried someone might take it from her. Might take everything from her.

Fuck. I know how that feels.

I put money down on the table to cover everything and then head for the door.

I don't really remember the walk back to my car, and it feels like I blink and then suddenly end up behind the wheel. My hands are shaking a little, and I squeeze the steering wheel, trying to get them to stop.

That visceral reminder of my sister fucked me up. I keep seeing her in my mind, that same scared look on her face, that same hunched posture and wide-eyed, terrified expression. Most people seem smaller when they're scared, and there are some fuckers out there that prey on that.

Thinking about it leaves a bitter taste in my mouth, and I start the car, hoping I can keep it together long enough to get back to the house.

I manage it, driving in a daze and gripping the wheel so hard my hands hurt. When I finally reach the now-familiar house, I park and let myself in. The house is dark and quiet since it's so late, and I'm glad I don't have to

talk to anyone. I just go up to my room and strip down, heading for the bathroom and the shower.

My head is full of memories that I don't want. The things I try to ignore and avoid every day. Hannah crying, shaking with fear and scrambling back away from one of the men who's getting off on tormenting her. The way she would sob my name when she was hurting, and the feeling of anger and fear and helplessness that always rose up in me when I realized there was nothing I could do to help her.

There's so much of this shit inside me, and it usually drives me. It manifests as anger and determination. Motivation to wipe each and every one of those fucking bastards out of existence. But tonight, it's harder.

I scrub my skin raw, standing under the spray and wishing that the water and body wash could wash away all the awful memories that won't stop clinging to me.

It doesn't work.

My head is too full. At this point, this shit is a part of me, and it feels like it's never going away. That ache in my chest is still there. It feels like shards of glass trying to claw their way out of me, and I stand under the spray until the water goes cold, trying to find some relief.

My knees start to shake harder and harder, and I sink down to the floor of the shower, tucking myself into the corner like Hannah would, like Avalon did in the diner. I wrap my arms around my legs, drawing them in tight to my chest as I try to hold myself together.

But I can't.

I'm just pieces.

Too many pieces.

Like I might blow away in the wind.

PRIEST

THE HISS of the shower is still going.

I heard River come home, banging up the stairs to her room, which sits right next to mine. Who the fuck knows what she was out doing, but ever since she went to go kill Ivan and almost didn't make it back, I've felt... twitchy, watching her leave the house.

She was gone for hours, coming back at that weird time of night where it's so late that it's almost early. I didn't come out of my room to see her then, but she sounded like she was in one piece, and I told myself that whatever she got up to was her business, and it wasn't up to me to care or wonder if she was alright.

River turned on the shower when she got to her room. That was almost a full hour ago, but it's still going.

She's probably just determined to run up our water bill. She's probably sitting on her bed, laughing about making us pay for her tantrums or whatever this is. It's a ploy. A trick. A stab in the back that we should have seen coming. Trouble on trouble that I predicted when we made the mistake of not killing her in the first place.

I shouldn't wonder why the shower is still on. I shouldn't care.

Just like when I followed after her when she went to kill Ivan. I shouldn't have cared then either. But there was something in the back of my mind... some itch that told me things were going to go wrong and I needed to be there. Someone needed to be there. And in the end, I was right. In the end, me being there saved her life.

All the same, I can remember telling myself angrily that whatever she got herself into was her problem. I sat at the kitchen table with my hands

balled into fists, staring down at the knots in the wood and telling myself over and over again that whatever issues she has are her issues, and she doesn't deserve my help. But I still ended up getting in my car and going after her.

Despite myself, I get up from my bed and go after her this time, too.

I knock on her bedroom door, and there's no answer. I open it a crack, expecting to see her sitting there, grinning or smirking. Asking if I've finally decided I want her. I don't think about the night in the piano room. It might be more accurate to expect her to look tired or pissed off from whatever she's been off doing. Presumably trying to track down more leads about how to get close to Ivan St. James.

But she's not on the bed. She's not anywhere in the room.

The shower is still going.

I know how our hot water heater works. That water will be icy cold by now.

The bathroom door is cracked open a bit, and I push it wider and step inside. River is sitting in the shower, hunched over her bent knees, arms wrapped around herself like she's trying to hold everything together and doing a bad job of it.

Her silver hair is dark with water and plastered to her head and shoulders, and her shoulders shake with either the cold or silent tears. Her skin is pale, making the scars and tattoos that decorate her stand out starkly.

What really draws my attention is the fact that her lips are blue and her eyes are red, and even though I've been standing here for at least thirty seconds, she hasn't even looked up at me. It's like I'm not here at all. She just keeps staring at the drain and the water swirling down it, as if it holds the answers she's looking for. Either that, or maybe she's hoping it'll take away all the things she doesn't want to deal with.

I lean in and turn the water off, silencing the spray. She glances up at the movement but doesn't seem to see me. It's more like she's looking right through me.

"Come on," I mutter, holding a hand out for hers. "You can't sit here all night."

She doesn't take it. If she even notices, I can't tell.

"River." I say her name sharply, raising my voice a little to see if it gets through to her. It doesn't. She blinks and then glances away, eyes going

back down to the wet floor of the shower. Her body shakes with a violent shiver, and I sigh internally.

She's clearly not getting out of this shower on her own.

Fine.

I lean down and gather her up, and her wet hair and skin immediately soak water into my clothes. But I don't put her down. Instead, I grab a towel and wrap it around her, drying her off as best I can while holding her in my arms.

Fine tremors wrack her body, and I rub the towel against her skin, trying to generate some warmth.

River doesn't say anything. She doesn't do anything. She just keeps staring into the middle distance, more out of it than I've ever seen her.

How long would she have stayed in the shower if I hadn't come in?

Shoving aside that thought, I take her back into the bedroom and use one hand to pull her covers back. I settle her down gently and tuck her in and then stand back.

For a second, I just stand there, looking down at her.

She seems... small.

For someone with so much attitude, so much fucking aggravating personality, seeing her quiet and broken is startling.

She curls up under the blankets, those shivers finally starting to die down a little bit. She'll warm up the rest of the way and be fine.

I turn to leave, ready to go back to my room and try to pretend like this didn't happen.

But before I can go anywhere, one hand shoots out from under the covers and catches my wrist, stopping me in my tracks.

Her fingers are icy on my skin, and instead of jerking away from her or telling her she's on her own now, I just... sit on the bed. Giving in to her silent plea.

We don't speak or even look at each other. Her fingers release my wrist and then slide down to lace with mine. They start to warm up as we stay like that, my body heat leeching into her.

It's dark in her room, except for the scant light from the moon outside, and I just stare into the darkness, thinking.

I lose track of how long we stay like that, and I can't say what moves me to speak, but when the words come, I just say them.

“You were right,” I murmur. I know she’s awake. I know she can hear me, even if she’s out of it right now. “Some things are broken and aren’t meant to be fixed.”

She doesn’t say anything, but her hand is still in mine, and it’s like I can feel her listening. The darkness is like a blanket around us in this moment. Wrapping us up. Keeping this between the two of us.

“But that doesn’t mean they’re fine how they are,” I continue. “It just means they *are* how they are. There’s no changing them or undoing the past. There’s no gluing the pieces back together and remaking the whole how it once was. There’s just sorting through the shards and making something new out of them. That’s all you can do.”

My words seem to echo in the silence, and for a second, there’s no response from River. But then her grip on my hand tightens.

I knew she was listening.

I squeeze back, and for a second, I’m lost in memories. I think of the beautiful woman with dark hair I was in love with once. How bright and open she was. How she changed everything for me.

And then, for another second, in my mind’s eye, I see the flames. They flicker, bright and intense. I see them engulfing her, cutting her off from everything and everyone else. I can see the panic and fear and helplessness in her eyes, and I remember feeling all of those things myself. Like someone was ripping my soul out of my body.

It’s like being there again, being trapped in it. The scent of death and smoke and burning all around me. The flames hot on my skin. The helplessness makes me nauseous, and even though I know it’s a memory and what’s done is done, thinking about it just makes it worse. I hate bringing it all back up again.

I clench my jaw, forcing the visceral memory of Jade’s death back down again like I do every day. If I keep control of it, it can’t own me. I can’t be hurt by it. It’s too big to deal with all the time. Too much to let it sit close to the surface.

I think of the three men who’ve become like brothers to me, and how understanding they were when I shut down after that. When I wasn’t the same person they used to know. Knox even helped me get my vengeance, standing with me and helping me make it right.

None of them tried to change me or fix me. They just let me be. They still do.

Yeah, Ash makes jokes from time to time, but that's Ash. It's his way of dealing with things, and it's never anything too bad. They all stayed with me, all rallied around me.

They didn't try to make me go back to the way I was. They just learned to love the shards of me.

River doesn't respond, but I know she gets it. I know that whatever is going on with her, she has those memories too. The ones that shake you down to your core and make you into a different person than you used to be. There's no way she doesn't. She talked about broken things because she is a broken thing, walking around spewing bravado because that's all she's got left.

It's her way of coping, I guess. The way shutting down and keeping everything under tight control is mine.

It feels strange to understand her like that. To know I'm seeing part of what makes her tick. I can't tell if I like it or hate it, but it's too late now. I can't unsee it.

We keep having these moments. I keep coming to her aid, even though I don't mean to. Even though I tell myself I don't want to.

I don't know what any of that means.

"Go to sleep," I tell her, my voice a little rough.

I don't let go of her hand.

There's some shifting as she makes herself more comfortable, and eventually, her breathing evens out.

She's asleep, but I still stay. I keep sitting there, holding her hand. I stay until the sun comes up.

RIVER

IN THE MORNING, I wake up feeling like shit. It's that hungover feeling that comes with doing too much of something too fast, but it wasn't booze for once. I'm hungover on pain, on grief. Feeling too much and not being prepared for it.

I haven't gone to that place since right after I was released from captivity, when I was living with my dad—the man who was responsible for me being locked up in the first damn place, since they were torturing me and Hannah to punish him.

That year was fucking hard.

It was like being in a dark hole, and I barely found my way out of it.

I hate going to that place, and usually try to avoid it if I can, but the memory of my sister and all that happened was just too much last night. It all hit me at once, and there was nothing I could do to stop it.

"Okay," I mutter under my breath, my face still half mashed into the pillow. "Get up."

My body doesn't want to listen. My limbs feel heavy and tired, and my head throbs the way it always does after a long, heavy cry. My mouth is dry, and the light hurts my eyes. It would be so much easier to just pull the blankets over my head and stay here all day, but I'm not going to do that.

That would be giving in, and if it's one thing I never fucking do, it's give in.

So I force myself up, throwing back the covers all at once and swinging my legs out before I have a chance to change my mind and lie back down.

Moving helps a little, and I go over to the window that's letting in all the morning light and crack it open. My head's a mess, so I get my nail kit

and my cigarettes and perch naked on the window sill, smoking idly while I take off yesterday's polish.

It doesn't fit anymore.

Today, I go for a deep red. The color of blood. It reminds me of who I am now. What I'm aiming for. I'm not that scared little girl, huddled in a corner. Or the scared little girl trying to keep the heat on me instead of Hannah.

I'm a motherfucking adult on a mission, and there's only one more name on my list.

I'll see Ivan steeped in his own blood one way or another. I'll make it happen or I'll die trying. That's who I am, and that's all that matters.

I can hear the guys moving, going up and down the stairs, doing whatever it is they do as part of their morning routines. They don't bother me, and I don't leave my room for a long time.

When my nails are dry and my cigarette is gone, I just keep sitting by the window, soaking up the quiet. I think about what Priest said last night about being broken. I think about his hand in mine and how I'd probably still be sitting on the floor of the shower if it wasn't for him.

Out of all the guys, I didn't expect to find a connection with him.

Well. I didn't expect to connect with any of them, but especially not Priest. I didn't even think it was possible for him to connect with *anyone*.

My thoughts are interrupted after a while by the sound of whining and scratching at the door.

Jesus. That fucking dog.

I try ignoring him, but he doesn't go away, batting at the door and whining pitifully for attention. I pick up a shoe from the floor and throw it at the door. It hits with a loud bang that reverberates through the wood.

"Fuck off," I snarl, but it's halfhearted at best. I don't have the energy to be that pissed at him for just wanting attention.

I get up and crack open the door. He's still there, standing right outside. As soon as he sees me, the pitiful look on his face shifts to the dog version of a grin, and his tail starts wagging a mile a minute.

In spite of my rough mood, I can't help but laugh. Nothing puts this mutt off for long. I can curse him out and throw things in his direction, and he's still always eager and happy to see me.

"Fine," I mutter. "Let me get fucking dressed first, you needy animal."

Like he can understand me, Dog drops into a sit, his tail thumping against the carpet in the hall.

I roll my eyes and close the door, throwing on some comfortable clothes quickly.

Of course, he's still out there when I come back, and as soon as I step out of the room, he's up on his feet, following after me as we head downstairs. It's been a while since breakfast, and he's probably hungry, so I go for his bowl and the dog food, filling it up and putting the bowl back down so Dog can gobble it up with his usual eagerness.

I lean against the counter, watching him.

I almost formulate the thought to wonder where the guys are, but the half-formed question is answered a second later when Ash and Knox come walking into the kitchen. Ash makes a face at Dog going to town on his food.

"Ugh. I'm tired of cleaning up your kibble drool, Augustus Gloop," he says to the dog, pushing his glasses up his face with one finger. "Maybe try eating a little neater once in a while."

"Yeah, I don't think he's listening," Knox says, laughing.

Ash rolls his eyes and turns his attention to me. "I saw you head out last night," he says. "You get anything good? Was my idea useful?"

"Maybe," I tell him. The last thing I want to do is think too hard about last night. I don't want to get dragged back to that place. Truth be told, I almost forgot that was the reason I went out last night in the first place.

Ash's face lights up. "Yeah?"

"Yeah. I'll keep poking around, but I might have a lead."

He smiles, looking pleased that he was helpful.

Knox crosses to the fridge, stepping around Dog, and rummages inside for a bottle of water. "You want me to beat anyone up for you?" he asks over his shoulder, looking like he hopes the answer is yes.

I grin at him. "I'll let you know."

Dog finishes up his food and licks the bowl clean before going to curl up under the kitchen table, which is apparently his new favorite spot to be.

I'm considering going back up to my room now that that's taken care of, but then Gage comes walking in, followed by Priest, the two men deep in conversation.

"We just need to make it happen," Gage says. "Simple as that. The logistics will fall into place or they won't, but we can't wait around for it."

Priest nods, either to show he's listening or that he agrees. It's a toss-up with him, really.

Of course, the blond-haired man doesn't look at me. He doesn't so much as spare me a glance. He's the same harshly handsome statue he pretty much always is. There's no mention of what happened last night, and there's no way anyone else would know unless they saw it, so I guess it's just back to business as usual.

I haven't really talked to Gage much since our rough, violent fuck in the library, but when he looks at me, there's not quite as much rage simmering in those bright green eyes as there usually is.

"Get dressed," he says to me. "We're going somewhere."

I lift one eyebrow very slowly, and he stares back. "I *am* dressed," I retort, not used to taking orders from anyone, least of all him.

"I mean in clothes you can go out in," he grinds out. "Not your pajamas. Just do it, River."

The moment of him not looking pissed has clearly passed, and that crabby expression is back on his face. It puts the scar on his upper lip into more focus than usual, but I tear my eyes away from it. I don't like how that little imperfection makes him look even more gorgeous somehow, or the way it draws my gaze down to his mouth when he speaks.

"You're too bossy for your own damn good," I tell him. "I'm not one of your employees for you to be giving orders to like this. What if I don't want to go anywhere?"

He tilts his head back and tugs at his lower lip, probably trying to keep his irritation under control. "Do you have to be combative about everything?" he snaps. "Will you just go do it?"

"Fine," I relent, rolling my eyes right back at him.

I take my sweet time about it though, throwing on a pair of jeans and a t-shirt and slipping my feet into comfortable shoes. I have no idea where the fuck Gage is taking me, but I'm not getting dressed up all fancy for it.

When I get back downstairs, they're all waiting for me, and we all pile into one car—Knox's, because it's bigger. I end up wedged in the back between Priest and Ash, confused and curious as fuck.

When Gage said 'we' were going somewhere, I didn't think he meant all of us. What the hell is going on?

If it's club business, there wouldn't be a reason for me to come along, and if it has something to do with Ivan, Gage probably would have told me

that from the get-go. And we probably wouldn't all be making the field trip if it was to do recon. There's nothing inconspicuous about four big dudes and one woman with silver hair stalking around somewhere.

Instead of going somewhere appropriately shady, we end up in what looks like a strip mall, driving around to the back side where there's a field with a building out front.

Bright Wars, it says in big letters on the front, and I frown, blinking in surprise. It's clearly a place to play paintball, and I have no idea what the fuck we're doing here.

We all pile out of the car, and everyone other than me seems relaxed and in the know, so I guess I'm just going to have to *ask* if I want to find out what the fuck is going on.

"Why are we here?" I ask Gage, getting right to the point.

He shrugs one shoulder. "Maybe I thought you needed more practice aiming a fucking gun," he says easily.

I punch him in the arm hard enough that I know he'll feel it and get the message. I expect him to snarl or get all huffy, but instead he just laughs, surprising the hell out of me.

We cross the parking lot and head inside. Gage goes to the counter to get us all signed in or whatever, and Knox comes to stand next to me.

"Have you ever done this before?" he asks, hands shoved into his pockets. He's wearing a dark gray t-shirt that hugs the broad muscles of his chest and shoulders. "Like when you were younger or something?"

I shake my head. "No, never. When I was younger, I was too busy..." I trail off, then repeat lamely, "I was too busy."

That's basically a complete sentence on its own, and I'm not about to spill the rest of my messed up past in the middle of fucking *Bright Wars*, of all places. I was too busy being held captive, assaulted, and tortured. If someone had handed me a paintball gun back then, I would have tried to figure out a way to kill people with it, and they would have deserved it.

Knox just shrugs, clearly not bothered by the parts left unsaid. "I didn't either, when I was younger. I was too busy, too. So I get it."

I remember what he said about killing his uncle and figure that yeah, he probably does get it.

"It's fun as hell though," he continues. He drags his hands out of his pockets to interlace his fingers and stretch them out, making the tattoos on

his arms ripple a little as muscles move beneath his skin. “Although it would be more fun with real guns.”

I just roll my eyes at that. Typical Knox.

The attendant is a bored looking teenage boy who shows us where the gear is, and we go for it, strapping on pads and masks to keep us from getting too badly hurt. I guess even paint balls launched at high speed can leave a mark.

Knox hands me a gun, and I heft it, getting a feel for the weight of it. Not so different from a real gun.

I’ve never done this before, but I’m a quick study and an even quicker shot. It’ll be a piece of cake.

We spread out through the field, taking an *every man for himself* kind of approach at first. There are trees and brush to hide in, and they really have it set up in a tactical way, so people can get as into it as they want to.

I get into it.

I find a patch of brush and flatten myself down into it, watching the four of them chase each other around. When Ash gets too close to my hiding spot, calling some taunt to Gage, I let him have it with a quick round, hitting the back of his thigh and then popping him once more right in the ass, leaving blue and purple paint splatters where I hit.

He turns around quickly, eyes scanning for where the shots came from, but he doesn’t find me.

I’m actually a great shot, fuck Gage very much.

Every time one of them gets close enough, I let them have it. Soon enough my spot is compromised, and I slip deeper into the trees, letting the shade hide me better.

I can feel them looking for me, splitting up to make it easier, while also trying to get each other too.

It’s survival of the fittest in a way, blurring the lines between a game and a real hunt. Between violence and fun.

I can hear Ash cursing up a storm and Knox laughing hysterically somewhere in the distance, so I know Knox must be laying waste to anyone who gets too close to him.

I clock them as being a few hundred feet to my left, so unless they come barreling right into me, I should be fine. I stay put, watching, listening.

The sound of footsteps alerts me to someone getting close, but slow, like they’re taking their time. Gage or Priest, then. And whichever one it is,

they're alert.

I crouch down a bit more, gun aimed and ready. I feel like a hunter, waiting for my prey to get close enough to my trap that it has no choice but to spring it.

It's Priest, walking softly, scanning the area with his gun held up, finger on the trigger. I leap out, tagging him with a vicious splash of green.

But instead of backing down or tagging me back, he bum rushes me, dropping his gun to the ground halfway through and tackling me hard.

We go down into the brush with him on top of me, and I grapple him, trying to flip our positions and get the upper hand. He's bigger than me though, so it's easier said than done.

His weight bears down on me, and the fingers of our hands interlace as he pins me down.

It's almost like a sense memory, the way his fingers feel laced through mine. It's not on purpose this time, but last night it was. He sat there with me, holding my hand while I shook and shivered under the covers, far away, drowning in bad memories.

Those icy blue eyes look down at me, and I stare up at him, the way I couldn't last night.

And then, with a sudden rush of clarity, I realize that this was *his* idea.

Priest did this.

For me.

The thought freezes me in place, and I'm locked in his gaze. There are a million questions I want to ask, and I don't even know where to start, but before I can so much as take another breath, the sound of shooting rings out over our heads and Knox and Ash come crashing through the trees, shooting at us.

KNOX

WE CRASH through the trees in time to see Priest tackling River. She's been lying in wait all this time, taking her shots where she can. Tactical and precise and damn good at it.

Ash turns to grin at me, and I grin back. There are two of them now, and two of us.

Seems like fair odds.

Priest gets off River, and she pulls herself up, not even bothering to brush the leaves and shit off her gear. She picks up her gun and lifts an eyebrow at me.

Her expression is all challenge, and it stirs my blood in the best fucking way.

"Oh, bring it," I say, and we face off.

River jerks her head at Priest, and they turn and run deeper into the trees, making us chase them if we want that glory.

The thrill of it beats in my chest, and I take off before Ash can catch up. The hunt is so fucking good, and I raise my gun, firing off a round when I see a flash of that gear in tactical black.

I catch Priest in the leg, and he swears under his breath before turning to return fire. I manage to dive out of the way, but he hits Ash right in the chest. If it was anyone else, they'd probably be laughing and gloating, but Priest just watches with those neutral eyes and then runs off.

We take off after him.

River has managed to slip away somewhere, hiding in the woods like the little fox she is. You'd think with that bright hair, we'd be able to see her, but she's damn good.

I slow my steps and my breathing, listening, waiting. That hunter's instinct taking over. Sometimes you have to be calm and chill out for a bit before you can catch your prey and toy with it. It's always worth it in the end.

A branch snaps not far away, and I turn with my gun raised, just in time to get pelted in the back of the shoulder by paint.

River laughs, perched up on a tree branch with her gun raised. I don't even know how she had time to get up there.

Before I can fire back, she's jumping down and running off again.

We keep up the chase, darting around and taking shots where we can. I tag River and Priest a couple more times, and Ash catches up enough to get in a few shots, too.

Actually, Priest and River make a pretty good team, which is weird, considering he hates her and wanted her dead at the beginning. Maybe doing this is a way for him to let off some of that aggression he's always pretending he doesn't have until it comes bleeding out when he doesn't want it to.

Either way, it's fun as hell.

Gage joins the mix soon enough, and the teams kind of fall apart into an every man for himself situation. It gets out of control, and I fucking love it.

We all have violent tendencies that need an outlet, and this is the perfect one. No one dies and we get to work off this energy. River's no different, either. I can see that savageness in her, and I know she loves this every bit as much as we do.

She's right in there, tackling people, butting them with her gun to get them out of her way. She sweeps her leg and sends Gage sprawling in the dirt and then runs off before he can shoot her in retaliation.

He snarls, and before he can take off after her, I put myself in his path. Not to protect River, because she can sure as hell handle herself, but because the energy of this fight calls to me. It makes the monster in my chest almost purr with the desire to throw myself into it. So I do.

Gage has a rage in him. He always has. It simmers behind his eyes and comes out in the way he scowls and glowers at everyone when he's pissed off. Usually, I take it in stride, teasing him and working around his moods, but right now, I want the brunt of it.

I wanna see what he'll do.

His eyes snap with fury, and I smirk back, squaring off against him. He lunges for me, catching me around the middle and knocking me off balance, but I recover easily.

It's knockdown, drag out, both of us trading hits and trying to take the other down. I can tell the others have stopped their own fights and are just watching me and Gage go at it.

I can feel River's piercing gaze on me. She's observing us just as intently as the others, and knowing she's watching amps me up even more.

Someone who walked in on this might think that Gage and I are trying to beat the shit out of each other for no reason or that we're pissed at each other, but that's not it.

The rage has nothing to do with each other. This is just an outlet for it. A way to keep it from consuming us so we can get other shit done.

We fight hard, drawing blood and leaving bruises behind. I sock Gage right in the stomach and he wheezes for a second before punching me in the face.

I taste blood from a split lip, and I lick it up, that salt and iron on my tongue, before spitting it in the dirt and grinning savagely at Gage.

He just glares back and we launch at each other again.

He manages to knock me down, and we grapple each other, rolling in the dirt and leaves and pine needles and shit. Something sharp slices into my arm with a bite of pain that barely registers.

A jagged piece of metal sticking out of the dirt, left behind by someone else who was here before us.

It hardly hurts, and I don't really pay attention to it.

Not when there's adrenaline pumping through me like a fucking drug, and Gage is trying to pin me down. I'm bigger than him, so it's hard, but he puts up a damn good fight.

It goes on and on until my muscles are burning and my chest is heaving. Then Ash cuts in, stepping between us and holding up his hands.

"Not to break up the party, but our time's up. We gotta go."

And just like that, it's over. Gage gets off me, and I get to my feet. We probably look a mess, but I'm grinning from ear to ear as we gather up our shit and head back to the main building.

We troop in to return our gear and stuff, and the kid behind the desk stares at me with wide eyes.

"What?" I ask, my brows furrowing.

“Your... arm.” He swallows, pointing to it.

I look, and yup, there’s blood dripping down my arm. From that cut, I guess.

The kid looks horrified, glancing between us and then back at me like he wants to ask but also really, really doesn’t. I just laugh.

A little blood has never bothered me. Hell, a lot of blood has never bothered me.

“Thank you for choosing *Bright Wars*,” the kid says, and I know it’s just the shit his bosses tell him to say because he looks like he can’t wait for us to be out of here when we file out.

We all pile back into the car, sweaty and smeared with mostly paint and some blood, heading back home.

Once we make it back, Gage disappears to do Gage shit, and Ash probably has a line of women waiting for his dick. I go into the kitchen and look at the cut on my arm, which is still bleeding.

“Don’t do that in the kitchen,” Priest says, giving me a look.

I roll my eyes. “Like there hasn’t been worse shit in here.”

River’s dog, Waldo, barks from under the table, and I give Priest a ‘see what I mean?’ kind of look.

He just looks unimpressed, then turns to walk out.

“That’s gonna need stitches,” River tells me, peering at the cut. “It’s deep.”

I poke at it. She’s probably right. Plus, it’s still bleeding, which means it’s not going to clot on its own.

“Do you have a kit?” she asks.

“Yeah. Upstairs.”

“Come on.”

She leads the way, and I nudge her toward my bathroom. The first aid kit is under the sink where I keep it for when I need to patch myself up. It’s not like we can just go to the hospital for every little thing that happens in our line of work, so we keep the house stocked with shit to handle it ourselves.

“Sit,” she says, pointing to the toilet.

I laugh and close the lid before perching on it, shoving up my shirt sleeve a little so she can get a better crack at it.

The light of the bathroom reflects off her silver hair, and I watch her hands as she sorts through the shit she’ll need, pulling out antiseptic and a

curved needle and the thread for stitching. Her nails are a brilliant, deep red today, and it matches the color of my blood almost perfectly.

She soaks gauze in the antiseptic and starts gently cleaning the blood from the cut.

It's weird, feeling her be gentle. I didn't know she could even do that. The stuff burns, but I don't flinch, just letting her get on with it.

Once it's clean enough, she threads the needle and gets to work.

Her hands are steady and sure, and she draws the thread through my skin with no hesitation. Her eyes are narrowed in focus, one hand keeping the wound evenly closed while the other moves the needle.

I don't feel any pain at all. I'm too busy watching her, feeling like I'm caught up in some kind of spell. I'm entranced and can't look away.

I was being good at first, but that doesn't last. I can't help myself with her standing there, being all precise and good at it.

My hands start wandering, groping her while she works. I slide them up her thighs to her ass, giving it a good squeeze before going higher.

I reach under her shirt and play with her tits, squeezing them through her bra before dipping my fingers inside one of the cups to tease and tweak her nipple.

It gets hard under my fingers, and River hisses, her hand jerking a bit.

She pokes me with the needle, though it's barely more than a little prick.

"You're gonna make me fuck up if you keep that up," she warns.

"I don't care," I tell her with a grin.

She rolls her eyes, and I keep playing with her.

I roll her nipples between my fingers, tugging at them until she arches a little. Her breath is less even, nowhere near steady, and her hands follow that trend.

Her stitches were neat and even before, but now they're messy and rough. It's going to scar, but I don't give a shit.

Not when I'm playing with her tits, drawing those noises out of her. She keeps her eyes on her work, but her focus is obviously on the way I squeeze down on her nipple with my fingers, trying to make it hurt.

When I look up at her, her blue eyes are dark and hazy, and I know she likes it. She loves the pain of it the same way I do.

River rushes through the last few passes with the needle, pulling the thread tight before snipping it off with the scissors.

"There," she says. "I'm done. Not that you were any help."

“I’m sorry.”

“No, you’re not.”

“No, I’m not.”

I smirk at her and drag her closer, until she’s standing right between my legs. I shove her shirt up and push her bra cups down, exposing her tits.

She put the needle down on the counter when she was done with it, and I pick it up, twirling it between my fingers with a little smirk.

Her eyes follow the motion, and I bring that sharp point to the perky tip of her nipple, dragging it against the sensitive skin there.

I can almost feel it when she sucks in a breath, and she rocks closer to me, turned on by the slight pain that comes from the sensation.

“More?” I ask, a bit of a challenge in my voice.

“More.” She nods, her voice husky.

I narrow my eyes and move the needle to one side and then force it through her nipple, piercing it. There’s that feeling of yielding when the needle goes through her flesh, and I love that shit.

River screams, but it’s half pain, half pleasure, and it ends in a groan. Her pupils dilate, and I know she liked it.

I can’t help but grin, liking her like this. So turned on by pain and pleasure.

“Shit,” she curses, trying to catch her breath. “Fuck.”

“We’re gonna get to that,” I mumble back.

She pants as she rocks against me, and I lean over to rummage in the drawer under the sink. I keep a collection of rings for piercings in there, mostly for myself, but I know I have one that’ll fit her.

I pick one that’s slim and silver with little beads on the end, and I force it through the hole I left, tugging on it gently when it’s all the way in.

“Fuck,” River hisses again. I can smell her arousal, and I like that she’s reached the point of only being able to swear.

“You liked that,” I tell her, eyes searching her face. “I’ve never known anyone fucked up the same way I am. The same way the other guys are. But you are. I was wrong about you.”

“What?” she asks, panting and trembling against me. I can feel that anticipation curling in her. It’s the same thing I feel, wanting to take her, wanting to up the ante for this thing we started.

“I used to think you were a fox in a pack of wolves,” I tell her, running my hands, slick with her blood from the piercing, up her back. “But you’re

a fucking wolf too.”

“Is that supposed to be a compliment?” she murmurs, staring down at me.

“Fuck yeah. It means you’re on our level. Means I don’t have to be gentle with you.”

She snorts. “When were you ever gentle with anyone?”

I give her the feral grin that’s been pulling at my lips since she screamed when I pierced her. She’s right. I don’t do shit gentle. I do it messy and bloody and rough. But she’s right there with me. She keeps up beautifully, and I fucking love it.

“You don’t know the half of it,” I tell her, voice low. I rub my thumb over her nipple and then lean down to lick up the trickle of blood that drips down from her nipple. “You don’t know the shit I wanna do to you.”

Anyone else might have been worried about that, considering who I am and the fact that I just shoved a needle through her nipple in the bathroom. But River licks her lips and her dark blue eyes are nearly black with lust. Pure and primal.

“Tell me,” she whispers roughly.

I grope her as I talk, squeezing her ass, manhandling her other tit. “More piercings for sure,” I say. “You’d look hot as fuck with them. Your other nipple.” I squeeze it hard, pulling until she gasps and arches toward me. “Maybe your clit just to see how that works.”

Her breath comes out in a rough rush as I keep talking.

“I wanna mark you up. See how well your skin holds a bruise. Or a bite. I bet you mark up so fucking pretty.” I drag my hands over the tattoos I can see on her and think about more. Wolves and foxes and all kinds of shit that would look good on her soft pale skin.

River hangs on to my words like they’re the only things keeping her upright. Like she’s half drunk on them. I talk to her about cutting her, watching her bleed and licking it up, and she moans my name so softly.

I can’t fucking hold back anymore.

I shove her pants off and pick her up to sit her on the counter. She’s wet as fuck, practically making a little puddle where she sits, and the smell of her arousal is thick in the air, mixing with the scent of the blood from my cut and her nipple.

It’s a heady combination, and now I feel like I might be drunk on it too. But that’s fine. I don’t need to be sober for this.

“Fucking—get in me,” she practically snarls, and I laugh.

I might have been tempted to draw it out more out of spite, but fuck, she’s right. We’ve already waited too long. I shove my pants down out of the way, my cock hard and leaking at the tip already.

The piercing in my cock matches the ring in her nipple, and I like that. I really fucking like that. It’s like we’re two peas in a pod, marked and fucked up together.

I sink into her, and her pussy is warm and wet and tight and perfect.

“Fuck,” I swear under my breath. I get my hands on her ass and drag her in closer until I’m buried to the hilt inside her.

She puts her arms around my neck, and I can feel her clawing at my shoulders, raking hot lines down my back as I fuck her. The pain just adds to it, and I pound into her tight channel, making sure she feels every single inch of me.

Her cries ring out in the bathroom, but I don’t give a fuck if any of the others hear us. This is our moment. This is our thing.

She’s pressed against my chest, and I know that has to be putting pressure on her piercing. I can feel the blood from it soaking into my shirt, making it even more of a mess than it was before.

It’s all just a part of it. All just foreplay that rolls into sex for us.

I slam my cock into her again and again, and she screams and thrashes and holds on as best she can.

It’s violent and rough, and any tenderness is wrapped up in the chaos of it. Maybe this *is* tenderness for us, I don’t fucking know.

I can feel her leaving bloody scratches down my back, and each time I flex and pull at one of the scrapes, it makes me fuck into her harder. Her body takes it so well. Legs spread wide, pussy soaking wet and letting me in again and again.

It sounds like a goddamn porno in here with all the moaning and the harsh breathing and her pussy being so wet. All of that goes to my head, and I can tell that my orgasm isn’t going to take long to rush over me.

River’s already glassy-eyed and out of it, high on that pain and pleasure and not coming down any time soon. I thrust into her a few more times, and then reach between our bodies to grab the ring in her nipple.

I keep fucking her while I tug at it gently enough that it won’t tear through her skin or fuck up the hole, but hard enough that I know she feels it.

She gives a strangled noise that's agony and ecstasy wrapped into one, and then her core goes tight like a vise around my cock. Locks it in a stranglehold as she comes with another scream and digs her nails into my skin.

She practically milks my own orgasm out of me, and I follow her over that edge with a low grunt.

It feels damn good, and I pump all I've got into her, fucking her until I go soft.

In the aftermath, we're both sweaty, a little sore, and streaked with blood. River sits on the counter, leaning back against the mirror and trying to catch her breath. Her pussy drips with her release and mine, and her nipple is bleeding again.

She looks fucking radiant like this. Like she went toe-to-toe with a beast and came out of it on top. We both won, and knowing she can go a full round with the monster inside me is the sexiest fucking thing.

There's no doubt about it. I'm fucking addicted to this girl.

RIVER

A DAY OR TWO LATER, I haven't had any luck tracking down other sex workers who seem to have had interactions with Ivan. I don't know if they're all clamming up, or if that bastard is just really good at covering his tracks, but either way, it's frustrating as hell.

This is the one way in that I haven't tried yet, and I want it to pan out.

Finally, something goes right, and I get a message from Avalon.

Meet me at the diner tonight. I should be done around 1 a.m.

It shakes me out of the bad mood I was in, and I get ready and head out at the right time.

She's already at the diner when I get there, a steaming cup of tea and a slice of pie in front of her. Even all dressed up for work, she still looks young and afraid, but I settle across from her, letting her direct this meeting so I don't scare her off.

Avalon has a sip of tea and a bite of pie and then looks at me. "I want to know why you want to know about Ivan St. James," she says. "Most people who ask questions about him are..." She sighs. "Well, they don't have good intentions. And I don't really want to stick my neck out and get burned if this blows up."

She chews on her lip, looking like she's debating saying more, but then decides against it, going quiet and waiting for me to speak.

The fear and uncertainty are there in her big blue eyes, and I can understand where she's coming from.

She's in a vulnerable position, already working a job where she doesn't get a lot of protection at all. If something were to go bad, I highly fucking doubt her pimp would protect her. And she doesn't know me at all, so she

doesn't have a lot of reason to trust that I'm not about to do something stupid and drag her down with me.

Even with that, my impulse is to lie. To make up some story or refuse to tell Avalon anything.

But I know that won't work.

She's risking a lot by even meeting with me, and if I want her help, then I need to tell her the truth.

And probably the whole truth, too. The guys know that I have a grudge against Ivan for some reason, and that he's the last on a list, but I haven't told them any more than that. And I don't plan to.

There's no point to it, when I don't need them for anything. But... to gain Avalon's trust, I can be honest.

Even if I really don't want to.

I suck in a breath and tap my fingers on the table. "One day, when I was sixteen, I came home from school, and there were these two men in my living room. My dad was there, which was already weird. Usually, he wasn't around when I got home, and I'd have to fend for myself. But he was there, and he looked scared shitless. More than that, he wouldn't look at me. I kept asking him what was going on, who these guys were, but he wouldn't look at me. It was like he was ashamed or something."

Just talking about it makes those memories rise up so clearly in my mind. I can picture the way he just kept staring down at the scuffed floor, acting like he couldn't hear me. Those two dudes stood there looking menacing, as if my dad tried one thing, they'd snap his neck or something.

I swallow hard, wrestling down the monsters that crawl around inside my head.

Avalon watches me with those big eyes, waiting for me to continue.

"I knew it was bad because of that. Or at least, I thought I did. I was holding it together, and then they grabbed up my sister. Then I lost it. I was trying to fight them off, trying to get to her and get her away from them. But they ended up knocking me out."

I lick my lips, thinking about how my vision went dark and I was still reaching out, trying to get to Hannah. It's like I can hear her, screaming my name, begging me to wake up. And the whole time, our dad just stood there, letting it happen.

At the time, we didn't really understand what was happening. We didn't know why he didn't help us, or why he'd let them take us. But they made

sure we knew later. It was one of their favorite things to tell us, how all of this was happening because our dad had fucked up, and we were paying the price for it.

“When I woke up, I was locked up in a basement. With Hannah, my sister. I didn’t know where we were, or what was happening, only that there was no way to get out. And believe me, I tried. That first hour, I tried every way I could think of to get the door open or find a window, but we were locked in. I didn’t have a plan for how we were going to get away once we were out, but I knew I had to do something. Hannah was crying her fucking eyes out, just terrified, and I was fucking scared too, but I was trying to be strong for her. I was trying to protect her, since our dad didn’t.”

Not that it ever did much good.

“What happened?” Avalon asks in a whisper, looking like she’s almost afraid to hear the answer.

I let out another breath. “Over the next several months, six men tortured and assaulted me and my sister. Whatever cruel shit they could think of to do, they did it. They liked to watch us squirm. Liked it when we cried. I learned not to soon enough, to hold it together until they were done, so they at least couldn’t get off on that. But Hannah had a harder time. I tried to protect her. Tried to make them come after me instead. I’d act out and call them cowards, whatever I could do to draw their attention away from her. But... sometimes I think I just made it worse for her. Like I made her seem more precious and coveted by trying to get them to leave her alone. It just made them obsess over her more.”

“That’s horrible. That’s—” She shakes her head, at a loss for words.

“Yeah. One day, I couldn’t take it anymore. I was just fucking sick of their hands on me and the way they talked shit about us. I was tired of listening to my sister cry every night and biting into the side of my cheek so I wouldn’t cry too. I tried to fight them. I don’t even really remember what I did. I was so out of it and just... wild with anger and exhaustion. I know I hurt one of them, and they made me pay for it. They killed Hannah in front of me.”

My voice doesn’t shake when I tell that part, which is a good thing. I manage to hold it together, even though just saying the words brings me right back to that night.

“Ivan was one of those men,” I tell Avalon. “He was there, doing whatever the fuck he wanted to us, hurting us, killing my sister. And the

reason I want information about him is because I'm going to kill him."

There are tears in Avalon's eyes as she looks at me. I don't know what she sees in my face, but whatever it is, it's enough to make her nod and swallow hard.

"I'll help you," she murmurs. "I've never seen Ivan St. James myself, but I know he comes to my pimp maybe once a month or so. They have some kind of deal. I've never been given to him yet, but all the girls who've been with him talk about how much they hate it. They all say it was awful. He's got some kind of assault fantasy, and he makes the girls he hires play that out."

My chest tightens, and I clench my jaw until my teeth hurt. Of course he fucking does. Fucking with girls who don't want anything to do with him is his favorite shit, clearly.

"Do you know when the next time he's going to want someone is?" I ask her.

She shakes her head. "It's not a set schedule. He just reaches out when he... has the urge, I guess." I can hear the disgust in her voice. "I don't want to drag the other girls into this..."

"That's okay. The fewer people who know, the better."

"But if I hear anything, I can let you know. And if he needs a new girl, maybe I can volunteer."

I feel a little sick at the thought of sending her to him, just so I can do my dirty work, but then a plan forms in my head. Maybe she doesn't have to be in danger at all. After all, if I'm going to kill him, then I need to be the one to get the drop on him.

"I have an idea," I tell Avalon. "And you won't be in danger."

She perks up at that. "Really?"

I nod. "You won't even have to see him. He'll never touch you."

"I don't want him to, but it's my job..."

"Let me handle it. All I need you to do is call me and let me know when he's looking for another girl. You volunteer to do it, and I'll take it from there."

Avalon has no real reason to trust me, but she nods and agrees all the same.

It'll be different this time. I'm going to keep her safe, and I'm not going to miss my chance like I did at that restaurant. Ivan St. James will die, and the list will be completed.

One way or another.

G A G E

IT'S BEEN a few days since River came home in the middle of the night, practically morning, smiling with triumph and saying she had a plan.

There was something haunted in her eyes that night, like whatever she had to do to get this plan in place cost her something, but apparently it was worth it.

I asked her then what the plan was, but she told me she'd tell us in the morning, making me wait and grinning when I seemed pissed off about it. I watched her go up the stairs to her room with a bad feeling in my chest.

She laid it all out for us the next day. How she met one of the hookers from the red light district and talked to her. How Ivan has a fucking assault fetish and likes to make the girls he hires act it out. Just when I thought it wasn't possible for me to hate that piece of shit more. It all comes together when River explains it. All she has to do is wait for this girl to call her, and then she'll move in and do what she does best. What she's been working toward all this time. She'll take out the last fucker on her list.

But this isn't like before, when she was going to shoot Ivan from across the street and be gone before anyone realized what happened. This is different.

She'll be in the middle of it all. Right there, pretending to be some fucking helpless hooker for him to take advantage of.

It's sick, just like Ivan himself, and just thinking about it makes me grind my teeth in irritation.

But of course, River doesn't give a shit. She's focused on the fact that this plan will work, and it's the best shot she has. I know she wants him dead, more than she wants anything else, apparently, but it's still a bad plan.

I didn't like her plan when she first told it to us, and I don't like it now. In fact, I fucking hate it.

I hate pretty much everything about this, starting with the night she killed someone outside our club.

She's *in* our lives now. Deep in. Way too deep for only having been here a short while. Little signs of her are everywhere in the house. A bra slung over the back of a chair, a bottle of nail polish on the table, her brand of cigarettes on the counter.

Even her fucking dog is settling in, running all over the yard and sleeping under the kitchen table like he owns the place, and I'm not sure how to feel about that.

I can't help but think about Priest's warnings that first night, how we should just kill her and be done with it because she's only going to bring trouble. He wasn't wrong. She's wormed her way into our lives and our home and our routines. At some point, I stopped thinking of the room she sleeps in as the guest room and started calling it *her* room. Like she lives here and isn't just staying so we can keep an eye on her. Knox and Ash both pant after her like horny dogs, even Priest seems to have made some kind of peace with her, and I...

I wander into the library, unable to forget fucking River in here.

I think about how she worked herself back, taking every violent thrust with pleasure, demanding more all at the same time. She riled me up to a breaking point and then handled it completely when I unleashed on her.

I'm sure a lot of people would think it's weird for there to be a full library in a house like this. They'd probably think the same thing about Priest's piano.

But this is where I come to settle my mind when my demons scream too loudly. It's peaceful and it's mine. My father was a piece of shit who mocked me for not learning how to read for a long time, so I've made it a point to read everything I can since I learned. I find old books, the classics that all the stuffy intellectuals say you have to read if you want to be anybody, and I read them. I keep them, along with the notes I make in the margins. Like proof that I can do whatever the fuck I set my mind to without approval from anyone else. Nothing can hold me back.

I walk along the shelves, trailing my fingers over the place where River had her hands while I fucked her from behind. She wanted to touch herself,

but I wouldn't let her, keeping her hands right there, making her take it at my pace.

Just thinking about it makes my cock perk up, and I can feel myself getting hard.

I pick up one of the books from the shelf. *Heart of Darkness*. Appropriate. I open it and go to flip through it, but the pages don't fan open the way they should. A bunch of them are stuck together, hard at the edges and unable to be pulled apart.

I narrow my eyes and put it back, picking up another one. It has the same issue.

My jaw clenches with anger.

River is in the living room, watching Ash and Knox beat the shit out of each other in a video game, and I march in, holding the book in my hand.

"What the fuck happened?" I snap, my voice cutting through the sound of video game violence and Knox laughing.

River looks up, confused at first, but then she sees the book in my hand and bursts out laughing. Her blue eyes are bright, and she runs fingers through her shiny silver hair like she couldn't give less of a shit.

"I don't know, Gage," she says, shrugging. "But it really isn't a good idea to smear cum all over the pages of books. They'll just stick together. Didn't you learn that lesson with porno magazines when you were younger?"

I see red at her nonchalant expression. "I didn't fucking smear cum on them," I growl.

Ash and Knox are still in the middle of their game, but I can tell they're listening. Knox's laughter might be about how his character just ripped the spine out of Ash's character and beat him half to death with it or because of me talking about jizz on the pages of my books.

Either way, it just pisses me off more. It's like it's a game to them. Like this isn't our lives this woman has marched herself into and started fucking with. She's here, like she owns the place, making herself at home and fucking things up.

Of course they both love it.

Knox is a sucker for chaos. Anything new and different and exciting. Plus, River seems to understand him in a fucked up way. He wouldn't spend so much time around her if she didn't.

Ash just wants to fuck her, and he probably has already. She's the type to get him excited, and he also likes when things are happening. Especially things that involve a pretty girl. Both of them are missing the point—that she'll be gone soon enough, and all the shit she fucked up will have to try to get back to normal. If that's even possible.

I stand in the middle of the living room glaring at her, feeling like I'm the only one who gets it. Mad at her for fucking with my shit, for being so damn compelling. I want her to kill Ivan so she can get the fuck out of our lives already, even though I know it won't be that easy.

Nothing's ever that fucking easy.

Her grin just goes wider as she glances down at the book in my hand. "Oh, yeah. That was me."

Anger rises in me. I'm pissed as fuck. She's grinning like she doesn't have a care in the world, like it doesn't faze her that she fucked with my stuff.

I stride toward her, prepared to yank her up, bend her over my knee and punish her if I have to, but her phone rings before I reach her.

She rolls her eyes at me and pulls it out of her pocket, answering it as soon as she sees the name on the screen. Her face goes serious in an instant, all traces of humor falling away. She gets up from the couch, moving over to a corner to talk in a hushed conversation.

I hear her say "Are you sure?" and "Okay," and "Don't worry. I'll be there."

Everyone in the room stops, looking at her while she talks. Knox has stopped laughing, and Ash isn't grinning anymore. The atmosphere in the room has completely changed.

I forget all about the books, waiting to hear the verdict.

Finally, she hangs up and turns to look at all of us.

"That was Avalon," she says. "Ivan put in a request for a girl, and Avalon volunteered to do it for the night. It's go time."

RIVER

ALL OF THE men look serious, even Knox for once.

Gage still looks pissed, but I feel like it's for an entirely different reason now. Not about the book or my petty prank, but because he doesn't like this plan.

He's made that more than clear since I laid it out for them a couple days ago. Telling me it's dangerous and stupid and whatever else.

Whatever. It's *my* plan. And it'll work. Or I'll die trying to get my revenge. Either way, it's worth it to me.

I go upstairs to my room, leaving Gage to be pissed and the others to deal with him. I need to get dressed. I took the time to put together an outfit like the one Avalon is supposed to be wearing. A short skirt that shows off my legs and thighs and barely covers my ass, with skimpy panties underneath. Avalon said that Ivan likes "easy access," and I wanted to throw up in my mouth, but it makes sense. I throw a halter top on with it, easily untied from the top, and no bra, so my nipples are basically poking through. I have plenty of heels to choose from, and I grab a pair that I know I'll be able to kick ass in and throw them on too.

It's skimpy and revealing, perfect for what I'm trying to do.

The picture of Hannah with my list on the back is in its usual place in the nightstand drawer, and I grab that too, shoving it into the little pocket on the skirt. I want it with me when I do this. It's the only piece of Hannah I have left, and she deserves to be there when I finally bring this shit to an end.

It's the best I can do for her now.

I give myself a onceover in the mirror and fluff up my hair a little before heading downstairs, ready to go.

All the guys are waiting for me when I get down there. They're armed and ready, serious-faced.

"Are you here to see me off?" I ask them, flashing a teasing smile. "I didn't know you cared."

"We're going as back up," Ash says, grinning back.

I look at Gage, my eyebrows twitching upward. "What happened to me doing this on my own?"

He was the one who was so adamant that none of them were going to help me. But at the same time, he was the first one who *did* help me.

"You still are," he says. "We're just going to make sure it gets done."

Priest's icy blue eyes practically burn as he looks at me intensely. His jaw is set, and the fire in his eyes is the only expression on his face. He doesn't say anything.

Ash gives me a long look up and down, then whistles, waggling his eyebrows at my outfit. "You'll blend right in," he teases.

"Is that supposed to be a compliment?" I fire back.

"If you want it to be." He winks, and I roll my eyes at him.

Knox moves in, nuzzling my ear before dragging his tongue up the shell of it. I shiver, and I can feel him smirking.

"It's a good night for vengeance," he murmurs, voice low.

Almost on cue, the piercing he gave me aches pleasantly.

"You're right," I tell him. "It is a good night."

It's a good night to end this, once and for all.

I don't argue about the guys deciding they're coming along. They can do whatever they want as long as they don't fuck it up.

Avalon texted me the location of where she's supposed to be meeting Ivan, and I get in my car and drive there, anticipation curling through me.

It's an abandoned area that looks like it might have been a park at one point. It's dark and totally isolated, and looking around, I can tell why people wouldn't want their kids to play here or whatever.

The trees loom in the darkness, and it's far enough away from both the road and any other buildings that if something happened, it would be hard to call for help.

Hell, things probably *did* happen here, which is why it was abandoned in the first fucking place.

I shudder with rage and disgust just thinking about it. It's a perfect place for what I want to do because it's also a perfect place for what *Ivan* wants to do. Play out his sick fantasies of attacking a girl and having his way with her.

As if he hasn't already done that enough.

I park and turn my headlights off, waiting in the darkness. I hold on to my anger but don't let it cloud my judgement. It fuels me, but I don't want it to distract me.

It's a quiet night, and I don't see anyone for a little while.

Then there's a flash of headlights turning off the road, and a dark car pulls up, with a man and a woman inside. They talk for a second, and then Avalon gets out of the car and her pimp or whoever the guy is drives off.

I want to put a bullet through his head for driving Avalon to this sketchy place and then leaving her alone like this, to be preyed on by a piece of shit like Ivan, but I keep myself in check. I grip the steering wheel hard, letting out a slow breath.

It's good. This is how we need it to be.

No witnesses, no one to fuck it up.

Just me and Ivan, finally squaring off after all these years. One of us is going to walk away from this, and it's not going to be him.

Avalon walks away from the spot where she was dropped off at, moving easily on her high heels but glancing around quickly to make sure no one's watching. There's no one else around to watch. We're alone. She comes over to my car and slips into the passenger seat.

Her hands are shaking a little, and she glances over at me. "Are you sure this is a good idea?"

I can hear the fear in her voice, but I nod all the same.

"I'm sure. I'll handle it. You just stay in the car and stay out of sight. He won't get to you."

She nods, hands fidgeting with the hem of her short skirt. Our outfits match almost perfectly, and it's been so long since Ivan's seen me that I know I can pull this off without him getting suspicious.

He's expecting an easy time for this. Some woman he can push around and use and then send back when he's done with her. He's got a rude awakening ahead of him, and I can't fucking wait.

"I just keep thinking of all the things that could go wrong," she whispers.

“It won’t go wrong. I’m not going to miss my chance again,” I tell her. “Just stay here.”

Avalon nods again, so I get out of the car and square my shoulders. I put a little sway in my hips and start walking back to the spot where Avalon was dropped off. I’ve seen enough sex workers plying their trade that I know the mannerisms, and even though I’m playing the part of a helpless woman for Ivan to fondle and worse, I know some things are hard to hide.

“He wants me to walk along the path through the trees,” Avalon told me on the phone earlier. “In the dark. He said he’d come to me when he was ready, and to just keep walking. He said to struggle, to make it seem more realistic.”

She sounded sick just saying it, and I can’t blame her for that. I don’t know how much he’s paying for this shit, but with the cut her pimp takes off the top for doing fuck-all, it can’t be enough to willingly become some fucker’s victim for the night.

Still, I follow the instructions, finding the path she mentioned easily. Everything about this place is sketchy as hell, especially at night when everything is dark and there are barely any streetlights to see by. But the path Ivan picked is especially dark. The trees close in on either side of it, and it would probably be nice in the daytime, with the trees giving some shade from the sun, but at night, it’s just dark and creepy.

Shadows loom on either side, and just walking past the trees gives that feeling of being watched or followed, even though I know both are probably true right now.

The path is lightly paved, grass growing on either side, and my heels tap on the pavement as I walk. I keep forcing myself to move at a leisurely pace. To not rush. I’m supposed to be unsuspecting and helpless or whatever the fuck gets Ivan off.

I walk for about five minutes when I hear someone moving behind me. My body wants to tense up, but I force myself to keep moving. The footsteps get faster, and then strong arms are around me, grabbing me, dragging me back against the hard line of a male body.

Even without seeing his face or hearing his voice, I know it’s him. Ivan. I know it by the way he breathes, the way he smells, the way my body lurches with the fight or flight desire to both beat the shit out of him and get away from him as fast as I can.

Just the touch of his hands on my skin brings back a torrent of memories that I don't want.

For just a second, I'm a teenager again. Scared and huddled in the corner with my sister. Ivan comes and stands over me. The others are in the background, egging him on. He grabs a handful of my hair and pulls me away from the corner and Hannah. He leers at me where my clothes are torn and dirty, and his hands are everywhere. He's bigger than me, stronger, and he gets off on knowing that I know that. He laughs when I struggle, when I cry. It's all a game to him, and he's winning.

In the present, his hands start moving over my body. One slides down to my ass, palming it roughly, and he squeezes at my tits with the other hand. I'm frozen for a second, caught up in the memories and the fear that doesn't feel like it's mine anymore, but which holds me all the same.

The slight pain from him squeezing near my new piercing shakes me out of the memories, and when he turns me around to face him and pushes me against a tree, I can breathe again.

I drag in a slow breath through my nose, gathering myself. Reminding myself why I'm here. I'm not that kid anymore. He doesn't have the upper hand.

Not that he knows that.

The bark is rough against my back as he presses me to it, not giving a shit about my comfort. He's already panting and eager. Ivan kisses at my neck, and I can feel his stubble and the heat of his breath against my skin.

"I don't want to hurt you," he breathes into my ear. "I just want to have a little fun. You're so fucking hot, and I can't help myself. So just hold still, and nothing bad has to happen."

Hearing his voice again, saying that bullshit, is enough to make anger simmer in me, edging out the fear once and for all. I know what I'm here to do.

His hands go low again, pulling up the hem of my skirt, and I snap into action. I rear back and then headbutt him, getting him right in the throat.

Ivan splutters and backs up a bit, coughing and wheezing. When he looks up, he's glaring at me, but anger isn't the only heat in his eyes.

"What the fuck, you bitch?" he snarls, his voice a low hiss. "You're supposed to struggle, not fight back."

But he's hard. I can tell from the way his pants are tented. He likes the fight. Likes the idea of having to subdue me first before he can take what he

wants. He wants to be rougher about it.

Ivan grabs me again, and I know I'm right. He's being rougher, almost violent as he yanks me closer to him. I can feel his hands digging into my skin, and it's like his touch burns.

I struggle against him, trying to pull away, and his breath starts coming faster. When he presses me against the tree again, I can feel how hard he is, and he grinds against me, trying to get more friction.

"You can't get away," he breathes. "You're mine now, bitch."

I prove him wrong by breaking his hold and stumbling back, but he grabs me again and hauls me back in. His mouth goes to my neck, and he drags his tongue over my pulse point. There's a sickening lurch in my stomach just from the feeling of it, and I knee him in the balls for the trouble.

Ivan curses in agony and drops to his knees in front of me, eyes screwed up in pain.

That's my opening.

I'm wearing a bracelet that I picked up from a sketchy little shop a year or so ago. It's silver and thin, with a little gemstone set into it. The gem is just big enough to grab, and when I pull at it, it slides out of place, attached to a thin wire that's been wound into the bracelet.

Perfect to garrote a motherfucker who deserves it in the middle of the night.

I jump on Ivan's back and wrap that wire around his neck, drawing it tight.

"Stop!" he gasps. "What are you doing?"

I still don't speak.

He flails, trying to get free, but I hold on tight.

He's still bigger and stronger than me, but I'm not weak. And determination burns through my body, giving me more strength. I hold the wire in place tightly, counting down in my head until he finally goes limp and slumps to the path.

For a second, everything is quiet.

Then four men step out of the shadows.

My heart skips a beat, and I have just enough time to wonder if Ivan brought backup after all for this little shit show, but when I look up, I relax.

It's the Kings.

Knox comes closer, a savage grin on his face. “Allow us, sweetheart,” he says, and the pet name somehow fits perfectly with his dangerous tone.

My fingers are so tight on the wire I used to choke Ivan out, and I don’t want to let go of it. But I know this isn’t done yet. We need to get him out of here to finish the job. He’s unconscious, and I let him go, getting to my feet.

On cue, the guys move in and grab him.

RIVER

I'M SHAKING as the men carry Ivan's unconscious body away and dump him in their car, which is parked just a little way off the path. They peel out, leaving me standing there alone in the dark.

My body doesn't want to move at first, rooted to the spot, trying to process the million different thoughts running through my head. I always knew I would get this far, but now that I have, it's a lot.

Eventually, I get moving, taking one step, then another, leaving the path and the scene behind me.

I get back to my car and open the driver's side door.

Avalon is curled up in the passenger seat, and she jumps when I open the door. Her eyes are still wide and terrified, but there's a touch of relief in them when she sees it's just me.

"Did you... did you do it?" she asks.

"It's almost done," I tell her. "We're taking him somewhere else."

"And what about me?"

"Do you have somewhere you can go?" I ask. "Somewhere your pimp and his people can't find you?"

She thinks about it for a second and then nods. "My cousin's place. She doesn't have any ties to any of this. She's religious. No one would think to look for me there."

"Perfect." I start the car and drive the fuck away from that sketchy park. Even though I know Ivan is being treated to the best hospitality the guys can offer, I can still feel my skin crawling from having his hands on me.

I'll need a shower or something to make that go away. Or just to revel in killing him. I'm itching to go back to the house and get it over with. Having

him there while I'm not feels like such a loose end, and it bothers me.

But I wouldn't have had this shot in the first place without Avalon, so I owe it to her to make sure she gets somewhere safe.

She's quiet for most of the drive, telling me where to turn and what exits to take. Her cousin lives in a nice little suburb that's mostly dark and quiet at this hour.

She's right. It's the last place someone from the red light district would look for her.

"That one there," she says, pointing. "With the blue door."

There's even a fucking floral wreath on the door, even though we're not close to any major holiday where a wreath would matter. It's too wholesome.

Avalon unbuckles her seatbelt and goes for the door handle. "Keep your head down," I tell her. "Don't go to work for a while, you know the drill. I'll be in touch."

She nods and gives me a nervous little smile before getting out and walking quickly up the drive. The motion detector lights come on, and she knocks on the door.

I wait until I see a light come on in the house and a sleepy looking woman in a bathrobe come to the door. Avalon talks to her for a second, and then she's ushered in.

Once the door closes behind her, I drive off, making tracks back to the house.

The guys are already back, and Ash greets me when I walk through the door.

"He's in the basement," he tells me before I can even ask. "Knox took him down there, and we saved him just for you. But you'd better hurry, or Gage might just do the job for you."

"He'd better fucking not," I retort.

Instead of rushing down to the basement, I head upstairs. Despite what Ash said, I take my time. I want this to be perfect.

I've been waiting for this for so long.

The last name on my list.

The last piece of my revenge.

I'm not going to rush and fuck it up now that I'm at the finish line.

I go in the bathroom and pull out my makeup, doing it carefully. I take care with every line, every smear of powder and swipe of color on my face.

It has to be perfect. I've been waiting for too long for this not to be perfect.

And then, when I'm finally ready, I go down to the basement.

All of the men are gathered there, and they turn to look at me as my heels clatter on the stairs. They do a collective double-take when they see what I've done with my makeup.

A perfect skeletal skull on my face, grim and as realistic as I could make it.

Knox grins, taking it in and looking almost proud. "You look like an angel of death."

I grin back at him, but then my gaze slides away from Knox to Ivan, and it's like he's the only one in the room I can see.

He's chained up on the wall, like all the people who have the misfortune of ending up down here. Like that guy Knox and I tortured together. Like *I* was, what feels like forever ago. But unlike both of us, Ivan's not leaving this basement alive.

He's awake now, red in the face and clearly pissed off.

"You'll regret this," he snarls. "You must not know who I am. Or else you're just dumb fucks who think you can get one over by kidnapping one of the most powerful men in the city. What do you want? Money? Power? You think snatching me will get you anything but a slow death? My people will have me out of here in no time. And then you'll wish you never fucked with me."

Ash rolls his eyes. "He's been going on like that since he woke up," he says. "Can you just kill him so he'll shut the fuck up?"

"That's the plan," I say.

"You can't kill me," Ivan snaps. "I'm Ivan St. James. I own you."

That specific wording strikes a chord with me, and I approach him, keeping my pace even. Leisurely.

He stares at me, yanking on the chains that hold him to the wall, anger in every movement and every line of his body.

"I know you don't remember me," I tell him, surprised by how calm and pleasant my voice sounds. The anger, the hatred, they're still there, but none of it registers in this moment for some reason. "But I remember you."

Ivan scoffs. "I don't remember every whore I've ever fucked. Even if I didn't get to fuck you." The look on his face says that even though I kicked his ass, he might still want to fuck me.

Fucking disgusting.

“I’m not a whore,” I reply. “And treating women like shit is what got you in this mess in the first place. Do you want to know who I am?”

“Why would I care?” he snaps.

“My name is River,” I continue as if he didn’t say anything. “River Simone. My sister’s name was Hannah Simone. She’s dead now, but you know all about that, don’t you?”

There’s a moment where he looks confused, but then there’s a flicker of recognition on his face as he pieces it together. It’s been years, but I know he hasn’t forgotten.

The anger drains from him, leaving his eyes full of fear and his skin pale with the realization.

I fucking love it. It feeds the blackness in me. That little ball of anger and hate and thirst for revenge that’s been sitting in the pit of my stomach since the day I got away from Ivan and his fucking friends. I want him afraid. I want him desperate. I want him to know even just a taste of the misery and pain he put me and my sister through.

“That’s right,” I tell him. “You remember now, don’t you? You know, you’re down here talking shit about what a big man you are, but you’re really just a fucking coward. A spineless creep who has to live out sick fantasies to this day. As if you can’t get enough of it.”

“Y-you bitch,” he says, going for bravado, but just sounding like he’s going to piss himself any second. “You won’t get away with this. You’ll wish you’d died before when I’m done with you!”

I barely hear him.

Knox has already laid out the tools on the counter for me, but I ignore them. I’ve got my knife on me, like I always do, and I pull it from the little sheath, lifting it so Ivan can see it.

His eyes go wide, and before he can open his mouth, I start cutting him. I cut from ear to ear, slashing at the corners of his mouth, giving him a Glasgow smile and making sure he feels every slice.

Ivan screams in pain, blood pouring down his face.

All of that bluster is gone in an instant. He’s limp in the chains, shaking from pain and sniveling like the fucking worm he is.

“So much for being the most important man in the city,” I tell him. “Where are all your bodyguards and cronies now? You’re not so fucking tough when you’re all alone, are you?”

He doesn’t say anything, just takes wet, gasping breaths of air.

That blackness in me pulses, anger rising.

I can feel all four of the men watching me, their eyes taking it all in, but none of them speak or do anything. They let me have this.

I grab a handful of Ivan's hair and lift his head up, forcing him to look at me. "You're not so tough," I say, my voice low and deadly. "When it's just you, and you're not up against some helpless woman. Or a teenage girl. No, when you're in real danger, you turn into a sniveling. Little. Bitch." Each word is punctuated by me driving my knee as hard as I can into his balls.

He screams and tries to twist away from me, so I get in one more strike for good measure.

When I let him go, it's clear the chains are the only thing keeping him upright. He sways and stumbles, falling back against the wall. His face is a mess of blood and tears and snot from his nose.

"You're fucking pathetic," I tell him. "If only everyone you've ever fucked over could see you now. If only they could see what you really are."

My anger's getting the better of me, making me want to drag this out, take every shitty memory I have of this man out on him. But that would take longer than I have.

I remember telling Knox that given the choice, I'd make Ivan suffer. I'd draw it out until he was begging me for death. And also that I just want him dead more than I want anything else. So why am I making this last so long? Why didn't I come down here and kill him on sight?

I know he deserves to suffer for what he did to me and my sister, for what he does to women like Avalon, but I just want him gone.

I get in his face once again, not caring that he can't lift his head to look at me. "I'll tell you this because you'll be dead soon. You're the last one on my list. Everyone else before you already went down. Now it's your turn. Saved the shittiest for last."

He gurgles something that might be an insult or a plea or something. I can't make it out, and I don't give a fuck.

It's time to end this.

I raise my knife one more time and drive it with all the force I can right into his chest. It plunges into his heart, killing him, and I yank it back out, flicking blood against the wall.

Ivan's body sags in the chains, bleeding wetly, all the life gone from it. He was once someone who caused me more nightmares than any one

person should ever have to face.

Now he's dead.

I almost forgot the guys were all here for that, watching but not interfering, but then Gage steps up next to me.

“We have to get rid of the body.”

G A G E

RIVER TURNS to look at me after I speak. There's some blood on her face, stark red against the black lines of the skull on her face. Even beneath the makeup, I feel like I can read her expression easily.

She looks haunted. Almost... lost. Whatever she was expecting to feel when she killed Ivan didn't click for her, I guess. Or it did, but it's not what she thought it would be.

Either way, we don't have time to talk about it.

"Knox," I say. "Get him down."

Knox unlocks the shackles that held Ivan up on the wall, and his body slaps to the hard concrete floor with a wet noise. He's bleeding everywhere from River's cuts and the final stabbing. I sneer down at his body. Someone so powerful and so hated. By me, by River, by plenty of other people. And now he's just meat. At the end of the day, no one is powerful enough to avoid ending up like this if they piss off the wrong people, and Ivan clearly did. His money, his bodyguards, his paranoia, all of that let him down. Trying to get his dick wet was his downfall.

Well, whatever he did to River was his downfall. Judging from what she said about her and her sister and the way Ivan liked his hookers to act, I can guess.

Blood seeps wetly out of his body, and I step back, shaking my head.

This is Knox's specialty, so I let him take point on it. He's removed enough bodies from this basement and other places that I trust him to get it done. I look to him, waiting to see what he wants to do.

"River," he says.

She looks up at him, the name registering, but she's still quiet. Knox shakes his head.

"No, like, we need to take him to the river. We did the woods last time."

I nod. Knox always mixes it up to avoid dumping bodies in the same place too soon one after the other. That's a good way to arouse suspicions, and we don't need that.

"We need to hack it up. Makes it easier to transport," he says, pulling out tools for that purpose.

It goes fast with the four of us. Five of us, if you count River. She's helping, but I can tell her head's not really in it. She still seems a bit dazed, out of it. Lost. Knox goes at it like he's having a good time, and I know there's probably a part of him that wanted to be involved while River was hurting Ivan. Ash and Priest work quickly, not relishing it the way Knox does.

We bag the body up, and Knox hauls it up the stairs. Usually, it's just him that takes care of this stuff. Sometimes I send Priest or Ash with him, to help get it done faster.

But this time, we all go.

No one says anything. We don't talk about it. There's just some unspoken agreement that we're all going to go and see this done.

We pile into the car, with Ivan's body in the trunk. Knox drives, and no one questions where he's going. He's done this so many times that we all know he has spots he likes to use.

It's not a long drive, but far enough out that even if someone finds the body, it will be hard to trace it back to us. But no one ever finds the bodies.

By another unspoken agreement, we all get out of the car and clamber down to the riverbank. Ash makes a joke under his breath about bringing River to the river, but River doesn't even seem like she registers it.

She watches Knox tuck rocks into the bag to weigh it down and says nothing.

"Can we move it a little faster?" Ash asks, always the one to complain about these things.

"I swear to god, if you say you have a date tonight..." I mutter in his direction.

He grins. "No, I just don't want to get all muddy and crap. And this piece of shit doesn't deserve us standing around wasting any more of our time than we already have on him."

He's right about that much, at least. Knox motions for Priest to help him, and they each take one end of the bag. Together, they lift it up and then give it a heave before sending it into the water. It doesn't float for even a second. The rocks and the weight of the body are enough to pull it down into the dark, murky water almost immediately.

We stand there for another few moments, watching until even the bubbles from the bag are gone.

Knox dusts his hands off and grins. "Am I the only one who's suddenly starving?" he asks.

"Yes," Ash and Priest say in unison.

River still doesn't say anything.

We move to head back to the car.

When we get back to the house, River goes right for the stairs. She was quiet for the whole drive back to the house too, her face with the skull still painted on it set into a tight mask.

I follow her upstairs, right on her heels.

She walks into her bedroom, and before she can shut the door, I walk in after her.

Finally, that gets a reaction out of her.

She whirls around, her eyes burning. "What the fuck do you want, Gage?" she demands.

"I know," is all I say.

"What?" She looks pissed off and confused, not understanding what I mean.

"I waited years for my father to die," I tell her. "I wished for it every day. Counted down the hours and the fucking seconds until he was done. And when he finally did die, I thought I'd feel free. Finally. After all that time waiting and waiting and fucking waiting. I thought there would be a massive weight off my shoulders, and I'd feel like I could breathe again without thinking about the shit he pulled every second of the day. But it didn't work out like that. Him being dead didn't just magically make it all go away."

River just glares at me and folds her arms. "Thanks for the pep talk. Stick to running your shitty club because you suck at motivational speeches."

She walks away from me, going into the bathroom. Someone else might consider that the end of the conversation and leave her alone, but I follow

her again, coming up behind her where she stands in front of the sink. She tries to pretend I'm not there, but I grab her face with one hand, fingers on either side of her chin, and turn her to face the mirror, making her look at her smeared skull makeup. At herself. There's anger in her face, edging out that lost, blank look from before, but I don't know if it's enough.

"River, listen to me. I know you usually don't give a shit about what I have to say, but fucking listen. You won't be free just because the last name is off your list," I tell her. "You'll only be free when *you* decide it's done. When you can let it go."

I look at her face, trying to see if any of this is registering with her. There's just anger there, burning in those dark blue eyes.

"What makes you so fucking wise all of a sudden?" she snaps, lashing out. "You're handing out all this advice like you know shit about how I feel. Have you decided you're free of whatever bullshit is in *your* past? Have you beaten back your demons?"

I know what she's trying to do, but I wrap my arms around her anyway, dragging her in tight against my body, her back to my front. She's still in her outfit from earlier, and I can feel the heat of her against me.

"No," I admit. "But this isn't about me. It's not about my demons. It's about yours."

"You don't know shit about my demons," she snaps.

I just laugh. "I don't have to. Doesn't matter the shape of them. I know what it feels like to be weighed down by them every fucking day. I know what it feels like when you think you've done enough to get them off your back and it turns out you haven't. I understand."

"Shut *up*," River growls. She arches in my hold, like she's trying to break free of my arms. I'm not immune to her outfit, or the way her body feels against mine, and my cock is hard in my pants. River presses back against me, rubbing right into my erection, and I bite back a groan, but push my hips forward, grinding hard against her.

Her breathing comes faster, and I can feel the desperation in her. It's echoed in me, us and our demons looking for release. Two desperate souls just doing the fucking best we can.

She stops fighting against me and leans into me instead, and then turns in my arms, eyes blazing. I don't have time to say anything or even get a good look at her before she's leaning up and slamming her lips into mine.

RIVER

OUR LIPS CRASH together again and again, hot, hard, and desperate. I can feel it in myself and the way it's answered in him. He was talking like he knows how I feel, like he understands me, and I hated it, but there's something about this kiss that makes me think he might actually be right.

His fingers dig into my jaw again, pressing against my skin, and he uses that hold to control the kiss. He tips my head back with that grip and then plunges his tongue into my mouth, devouring me in a way that makes heat burn through me.

I answer him by twining my tongue with his, giving as good as I get and teasing and tempting him to kiss me more, harder, better.

Gage meets that challenge head on. He bites down on my lower lip and tugs it into his mouth, sucking on it lightly before biting down harder, making sure I can feel it.

I fist my hands in his shirt, holding on tight while I rock in the waves of heat and sensation that rise in me.

When we finally break apart, my makeup is smeared all over his lips, white and black, a messy sort of claim. He's panting lightly, and he looks at me with that intense stare before wiping the back of his hand across his mouth.

"Get on your knees," he tells me, voice low and firm. It's the voice he uses when he wants to get shit done and expects to be obeyed.

Usually, I'd tell him to go fuck himself for giving me orders, but now there's the distraction of the arousal beating against my ribcage in time with my heartbeat, and I want to do what he says.

So I drop to my knees, dragging my nails down his chest as I go.

I know what he wants me down here for, and my hands go right for his belt, undoing it and his pants so I can pull his cock out.

It's already hard in my hand, thick and pulsing with heat. There's a bead of precum at the tip, and I use my thumb to smear it over the head of him, rubbing the sticky fluid in and then popping my thumb in my mouth to taste him.

"Suck my cock," he breathes. I can hear how affected he is, how much he wants it, and I keep my eyes on him as I drag my tongue up his shaft slowly.

I ease my mouth over the head of him, getting more of that salty proof of how turned on he is from the source.

"Fuck," Gage curses, and when I look up at him, he's staring right back down at me, those green eyes even more piercing than usual. He seems imposing like this, almost intimidating, and it sends a thrill up my spine that I like.

"I said suck me," he rasps, and I roll my eyes but do as he says.

I suck on the head of him at first, making it wet and sloppy. Drool slips past my lips, running down his shaft, and I lick it up before putting my mouth back where he wants it and working him as deep as I can.

My head bobs back and forth, and I take him all the way down over and over again, holding him at the back of my throat for a second before pulling off to breathe.

"Knox was right," he pants. "You do look like an angel of death. But a filthy one now."

He's probably right. My makeup is smeared all to hell, and my mouth is stretched around his cock.

He thrusts deeper into my throat, hitting the back of it, and I swallow around him before bobbing my head faster.

Gage isn't gentle with me, and I don't want him to be. I don't want coddling or lovemaking or whatever the fuck. I want something I can lose myself to. I want to be able to turn off my brain so it stops thinking about anything but him. The way he feels in my mouth, hot and hard and heavy. The smooth texture of his skin and the weight of his cock against my tongue.

He grabs a fistful of my hair when I go to pull back to snatch a breath, and he holds me down a bit longer, making me take it.

I splutter around him, and when he finally pulls back to let me breathe, drool and precum drip from my lips. That grip on my hair keeps me in place, and he uses it to hold me there while he thrusts into my mouth hard.

All I have to do is kneel there and take it. Let him use my mouth like he used my pussy the last time we fucked. He practically rams himself into my mouth, and I relax, letting him fuck into my throat. I use my tongue to swirl around his cock when I can, and the sound of his harsh breathing combines with the wet noise of him fucking my mouth.

There are no outside thoughts. No remembered pain or worry. Everything that happened tonight is far away, and all I know is Gage. Just him and the way he makes me feel.

As he gets closer to coming, I can feel his thrusts getting more erratic. His body trembles with fine tremors, and I can feel them through his cock. He stares down at me, and I keep looking up at him, tears springing into my eyes when he forces himself as deep as he can go and holds there, cutting off my air for one second, two, three, four.

Just when I'm getting lightheaded, he pulls back, letting me gasp for air before he slams back into my throat again. It's like he wants to fuck it raw, and I'm not fucking complaining at all.

He chokes some words I can't quite make out, but it doesn't matter what they are. I can tell he's at the point of no return. His cock is buried in my throat, and he comes hard, curling over me a little as he finishes. His back bows, and I gag a little with those last few thrusts as he empties himself down my throat.

I swallow it all, and when he pulls out of my mouth, I have to suck in air like it's going out of style. I can see there are little streaks of makeup on his cock too. Another kind of marking.

Gage chuckles darkly, sounding a little bit breathless.

He pulls me up again, then turns me to face the mirror once more. Some of my makeup is still there, some is smeared all over the place, the black mixing with the white to form a sort of muddy gray.

I look like what I've always called myself—a ghost.

Gage runs his knuckles down the side of my face, standing behind me. I look at his reflection instead of turning my head to see him when he speaks.

"Look at yourself," he says, and his voice has a softer tone to it, even though it's clear he still wants me to obey him. Bossy bastard.

But I look. I can't help but look.

“You look ruined,” he goes on. “Are you ruined?”

Am I?

I’m still standing.

I killed Ivan.

Out of the two of us, I fucking won. He might have had the upper hand when I was a kid, locked in a room and helpless to resist his bullshit, but in the end, I got the vengeance I’ve been gunning for this whole time.

It might not be the triumph I expected, and I might not feel the way I thought I would, but that doesn’t change the fact that I won. That at least that ordeal is really and truly over, and every single fucker responsible for making my sister suffer and die is dead in her name.

My lips curl into something that’s a cross between a sneer and a savage grin. “No. I’m not.”

“Good girl,” Gage says.

He yanks me backward until I’m pressed against him again. He just came, and I can still taste the proof of that, but he’s hard all over again.

He bends me over the sink and shoves my skirt down, ripping my underwear off in one go.

My cunt is wet and throbbing, and Gage wastes no time slamming into me. I practically howl with pleasure, and I can feel my walls contracting, going tight around his cock like they don’t want to let him go.

He hisses a curse under his breath, fingers tight on my hips and then draws himself out slowly, making sure I can feel every inch of him.

I’m already so worked up, and it sends an electric shiver up my spine.

“Don’t fucking tease,” I gasp out, trying to push my hips back and get more of him.

He laughs darkly. “I don’t plan on teasing.”

I open my mouth to tell him that it doesn’t look like it when he’s stalling with just the tip of his cock in me, but then he slams himself forward again, and I lose the breath and presence of mind to say fucking anything.

All the thoughts fly right out of my head, and it’s all I can do to brace myself against the counter while he fucks me hard and dirty.

I can hear him slapping against me, hear his cock moving in my soaking wet core. The bathroom is full of the scent of us fucking and the sounds of it, and it’s so much. It’s so *good*.

Gage doesn’t speak. It seems like he’s not really one for dirty talk most of the time, preferring to let his actions speak louder than his words, but

that's fine with me. I don't have the breath for words, and I'm too focused on how goddamn good it feels with him fucking me like this.

He makes my body sing, pleasure and lust climbing higher and higher while he works me over. I know there will be bruises in the shape of his fingers on my hips tomorrow, and I'll be sore from how hard he's fucking me, but in the moment, I can't bring myself to give a shit.

All I care about is how his cock feels in me and how big and imposing he is behind me. How he controls the way we fuck, pulling me back into some of the thrusts or holding me still and making me take it.

All the heat and sensation are filling me up, making it hard to breathe around the pleasure sitting right in the center of my body. It rises higher and higher, and then a little bit higher after that, and my mouth falls open on a silent scream as my orgasm slams into me with force.

My moan is strangled, and I bite back a scream as I shake through the pleasure.

"Goddamn," Gage pants. "You're so fucking tight."

I don't have words to reply, and my knees shake, a little bit like jelly after how hard I just came.

"I'm not done with you yet," Gage growls, low and intense. He pulls out of me, leaving me feeling empty, my cunt clenching around nothing. Even him pulling his cock out is enough to send shivers through me.

He drags my skirt all the way down, and I kick it off, sending it flying into the corner. That's something to deal with later, because right now all I can think about is getting his cock back in me.

Gage seems to be on the same page.

He picks me up and slams me against the wall, my back hitting it with a thud. I don't feel any pain from that. All I can feel is the heat still rising from my pussy and the desire that's clawing at me relentlessly.

He lines up and shoves his cock back into my sopping hole, and I wrap my legs around his waist.

His eyes are dark green now, so dark they're nearly black with how turned on he is. His cock is slick with my arousal, sliding in so easily. Like it was made for me. Like *he* was made for me.

And my body welcomes him eagerly. I just came, but I'm still needy for more. Gage gives it to me hard and fast, fucking me against the wall with the same force he was using earlier.

I claw at his shoulders, his back, his hair, desperate for something to hold on to while he sends me spinning into the beginnings of another orgasm.

It's hard to breathe, harder to think, and I hold on for dear life, clenching around his cock. It's not going to just be me that falls apart this time. I'm taking him with me.

"Shit," Gage hisses, and I can hear his control fracturing by the tone in his voice. His fingers dig into my thighs where they hold me up, and his cock pulses inside of me.

I'm not far behind, though, and before I milk an orgasm out of him, I'm tipping over into another one. I kiss him and moan my pleasure into his mouth, letting him taste it and swallow it all down.

He comes with a low snarl of his own pleasure, filling me up with a few more erratic thrusts that set off aftershocks in my body.

We stay like that for a few minutes, and when I get a good look at Gage's face, I can see more of my makeup has smeared over it. Both of us have that gray pallor to our skin now. Like ghosts.

Gage lets me down so my feet touch the cool, tiled floor, and we slump against each other, exhausted and spent.

RIVER

I STAY like that for a few more minutes, slumped in Gage's arms, feeling blissfully calm and empty. It's like all of my emotions and bad feelings were washed away by the orgasms, and even though it left me feeling wrung out, it's not in a bad way. My head is clearer than it was after I killed Ivan, and I like that.

After a while I wiggle in Gage's arms, feeling restless and ready to have some space. I push him away, and he lets go of me and steps back.

We're both disheveled and messy as hell. My hair is a mess from his hand being fisted in it while I sucked his cock, and his clothes are rumpled. His mouth is kiss bruised, that scar on his lip stark against the makeup smeared around his face. His cock is still hanging out of his pants, soft and spent now.

I can feel his eyes on me, looking me over the same way I looked him over. We reach the top at the same time, and our eyes meet for just a moment.

I can see the weight of the things he told me earlier in them, eyes the color of spring grass that have clearly seen so fucking much. There are demons behind them, and even though they're not simmering with rage like usual, I know it's never far away when it comes to Gage.

I'm not sure what he sees in my eyes. He told me to look at myself before, and I did, but he never said what he saw. All the same, it feels like understanding passes between us in this moment. It seems to stretch on for longer than a minute should be capable of, but then Gage blinks, and the spell is broken.

I turn away from him, dragging fingers through my hair. “Okay, get out,” I tell him. “I need to get cleaned up.”

He snorts, but doesn’t argue that it’s his house and I can’t tell him what to do in it or whatever. He just turns to leave, tucking his cock away as he heads for the door.

“I’ll be out of here by tomorrow,” I call after him.

His steps falter for just a second, a slight hesitation, giving almost no sign that he heard me at all. Then he keeps walking.

I stand there in the middle of the room for a bit, body aching pleasantly. Then I close the door and start up the shower after getting my skirt from the bottom of it. I’m covered in makeup, dried blood, and cum, and I just want to feel clean for a bit.

The water is hot, and I sigh as it washes over me, the mess of the makeup and sex and murder swirling down the drain with the suds as I scrub up. I wash my face and my hair, taking extra care with everything, letting it all go.

When I pull the shower curtain back, the bathroom is filled with steam. I wipe the mirror clean after I dry off, and I look like a woman again. Silver hair, tattoos, nails the color of blood. Not an angel of death anymore.

I pull the picture of my sister out of the pocket of my skirt and cradle it in my hands. Like I always do, I spend a minute looking at Hannah’s face, tracing the lines of it and aching before I turn it over.

All the names are crossed off but one, and I fix that pretty quickly. When the last name is marked off, I stare down at the list. Every single name with a vicious line marked through it, taken off the list like they were taken out of existence.

It’s over.

It’s done.

My quest for vengeance is finished now that Ivan St. James is in a bag at the bottom of the river. I’d say hopefully the fish can get some use out of him now, but the fish don’t even deserve to have to deal with him.

There’s a strange feeling of relief, at knowing I finally accomplished the goal I’ve been working toward for so long, but there’s also a sense of... emptiness that fills me.

I’ve been pointed at this one goal for so long, letting it fill me, feed me, drive me, and now that it’s over, I have no idea what comes next.

I walk back into the bedroom and shake a cigarette out of my pack, lighting it up and taking a long, slow drag. I crack the window to blow the smoke out, and settle on the sill with a sigh.

All of that nice, empty-headed feeling I had when Gage and I were fucking seems to be trickling away, leaving a weird, antsy feeling in its place. Like little things crawling under my skin, making it hard to relax and think straight.

I get up to find one of my knives, putting my sister's picture down in the drawer in its spot. I suck in a breath and draw the knife over my skin, the sharp burning sensation of cutting myself working to provide some relief.

I let that breath out when I finish the neat slice, and look down at the blood welling on my thigh. It's not a deep cut, but the knife is sharp, slicing through the skin easily. I draw another line with it, parallel to the first.

I feel more grounded, but my head is still full of too many thoughts. Gage's words from earlier pop into mind, and my jaw clenches as I think about what he said. How the demons don't just go away and how freedom doesn't come just because your tormentors are gone. It sounded like bullshit to me, but he talked like he knew. Like he was in a good position to know.

I cut myself again and again, drawing line after line with the knife. My thigh aches with the cuts, but it clears my head and leaves me with another kind of numbness, just like the sex gave me earlier.

And I really fucking need that right now.

Maybe I lied to Gage before, facing him and myself in the mirror, makeup smeared across my face.

Maybe I *am* ruined.

THE NEXT MORNING, I wake up on top of the covers with dried blood running in spiderweb patterns down my legs. The knife is still next to me. Apparently I passed out from exhaustion and... everything else last night without cleaning up or anything.

I make my way to the bathroom, pleased when none of the cuts reopen from walking, and use a wet towel to wipe away the blood until my skin is clean.

I told Gage I'd be out of here today, and I plan to stick to that. The deal is up. Ivan's dead, and I don't have a reason to be here anymore.

I pack up my things, shoving it all into that duffel bag I brought with me when Knox made me come here. It feels like a long time ago, even though I know it was just a couple of weeks, really. It takes some time to hunt down everything I brought with me, but I have the most important shit.

Hannah's picture, my weapons, my nail polishes and razor blades. I don't bother to fold any of the clothes, just chuck them all into the bag, and when it's stuffed full, I zip it up and head downstairs.

The house is quiet, and apparently none of the guys are around. No Knox in the kitchen eating a breakfast that could easily feed two or three people, no Ash doing card tricks or twirling a butter knife between his fingers.

It feels weird to just leave without seeing them, but that's bullshit. They all knew what this was. The deal was that as soon as Ivan was dead, I'd be out of here. And they all saw him die.

So it's time for me to go. No harm, no foul.

Dog is under the kitchen table as usual, and he perks up when I walk in.

"Come on, Toto," I tell him. Knox's habit of calling him whatever name seems to fit in the moment has really stuck, apparently. "It's time to go home."

I grab his bowl and the dwindling bag of food, heading for the front door with everything. Dog comes, the way he always does, trotting eagerly after me.

I walk down the driveway to my car, unlocking it so I can start loading up the backseat with all this stuff. When I look up to try to get him in the car, the furry brown mutt is standing halfway between the house and the car, whining softly like he's torn.

There's a flash of hurt in my chest for some fucking reason. The only reason why this stupid dog got such a cushy little vacation in the first place was because I brought him with me to piss off the guys for being bossy jackasses. But now he wants to choose their house over me?

"Fine," I snap. "You can stay here if you want. It's not like you're mine. And it's not like my shitty studio is better than this place. I don't have a yard or a kitchen table for you to sleep under, so whatever. I'm sure the guys would just love for you to stay here. Ash can yell at you every morning and you can shit in his shoes. It'll be perfect."

I don't know why I'm arguing with a damn dog in the middle of the driveway, but after I say my piece, Dog finally trots toward me and hops up into the backseat of the car, curling up next to my duffel bag.

"Whatever," I mutter under my breath. "Fucking drama king." I slam the door closed, but I can't help the grin that stretches over my face.

I start the car and drive away from the house, away from the fancy-ass neighborhood with the probably snooty neighbors who will be glad not to have to look at my eyesore of a car anymore, I bet.

Instead of heading back to my place, I take another exit and drive toward the address Avalon texted me this morning.

She left her cousin's place, not wanting to get her into any trouble, and said she's in a motel on the outskirts of town.

By now, Ivan's absence will definitely have been noticed, and his people will be coming after the pimp, who will be looking for Avalon.

I park outside the place. It's run-down as hell, a flashing vacancy sign above it, but no signage to say the name or the rates or anything. It's the kind of place you'd come to try to disappear or hide something.

I grab my bag from the backseat and use my knife to split a seam in the side. There's a little false pocket sewn into it, stuffed with the emergency cash I keep hidden there. You never know when you might need it, or when you might need to help someone who put their neck out to help you.

I count out a few bundles, five thousand bucks or so, and tuck them into my jacket. Dog and I get out of the car and head inside, going up to the room Avalon said she'd be in.

The hall is quiet, but there are definitely people fucking in a room I pass by on the way to Avalon's. I knock on the door, and there's silence for a moment, then the sound of footsteps.

"Yes?" a voice calls. It's Avalon's, I'm pretty sure, but she's trying to sound different, just in case.

"It's me," I call back.

There's another beat of nothing, then the sound of someone leaning against the door, probably to look through the peephole. Then the deadbolt scrapes back, the chain jingles as it's drawn away, and Avalon opens the door.

She looks like she hasn't slept at all, with heavy bags under her eyes and pale skin. I can't really blame her for that. She's in a tough spot. Even knowing it's me, she still looks wary, like she's expecting an ambush at any

second. I remember how scared she looked all the way up until I dropped her off at her cousin's place last night. Yeah, getting her out of here is the best thing.

"Listen," I tell her, closing the door behind me. May as well get right to business. "You can't stay here."

"I don't know where else to go," she murmurs, wrapping her arms around herself. "I couldn't stay with my cousin. I didn't want her to get in trouble because of me or anything. I—"

"I know." I cut her off. "I mean you can't stay in Detroit. Ivan's people could be anywhere. They'll be looking for you once your pimp rats you out. And you know he will." That fucker would throw her under the bus to save his own skin in a hot second.

"So, you did it then?" she asks softly, glancing up at me with those tired eyes. "He's dead?"

I nod. "He's dead. Here." It seems like a good idea to spare her all the gory details, and I don't really want to get into it anyway. I pull out the wad of cash and hold it out to her.

Her eyes get wide as she looks down at it. She doesn't have to count it to know it's a lot of money.

"I can't—" She shakes her head. "That's so much money, River. I can't take that."

"You can, and you will," I tell her. "I owe you for helping me get this far, and I said I'd take care of you. So here." I push it toward her again. "Take it and get out of Detroit. Go somewhere you can start over."

Tears well up in her eyes, and she throws her arms around me. I immediately go stiff with surprise. I don't like emotions, and displays of gratitude like this are just weird for me. I can feel myself closing off and getting uncomfortable, but I let her hold on for a couple seconds before I gently push her away.

"Look, you helped me out a lot, so it's fine. I wasn't going to leave you high and dry. We don't have to hug it out or anything."

"Sorry," Avalon says, wiping her eyes. "I'm just... I'm really grateful."

"Okay. Well. Good."

Her hands are shaking when she finally reaches out and takes the money from me, tucking it into an open bag on the bed. Everything else aside, I'm glad that she's going to be able to get a fresh start. She deserves that, at the very least.

"I guess I won't see you again, huh?" she murmurs, glancing at me.

I shake my head. "Probably not. Take care of yourself. Maybe try to avoid shitty pimps if you can. None of them will give a fuck about you."

Avalon nods. "I know. I'll try. Thank you, River."

"Sure."

"You take care, too. If anyone finds out what you did..."

"I can take care of myself. I've been doing it for a while. So you don't need to worry about me. Focus on keeping yourself out of trouble."

She nods again, glancing at the ugly carpeted floor and then back up at me. "What are you going to do now?"

It's one of those questions I don't know how to answer. I'm not trying to have a heart to heart with her, and it's not like I know. I can feel that emptiness pulling at me, reminding me that for so long, my life revolved around taking these fuckers down. And now my list is complete, leaving me with not much else to do.

But like I said, I'm not trying to get into that with Avalon in this shitty motel.

"Get back to my life," I say. It's the best answer I've got.

"I'm happy for you," she tells me with a little watery smile. "You got your revenge. I hope it helps."

"Yeah," I mutter. "Me too. Anyway, I'm out of here. You should get moving too."

"Right. Okay. Thank you again."

I think about shaking her hand for a second, but then I just turn to leave, ready to be done with all of this. Ready to go home. Dog trots along after me, and we slip out of the motel room and back down to the parking lot.

This time, Dog hops right into the car when I open the door, settling himself on the back seat.

I adjust the rearview mirror and look back at him, a little smile tugging at my lips.

"Well," I tell him. "This is it. We're free. Time to go home."

I crank the car up and get us heading back toward my place. I haven't seen it in a while, and it'll be good to sleep in my own bed again. I can do whatever I want again, when I want to, without having people breathing down my neck about it.

It'll be good.

But as I drive, keeping my focus on the road and trying not to let my thoughts steer to the four men I'm leaving behind, it doesn't really feel like freedom.

KNOX

“SHE JUST LEFT?”

It’s a dumb question, I guess. As soon as I got back to the house, I could tell River wasn’t in it. Her car was gone, the dog was gone, and all the little odds and ends and shit she’d left lying around the house were gone too. Plus, the energy was different. There was something about the air when she was around. Something charged, like anything could pop off, like gasoline just waiting for a match to spark and light a whole fucking inferno.

I got used to that while she was here, and it’s weird having it gone. Having her gone.

“Yeah,” Gage says. “She must’ve. She said she was going to, and all her shit is gone. Her motherfucking dog is gone. So, yes.”

It’s all the same shit I noticed, and I narrow my eyes at him a little.

“And you’re just good with that?”

Gage’s face hardens, his emotions disappearing behind that angry look he usually wears. “Why wouldn’t I be? Our arrangement is over. Ivan is out of the picture, so River is free to do whatever she wants now.”

“She didn’t even say goodbye,” I point out.

He shrugs. “So what? This was never about us being friends or sentimentality or anything. She had a job to do, and she did it. The whole thing actually worked out pretty smoothly. Since River went through that hooker, there’s almost no chance anyone will be able to connect us to Ivan’s disappearance. We were never seen with him.”

“And that’s all that matters?”

He gives me a look. “The problem is taken care of. Now we can refocus on our business and get on with shit. *All* of us.”

He's right. The arrangement was that she would leave when the job was done, and the job is done. I'm the one he sent after her in the first place to make sure she couldn't run away before she took care of St. James. But even knowing that, it still feels wrong. Like there's something under my skin that's different from the usual shit. Like when you eat a meal, and at the end you're still hungry. Unsatisfied.

I look at Ash and Priest, who are both standing in the kitchen with us. Neither of them have said anything about coming home to find out River had already left. Like they don't even care.

Ash is doing his fiddly shit, like fucking always, turning a coin over and over again in his fingers. Priest just stands there, arms folded, looking like a piece of wood for all the feeling I can read from him.

"Are you two good with this?" I ask them, trying to get them talking, at least. See where their heads are at.

Ash shrugs, flipping the coin faster. He doesn't look happy, but he's not going to say anything about it in front of Gage, apparently. "Gage isn't wrong. The problem is solved, and that was always the arrangement."

"I know what the fucking arrangement was, Ash," I snap.

He just shrugs again, clamming up. However he feels, I'm not getting anything else out of him.

There's nothing from Priest at all, who's locked down so tight that nothing's coming through. He looks at me like he couldn't give less of a shit and doesn't say a fucking word.

Now the restless, unsatisfied feeling in me turns to anger. No one seems to give a fuck that River's gone. Like it didn't even matter that she was there in the first place.

I want to hit someone or break something, but I settle for kicking over one of kitchen chairs, letting it crash to the floor with a loud clatter.

"What the fuck, Knox?" Gage snaps, but I turn and storm out, hands fisted at my sides.

"Where the hell are you going?" he calls after me.

"To find someone to fuck up," I snarl back.

"Why?"

"Because I fucking feel like it."

I let the front door slam behind me, not giving a shit what that looks like or sounds like to our neighbors. That putting on a good front shit is all Gage, and I'm too keyed up to care right now.

My momentum carries me all the way to my car, and I get in, slamming that door too. The window rattles, and it feels good to make noise and give something physical to the whirlwind of emotions in me right now.

I jam the key in the ignition and peel out, heading out of the quiet little neighborhood we live in. There's always somewhere to go to find a fight in the heart of Detroit. Assholes hanging around street corners, hopped up on drugs and looking for violence, bars packed with people who won't turn down a good brawl. I crack my knuckles after having them so tight on the steering wheel that they were turning white.

As I drive deeper into the city, I weigh my options. I could pick a spot, cause some chaos, and then get out. Or find someone to piss off and then make them give me a reason to fuck them up. I don't need to take them back to the house to make them wish they'd never messed with me.

I lose track of the time, just driving, my thoughts churning.

I keep thinking about Gage saying that this was the arrangement, and the arrangement is over now. I keep thinking about how River looked when she was fucking with Ivan, making sure he knew why she was doing this to him.

It wasn't the long, drawn out torture he deserved, but it was something close enough. He knew when he died why he was dying and that there was nothing he could do to stop it.

I wanted to get in there and help her. Get my hands bloody with hers, help her take her vengeance. But I knew it was hers to take, and that she'd earned it. Done all the leg work, hunted him down for as long as it took. It was her moment.

I was just happy to be a part of it.

Afterward, I wanted to talk to her about it, tell her how fucking hot she looked, making him pay for everything he'd done to her, but then she was gone. She was gone, and we're just supposed to be done with her, according to Gage. Which sounds like bullshit to me.

Thinking about her changes my direction. Instead of going to find a bar or a street corner to start trouble at, I drive to River's apartment building. I still remember how to get there from following her that first time. The feeling is definitely different now, though.

Her car isn't in the rough looking parking lot off to one side when I pull up, but it only takes a few minutes for her to drive into the lot. The dog is in

the back seat, and as soon as she parks and gets out, he stands up on the back seat, wagging his tail like mad.

He hops out of the car like he's the king of the goddamn world about to accept an award or something, trotting up toward the front door of the apartment building while River gets her bag from the back.

Her silver hair is pulled back into a messy bun, and she's got on low-slung jeans and a thin t-shirt. She looks comfortable.

She looks good.

She always looks good, but there's something different about her now. That pinched look she used to have all the time when she was mad at Gage or feeling frustrated is mostly gone, but there's something else that looks like it's weighing her down now.

She takes her bag and slings it over her shoulder, then sighs, walking up to the door of the building.

I noticed before that it's basically a shit hole. A couple steps above a slum, but not by much. The paint on the outside probably used to be white, but now it's a dingy grayish beige and peeling. The short set of cement stairs that lead up to the entryway are crumbling at the corners, and the metal rail is so rusted that it would probably snap if someone actually leaned on it.

River walks up the steps, then looks at Dog, who's still wagging his tail like a weed whacker.

She says something I can't catch from where I'm parked, then jabs her finger toward the alley. I remember the dog coming out of there when I picked her up, and I smirk.

I knew that wasn't her fucking dog. Just some stray she took in to try to fuck with us. I never cared, but I know he pissed Gage and the others off pretty bad. Point for River, I guess.

The dog just looks at her like she's crazy, tilting his head in confusion while she keeps pointing. I catch the end of her last word this time, a frustrated "Go!" that the dog ignores.

River rolls her eyes and lets herself into the building.

As soon as the door opens, the dog tries to trot through it, but River pushes him back with one foot. He sits down on the stoop and gives her those pathetic eyes, and even from my car, I can tell they're working.

She presses her lips together and then slumps in a sigh.

She says something else to him, and he wags his tail even harder. Then she swings the door open wide enough for him to come through, and they disappear for a bit as the door swings shut behind them.

I don't look away from the building. I wait, watching the windows that face the street. Some of them are already lit up with people home, but I remember which apartment is River's.

My eyes go to that window, and in a couple of minutes, it lights up, a pale glow spilling out around the edges of the blinds. For a bit, there's nothing. Every now and then, I catch sight of her shadow moving in front of the window, putting things away, probably. Maybe feeding the dog.

I track each movement like I'm fucking desperate for them, trying to will her to lift the blinds and let me get a look at her. When I thought I was addicted to her before, I was definitely right. I barely blink, just waiting, wanting to see her.

And then I get my wish.

The blinds go up with a snap, and the window gets cracked open. And then there she is, standing in front of the window with a cigarette in hand.

Smoke curls from it and she takes a drag and then leans down, blowing the smoke out the crack in the window. It wisps into the air, floating away, and somehow just watching her do that is getting to me.

I feel that stirring under my skin, and I want to pull her close to me and taste her, taste the ash and the lingering victory from the night before on her lips.

While she's standing there, she shifts and starts getting undressed. Her shirt comes off, and she tosses it toward what must be the bed, leaving her standing there with her tits out in front of the window like she doesn't give a shit that someone might be watching.

Like she's the queen of her fucking castle.

My cock definitely takes notice of that, stirring in my pants and getting hard. I'm too far away to be sure, but I tell myself that the little glimmer I can see against her skin isn't a trick of the light, but the ring I put through her nipple. Still there, like a reminder that we're connected. I hope she didn't take it out.

River pushes her pants down and steps out of them, and then she turns her back to the window, walking away a bit.

I sit up in my seat, idly rubbing my cock through my pants. I press down with the heel of my hand and suck in a breath when my dick throbs in

response.

Fuck, I want her.

She crosses back in front of the window, blowing out more smoke before she puts on a bra. I squint, trying to see if I recognize it.

It's black and lacy, and maybe I've seen it before, maybe not. Either way, it looks damn good on her. Like everything does.

She pulls a shirt over her head and then puts on another pair of jeans. She smokes the last of her cigarette and then closes the window with a snap, letting the blinds down right afterward.

My cock is still throbbing, aching to be inside of her again, and I sigh once I can't see her anymore. I guess I could go up, see if she wants to talk or something.

She left without saying goodbye, which is a pretty good sign she doesn't want to see any of us anymore, but I've always been pretty good at ignoring signs when I want to.

The light goes out in her apartment, and I frown. It's barely evening, still way too early for her to be going to bed or something. But then, a couple minutes later, she comes walking out the front door again.

River gets back into her car, starting it up and pulling out of the parking lot. I wait a beat, then two, and then I follow her.

I'm not sure where I'm expecting her to go, but it's not to the nice part of Detroit. Where all the fancy people live. Most of them are just as full of shit as anyone who lives in the slums, but at least the people in the slums are honest about their shit most of the time.

What the fuck is River doing here?

With her silver hair and tattoos, she'll stand out immediately.

She parks in front of a fancy clothing store. The kind with mannequins in the window that look snooty and judgmental. Intrigued, I watch her park and then do the same, following her inside.

"Welcome to..." The woman who steps up to greet me trails off when she sees me, and I flash her a grin.

"Just browsing."

She nods and steps back, like she doesn't know what to say to that, and I wander through the racks for a bit, hunting for a head of silver hair.

I find her trying on shoes, a few boxes pulled down and scattered around where she's standing. The ones on her feet are strappy, lacing all the way up her legs in a silver color just a little bit darker than her hair.

She turns in the mirror, rotating one foot in a way that sets off the sparkly shit in the shoe.

I smirk and come right up behind her, leaning down to drag my tongue along her neck slowly.

River tenses for a second, and I can feel her coiling, ready to turn around and fuck me up. But then she relaxes at the last second, realizing it's me and not some random creep.

She squirms a little, and I like the way that feels against me. Then she turns around and glares up at me.

"Look," she says sharply. "If Gage sent you after me again—"

"He didn't," I tell her, cutting her off.

"Then why are you here?" she asks. "We had a deal, and it's over. It hasn't even been a day, and you're already harassing me? What the fuck do you assholes want?"

I just grin at her, not daunted by her tone at all. I waggle my eyebrows and lean in close again. "We need to celebrate."

Her brows snap together, and she looks up at me in confusion. "What do you mean?"

I could explain, but nah. It's more fun if I don't.

"It's a good thing you came to this part of the city," I tell her, glancing around at the rows of fancy clothes and shoes and hats and shit. "Because we need to get you a fucking dress."

RIVER

I RAISE ONE EYEBROW, looking at Knox skeptically. Leave it to him to track me down on the opposite side of town when I'm supposed to be done with these assholes for good.

"A dress for what?" I demand.

"There's a fancy as fuck gala that we're going to this weekend."

"I thought galas were for the rich and famous. How the hell do criminals like you guys get invites to things like that?"

Knox laughs, leaning in again like he's sharing a secret with me. "The worst kinds of criminals are the ones who wear fancy suits and go to shit like this gala. They put me and the rest of the Kings to shame. I might be a psycho, but they're something else altogether."

He's not wrong about that. It's always the fuckers with delusions of grandeur that you have to look out for.

I chuckle a little and shrug a shoulder. "It sounds like a good time."

Knox's grin just grows, so clearly he's taking that as a "yes" to his invitation. "I know just the place," he says, crooking a finger at me to follow him.

Rolling my eyes, I sit down on the little bench to take off the shoes, then put them back in the box.

I make him wait while I put away all the other ones I was going to try, and then we leave the store together. The woman greeting people looks like she might faint at the sight of his imposing, tattooed form, and I snort with amusement at that.

We walk a little bit farther down the row of fancy shops, passing a place selling crystal glassware and a little sushi bistro. Knox turns and jogs across

the street without even checking to see if there are cars coming, like a fucking maniac, and I hustle to keep up with him.

“How the fuck do you know where you’re going?” I ask him. I can’t imagine him in any of these places. He’d stand out in every one of them by being so big, and by being... well, himself.

He just grins at me over his shoulder, looking like he’s having a grand old time. “I get around,” he says. “There’s a lot you don’t know about me.”

It’s on the tip of my tongue to ask, but I bite it back. I’m supposed to be done with them. This gala is one thing, a last hurrah or whatever, to celebrate that Detroit has one less piece of shit mafia asshole kicking around, but that doesn’t mean I’m falling back in with the Kings of Chaos.

The deal Gage and I struck back when this all started should stand, even if they found out more about me than I ever meant for them to.

So instead of asking, I just shrug and let him lead me into one of the most expensive boutiques in the area.

Everything is fancy as hell, and the attendant looks at us like we’re probably in the wrong place. Knox just walks past her like he owns the whole goddamn store and heads for the special occasion dresses.

“Pick something out,” he says, still grinning that feral grin at me.

I run my hands over the dresses, taking in the quality of the fabric. There are gowns in every color. Some floor length, some cocktail length or whatever. Beaded bodices, sequins, lace details. These are the kind of dresses you only get when you’re going somewhere you want to be noticed. And when you want to impress everyone who notices you.

I grin a little, because I could get on board with that.

There are a shit ton of colors, but I grab ones in black and silvery gray, and then one in blood red just because I can.

There have to be dressing rooms in this place, but before I can even start looking around for one, the attendant pops up practically at my elbow.

“Can I get you a fitting room, ma’am?” she asks, her smile pasted in place just like the curls in her bleach blonde hair.

She seems like she’d much rather deal with me than Knox, who’s still looming in the background.

“Yeah,” I tell her. “That’d be great.”

She smiles wider and hurries off to the back of the store, leaving me to follow her. I can feel Knox tracking us with his eyes but not following. Always the fucking hunter.

“If you need any help, please don’t hesitate to ask,” the attendant says, chirpy and pleasant. She unlocks the changing room and takes the dresses from me, hanging them on the hooks on the wall.

Then she shows herself out, swinging the door closed.

It’s much better than most fitting rooms I’ve been in. It’s actually an entire little room, with a cushioned bench against one wall and a little stool in the corner. The wall opposite the bench is all mirrors, and the dresses are hung around me.

I start stripping out of my clothes and shoes quickly, then reach for the first dress. It’s the silvery gray one, just a little bit darker than my hair. It would match those shoes I was looking at earlier perfectly.

I pull it on, and the material is cool and silky, shimmering softly as I pull the dress up my body. It’s backless, showing off the curve of my spine and leaving the rest to the imagination. It’s sleek and sexy, complementing my curves where it clings to them.

When I turn this way and that, checking it out in the mirror, the dress moves with me, and I like that. It’s not uncomfortable or restrictive, and it’s not so long that it would drag on the ground. Just long enough to show off my shoes, with a little slit up one side to flash a hint of leg.

I run my hands over my hips, smoothing the fabric down.

Yeah. I like it.

As I’m checking it out, the doorknob rattles. I look up, expecting it to be the over-eager attendant again, asking if I need anything else.

But it’s Knox, sliding inside and then closing the door behind him.

“Stalking people like a creeper is frowned upon, you know,” I tell him, catching his eye in the mirror. “Innocent young women don’t want to be followed around by big men with bad intentions.”

Knox just laughs. “Yeah, if you’re innocent, then so am I,” he fires back. “And you know every single one of my bad intentions toward you.”

His eyes burn as he says that, even through his reflection. He stalks closer to me, and suddenly the space that seemed practically roomy just a minute ago is a lot smaller. Knox takes up that much space with his attitude and his presence.

He comes up toward me, and I turn around, letting him back me against the mirror. That predatory look is on his face, the one that says he can’t decide if he wants to hunt me down or devour me or what.

It should probably be scary. To someone else, it might be. But for me, it just sends a thrill up my spine. It's been less than a full day since I killed Ivan, and even less time than that since I left the guys' house, but it's like a part of me missed this. Knox looming over me, trying to take me apart with just his gaze.

"You're so fucking addictive," he says, voice low. I swallow hard at his tone. "How the fuck am I supposed to not want you? You're fierce as hell, strong as a fucking warrior, and you come so perfectly when I take you apart."

My tongue darts out to lick my lips, and I watch Knox follow the motion. Everything about him is big and in your face, and usually, that puts me on edge. I hate being backed into a corner, but now, it just makes the sexual tension flare.

It's always been there between us, since the first moment he found me in the basement of their house and started licking my blood. It's been this twisted, fucked up thing that's hot as hell.

"Sounds like you missed me," I tell him. It's supposed to be a taunt, mocking him for how he went and got attached even though that was never supposed to be the deal. It loses some of that force though, because I sound breathless as fuck just from how close he is.

My body arches toward him like it's magnetized, and those deep, dark eyes skim over my curves where the dress highlights them. I can see everything he wants to do to me playing out over his face, and I want it.

My core pulses in time with my heartbeat, deeply interested in whatever is about to happen here.

Knox reaches into his pocket and pulls out a switchblade. He flicks it open with a smooth, practiced motion, and something about the sight of it and the sound of that blade flipping out makes my body tighten in the best way. My nipples are hard and taut, poking against the thin fabric of the dress since I definitely can't wear a bra with that plunging back.

Knox can tell. I know he can. His nostrils flare as if he's scenting my arousal on the air.

He moves in even closer, the florescent lighting overhead catching on the blade of the knife. My heart pounds, but once again, not with anything even close to fear.

The metal of the blade is cold, even through the material of the dress. Knox skims it over my curves, letting me feel the hard steel of it. He runs it

between my breasts, down my stomach, over my hips, and I stand as still as I can, not wanting to make him slip and mess up the dress.

But he has other ideas, because of fucking course he does.

That deranged smile spreads across his face, and he yanks me closer with an arm around my waist, his hand at the small of my back.

I shiver again when he runs the knife up my bare arm to the shoulder strap of the dress. With a practiced flick of the wrist, he cuts through the fabric there, and the dress falls away on that side, exposing one of my tits. The one with the nipple he pierced.

His eyes linger on the metal through it for a second, and then he keeps going, cutting down the middle, dragging the knife down the valley of my cleavage.

There's already a tiny healed scar there from another time he cut me, and it almost tingles when the knife touches it. He keeps cutting down the side, and I hiss in a breath when there's a sharp line of pain where he knicks me with the knife.

I glance up at his face, and I can't tell if he did it on purpose or not. Probably he did.

He just grins and follows that line of blood with a finger, swiping it up and making a show of licking it off.

"You're so fucking delicious," he growls. His eyes are usually a dark brown color, but they're all black now, dark and shadowy with his desire for this. For me.

The dress falls off me, landing in cut up pieces on the dressing room floor. I'm naked except for my panties, and Knox runs his gaze all over me, those dark eyes taking in everything.

He's not done with the knife, either. Without the dress as a layer, I can feel that metal against my skin so starkly. It makes me shudder, and my pussy pulses harder, getting wet and starting to soak through my thin underwear.

Knox drags the blade up my stomach to my chest. He grins that crazy man grin, slowly gliding the point over my pierced nipple.

"You kept it," he says, exhaling the words in a rush.

"It's still healing," I point out.

He teases me by pressing the tip of the knife against that hardened bud just hard enough that the piercing starts to ache, and then he moves it away.

He drags it down my stomach again, pressing harder, but still not hard enough to cut. Not hard enough to cut my skin, anyway. He cuts through my panties like they're tissue paper, letting them fall to the floor with the tatters of the dress.

Knox smirks wickedly and teases at my cunt with the knife.

I suck in a breath at the feeling of cold metal against the place where I'm the hottest.

"Look at how fucking wet you are," he breathes, and he sounds like he's at the last threads of his control. "Fuck, River."

He rubs the blade through the mess between my legs, careful not to cut me. When he presses it to my clit, I moan out loud, spreading my legs for him.

I reach out, not content to just let him do shit to me and not touch him in return. His cock is hard in his pants, and I reach down and rub it, feeling the hard line of him through the thick denim of his jeans.

"Fuck," he curses, and it's a wild sound, almost like it was punched out of him.

The knife clatters to the floor as the last tether of his self-control snaps, and he shoves me back until my back hits the wall. I have just enough time to watch him shove his pants down in one go, before he's picking me up roughly.

I manage to get my legs around his waist, but being wedged between the hard lines of his body and the wall make it pretty hard for me to fall.

Knox is so fucking big and muscled that lifting me doesn't even seem to take any effort.

Whatever foreplay he was in the mood for before, all of that is gone. He shoves his cock into me, nearly forcing all the air out of my body as he slams in and bottoms out.

I can feel the metal in his dick from his piercing, rubbing up against the sensitive parts of me, and it reminds me enough of having that knife skimming over my clit that I moan.

"Fuck," I hiss, bucking against him.

"Shut up," he mutters, but without any real heat. "Unless you want all those fancy bitches outside to hear you getting fucked in here."

I growl anyway, and clench around his cock, getting a strangled moan out of him. "You shut up," I fire back.

He laughs breathlessly and starts driving into me hard and fast. His cock is so big, and it rubs against every part of my pussy as he thrusts, dragging his cock out enough that my pussy misses it and then slamming it back in.

It's overwhelming, and the friction is incredible. All I can focus on is how fucking good it feels, the heat in my body climbing higher and higher as he keeps thrusting into me.

I rock my hips, meeting him in the middle as best I can, but after a while, all I can really do is take it. And there's no shame in that. Knox's dick is as big as the rest of him, and my core clenches around him, spasming from every time he bottoms out in me.

Jolts of electric pleasure build and build and build, and I'm gasping and moaning his name, unable to hold it back.

He looks at me, eyes like black fire as he smirks, slapping a hand over my mouth to keep me quiet. I consider biting him, just for the hell of it, but then he does something with his hips that sends his cock grinding against that spot inside of me, and I nearly melt against him, not caring about the audacity of him trying to shut me up anymore.

"So fucking pretty," he growls, leaning closer until his mouth is right by my ear. "So fucking tight and wet. Wanna mark you up. Wanna send you back out there so everyone knows what you were just doing."

His words contradict the way he's keeping me quiet with the hand over my mouth, but I don't—and can't—say shit about that. All I can do is give a muffled moan as he rocks into that spot again, and I feel my body start to tremble.

My toes curl in my shoes, and the heat grows until it's a fucking forest fire in my gut, spreading out and threatening to overwhelm me completely.

I don't try to hold it back, don't do anything but let it happen. My orgasm slams into me with the force of a train, and it ends up being a good thing he covered my mouth because I would have screamed otherwise.

I rock through my climax, and Knox keeps fucking me, chasing his own. Every nerve in my body is on fire, and once the pulsing waves of pleasure start to die down, I'm so sensitive that every stroke of Knox's cock against my walls makes more aftershocks tremble through me.

My vision goes fuzzy around the edge, and I writhe where I'm pressed between him and the wall, trying to catch my breath while he keeps fucking into me.

Finally, he falls apart himself. He shoves in a few more times and then hisses out a string of curses between gritted teeth. He comes inside me in a warm, wet wave, and we slump against each other, breathing hard.

We stay like that for a couple minutes, then Knox pulls out and lets me down. My legs wobble for a bit when I get back on my feet, but then I steady myself and look around at the mess on the dressing room floor.

"I still need a dress, you know," I tell him.

He looks at the shreds of the dress on the floor and then the others on the hooks that I brought in to try on.

"I guess I'll just have to buy you all of them," he says. "Since I can't guarantee I won't shred another one off you."

His voice is low, and it's definitely a threat, but not one that I'm upset about at all. I just chuckle and step over the shredded fabric to get the clothes I wore into the store, picking them up to get dressed.

Knox tucks his dick away, gathering up the mess of the first dress and the other two on the wall while I put my clothes back on. When I look for the remains of my panties, they're not there anymore, and Knox is wearing an innocent expression that wouldn't fool anyone with eyes.

I just shake my head and lead the way back out into the main part of the store.

Luckily, the chirpy sales woman isn't nearby, waiting to pounce and ask me if everything fit alright or if I need any help. She's across the store, helping someone else, so we make our way to the register to pay for the dresses.

"Did you find everything okay?" the woman behind the register asks. She looks like she could be the first attendant's sister or clone or something, even down to the same smile and bleach blonde hair.

"We did," Knox says, grinning his savage grin at her. She goes a little paler. I can tell she wants to step back, away from the counter and his looming form, but that customer service training kicks in and she stays put.

"That's great," she says, forcing that smile even harder.

Knox puts the two dresses on the counter and then dumps the shredded pieces of the silvery gray dress on top of them. He stands there, waiting for her to ring them up like he doesn't have a care in the world.

The sales woman blinks at him, and Knox grins wider. "I'll take it all."

ASH

I STAND IN MY ROOM, looking myself over in the full-length mirror that hangs on the back of my door. I don't like to toot my own horn, but I look fucking good. We always clean up nice whenever we have to go to one of these things, and it's never a chore to put on a suit and look like a model or something for a night.

The tux I'm wearing was tailored just for me, showing off my broad shoulders and long legs. I adjust my tie and smirk before heading downstairs to see if the rest of the Kings are ready yet.

The house has been a fucking mess these past few days. Even more so than usual. You'd think with me bringing flings home whenever I want and Knox running a torture dungeon in the basement, it would be normal for things to feel *off* in this place, but this is different.

It feels too empty with River gone. Like the four of us aren't enough, even though it's always been just us here, and it was never an issue before. Then River showed up. In a few weeks, she managed to shake things up enough that her imprint is still here somehow. And without her to fill it, things just feel off balance.

Plus, Gage has been pissy as fuck lately. Even more so than usual. He's acting all mad that Knox invited River to the gala, something Knox told him with a pleased smirk.

Gage exploded at him, asking him what part of "the arrangement is over" did he not understand. As usual, Knox wasn't even fazed by Gage's anger. He's the one who can stare down all that simmering rage like it's nothing and keep joking or whatever it was he was doing that pissed Gage off in the first place.

He just shrugged in answer and said he thought it would be fun. “Like a celebration, you know? Since we all got what we wanted out of this ‘arrangement.’” The air quote tone had been very heavy, and Gage just glowered at him, like he wanted to start something.

But he didn’t. He just stormed off, going into his library and slamming the door closed behind him.

Funny thing is, even though he acted all pissed off and has been snapping and growling at Knox ever since, he never once told him to uninvite her or made any effort to stop her from coming.

He could have, if he really wanted to. It’s not like Gage to not press an issue if it bothers him enough, so it’s obvious he’s not that upset by the thought of having River there.

“We may as well have some fun if we have to go to this thing,” was what I told Gage when he came stomping into the kitchen later that night.

“It’s not about fun,” he growled out.

“It never is with you, is it? You’re turning into Priest, and I don’t mean that in a good way.”

The result of that little comment was Gage slamming every cabinet and drawer in the entire kitchen as he made himself a late dinner, but I made my point, so whatever.

The only reason we’re going to this thing in the first place is because there are some high rollers who’ll be there who we want to chat with.

These kinds of parties are all about networking, spreading your influence and trying to get other people in your pocket. The criminal underworld is all about who you know, and anybody who’s worth knowing will be at this gala. A lot of handshake deals happen at fancy parties like this one.

There’s a lot of dirty money in Detroit that needs a place to go, and now that Ivan is off our backs, we can work on expanding our reach.

I helpfully don’t point out that the only reason Ivan St. James is a thing of the past is because of River. Her plan worked, even after Gage grumbled about it being a bad idea. In the end, she’s the reason we can feel comfortable moving on and pushing for more in our business dealings, without having to worry about St. James’s trumped up ass trying to horn in on our good thing.

Gage is still grumbling when I head downstairs. He’s dressed up and ready to go, arms folded and scowl firmly in place. Priest and Knox are

ready, too. Knox looks excited, and there's no question as to why, and Priest looks... well, like Priest. In a tux. No expression on his face to let anyone know one way or another how he feels about any of this.

I half expected him to be excited that River's gone now, but then again, I have no idea how he really feels about her. Neither does he, probably. He's been quieter than usual since she left, not really talking to anyone.

"Let's go," Gage bites out. "We're not going to be late because of this."

"It's called being fashionably late for a reason, Gage," I tell him with a little smile. "Only nerds and people trying too hard show up on time."

He just glares at me, and I shrug in response. We all head out to the car, piling in. Gage and Priest are up front, and Knox and I take the back. Knox asks if Gage needs directions to River's place, and Gage ignores him, starting the car and taking us out of our neighborhood and toward the shittier part of town.

It's not as bad as the slums or anything, but it's definitely easy to tell that rough shit goes down in this area. There are already people on corners, dealing drugs or asking for money or whatever, as we roll past.

The drive is quiet.

Gage is glaring at the road like it did something to offend him, while Knox looks comfortable, fiddling with his cufflinks and looking out the window. Priest looks like he's made of stone, practically. He's shut down in a way he hasn't been since right after Jade died, and I can't help but be a little worried about him.

We pull up to a run-down apartment building that has definitely seen better days but was probably a piece of shit when it was new. Some places are just like that.

Gage leans on the horn a little, and I roll my eyes.

"Have you never picked a woman up for a gala before?" I ask him. "You can't just honk and wait."

"This isn't prom, Ash," he snaps. "We're not her fucking dates."

I shake my head and get out of the car, leaning against the side of it to wait. Knox and Priest do the same, and Gage stays stubbornly behind the wheel, determined to keep having his little tantrum.

Well, whatever.

I glance at Priest, but there's still nothing there. He's checking out the building, looking around at the cars and the few people coming and going, but it's like there's nothing behind his eyes at all.

At least, not until the front door of the building opens and River comes walking out.

It's almost funny, seeing her dressed to the nines in a sparkly black gown that looks fucking stunning on her, walking out of a shit hole place like this. The dress has a shimmer to it, as well as sparkly beads or something along the bodice. It's sleeveless, showing off her shoulders and the tattoos that snake along her arms. It clings to her body in all the right ways, showing off her chest and her hips and then skimming down her legs just long enough to make you wonder about them. Her silver hair flows over her shoulders and down her upper back in soft waves. She's done her makeup and has on some killer black heels, and all of us straighten up and take notice.

Something flares in Priest's eyes for a second before he shuts it away again, and Knox looks like he wants to throw her down on the hood of the car and take her right here and now.

I can't say I blame him for that. She's gorgeous as hell, looking like a goddess even here in the parking lot of this shitty place.

She checks us out right back as she makes her way across the street to the car, and it's kind of crazy how I can feel the change in all of us, just having her here with us again. It's like we suddenly know which way is up again. Like we're all pointed in her direction, where before we were spinning out of control or something.

It's weird, but I'm not complaining.

A sharp bark from above is the only thing that yanks our gazes away from River, and I look up to a window on the third floor where her fucking dog has his paws up on the window sill. He barks again, tongue lolling out of his mouth.

"Shut the fuck up," Knox says, laughing. "She's ours for the night."

I snort at the idea that he's jealous of her damn dog of all things, but I guess out of all of us, Knox has had the hardest time dealing with River being gone. At least on the surface. He's the one who hunted her down to invite her to this thing, anyway.

"Don't yell at Jon Snow," River says, finally close enough that we can hear her. "It's not his fault you're dragging me to this thing."

"Dragging is a strong word," I tell her with a grin, letting my gaze roam up and down her body shamelessly.

“Who asked you?” she shoots back, and it probably shouldn’t be this easy to fall back into our old banter, but again, who’s complaining?

She looks the three of us over, and I can see the heat in her eyes as she takes us all in. We’re all dressed our best, even Priest, and I can tell she likes what she sees.

That just makes me grin wider at her.

Knox is also grinning like a madman, and he eyes her with a hot gaze. “Good choice,” he says about her dress. “Black’s a good color on you.”

“I figured the red might be too much of a statement,” she says.

He shrugs. “You could’ve pulled it off.”

Priest doesn’t say anything, but a look passes between him and River that happens so fast I almost miss it. Well, at least he’s not completely dead inside, I guess. He can still take notice of how fucking hot she looks.

Gage blows the horn again, and River lifts an eyebrow.

“Don’t ask,” I tell her. I sweep down into a goofy, over-the-top bow and open the car door. “Your chariot, ma’am.”

She rolls her eyes at me and lifts her dress enough that she can get into the back seat without wrinkling it. She slides into the middle, and Knox and I get in on either side of her.

“Okay,” I say. “Now we’re ready to go.”

Gage doesn’t say anything, just starts the car and peels out.

It’s another one of those funny juxtapositions when we leave River’s little neighborhood and start heading for the part of town where the gala is being held. It’s all mansions and fancy hotels and shit, places that make sense for the kind of people who’ll be at this thing.

It’s being held in one of the big hotels, in the “Grand Ballroom,” which is just so fucking pretentious it makes me want to puke all over myself.

We park the car and walk inside. There’s already a line of similarly dressed people to follow, and a man who looks like an honest to god butler is standing outside the ballroom, checking invitations.

“Keeping out the riffraff,” I mutter under my breath to River, who snorts.

“And yet somehow they’re letting you guys in. They need to do a better job with this shit.”

I stifle my laugh in time to nod to the butler dude, who takes the tickets from Gage and waves us through.

The lobby of the hotel was fancy enough. Everything was all gilded and marble in light colors. But the ballroom is a whole other story. There's more than one delicately carved ice sculpture, big glittering swans on either side of the room. Waitstaff circle the area with trays balanced on their hands, offering glasses of champagne and little canapés that probably cost more than a week's worth of food. There's an orchestra in one corner, playing light music, and the rich and corrupt of Detroit all mingle amongst themselves.

The invite said it was "masquerade optional," which apparently means some people are wearing gold masks and some have decided to say *fuck that* and want to show off their faces. Judging by how much work a lot of them have had done, it makes sense to want to display that investment, I guess.

Everything looks fake and overly primped, and it's just a good reminder how much I hate shit like this. It's why the other Kings and I opened a nightclub with the money we got from our first few big deals, instead of doing something fancy and shitty. Loud music, flashing lights, and hot dancers in cages are much more my scene than this stuffy display of assholes all trying their hardest to one-up each other and come out on top of a pile of fancy garbage.

We all walk in together, checking everything out. I can tell River's never really been to something like this before, and she scopes it all out, making an amused face at the ice swans and the people who are half in masks and half not. None of it makes a lot of sense, which is what makes it so ridiculous that they're all so proud of it.

As we stand near the entryway, a tall guy carrying a tray comes over. He bows at the waist, managing not to spill any of the champagne on his tray, which is actually pretty impressive. River just arches an eyebrow at him.

"Welcome," he says, in a voice that makes it clear he's given this speech or some version of it about a hundred times already tonight. "The hosts of tonight's extravaganza do hope you enjoy your time. Please know that there is fine quality champagne that we hope will be to your satisfaction, as well as an open bar and a selection of fine canapés on offer. If you need anything, please find me or one of my fellow servers, and we'll be happy to assist you."

"At ease," I say, giving the dude a look. "I'm sure we can manage."

He just nods, acting like he didn't hear the first part. "Please also know that there is a silent auction happening later in the evening. The prominent artist David Gleason has a new piece, and it will be unveiled before the bidding begins."

"Thank you," Gage says.

The waiter nods again and whisks himself away to go give the spiel to someone else.

"What do you even do at things like this?" River asks. She eyes the bar in the corner, where there's already a group of people gathered, sipping scotch and whatever the fuck else.

"Mingle," Priest says, speaking for the first time since we picked River up. He says it like it's a dirty word, and I can't imagine something more anti-Priest than mingling with a bunch of rich strangers. Except maybe an orgy or something, but if we were at an orgy, at least I'd be having a good time.

"Ugh. No thank you," River says, shaking her head. "I'll be at the bar."

She goes to walk away, but Gage catches her wrist before she can. She turns around to look at him, her gaze dropping down at his fingers wrapped around her wrist and then back up to his face.

"What?"

"If you're going to be here, then you're sticking with us," he says in a low, insistent tone. "I don't want you wandering off."

"I'm not a child," she snaps back.

"I never said you were. But you came with us, so you're staying with us."

And for someone who didn't even want her here in the first place, he seems pretty damn set on that. I don't point that out because I don't want to start shit in the middle of this room full of fancy, corrupt people.

Knox, true to form, just laughs. He slings an arm over River's shoulder and pulls her in close, tugging her out of Gage's hold.

"It won't be so bad," he promises. "We'll schmooze for a bit and then get drunk."

That seems to placate her a bit. Enough that when Gage leads the way into the throng, she doesn't immediately book it to the bar anyway.

I get why Gage wants to move as a group. There's safety and strength in numbers, and any deal that these people want to make has to be made with all of us. For all intents and purposes, River is one of us for the night.

We're barely into the thick of the crowd before someone comes up to us. I don't recognize him at first, but rich criminals are a dime a dozen in this part of Detroit. Hell, some of them are probably from out of town, visiting with friends and business partners for the social event of the season.

"You're the owners of that club, aren't you? Sin and Salvation?" he says, looking each of us over. His gaze lingers on River and Knox's arm around her shoulders.

"We are," Gage says. "And you are?"

"Samson Creel," the man replies, holding out a hand to shake. "I hear you're the people to talk to about moving things... discreetly."

Gage shakes his hand, and I roll my eyes at the way he drew out the word "discreetly." Like some sort of bad Bond villain.

I kind of glaze over while they talk, nodding every so often to make it look like I'm paying attention. My hands feel empty, itching for something to fiddle with. I should have brought a coin or a deck of cards or something to keep in my pocket for these long but necessary business conversations.

Luckily, Gage handles it the way he always does. To the point, pushing for the best deal.

"I think that can be arranged," Samson Creel says, nodding. "I'll have someone stop by your club next week with the particulars."

"We'll keep an eye out for them," Gage says.

He seems like he's in a better mood when Creel moves away to talk to someone else. A minute later, we're waved over to a little group of people, all holding champagne glasses and laughing at something the woman in the middle of the group is saying.

She's hot, so I get why everyone's clustered around her. Older, probably in her forties, but wearing it damn well. Her gown is a sunset orange color, and she had a mask on at one point, but now it's dangling from her wrist as she lifts her hand to sip at her champagne.

She eyes us as we approach, lingering on each of us in turn, but mostly glossing over River. River seems fine with that.

"Oh, I know you," she says, and her voice is husky and musical. "I've been to your club."

"Have you?" I ask, stepping up for this one. What can I say? Beautiful women are my specialty. "I find that hard to believe."

She frowns, eyebrows drawn together. "Are you implying that I'm a liar?" she asks.

I hold back the urge to snort. Everyone in this room is a fucking liar in one way or another, but I'm not about to tell her that. "Of course not," I say smoothly. "I just mean that I'm pretty sure we would have noticed if someone as gorgeous as you had graced our club with her presence."

That does the trick, and she laughs, covering her mouth with one hand. "Ah, so you're a flirt," she replies. "I'll have to be careful around you."

I just toss her a wink and let Gage take over, asking her questions about how she liked the club and what she came for. Now that she's warmed up from me flirting with her, she answers everything easily, and I can smell the deal brewing already.

Knox elbows me in the side and jerks his head to the left. "Look who's here," he mutters under his breath.

I glance over in that direction and let out a soft whistle when I see who he means. "Damn, they really did get everybody who's anybody at this thing. Makes me feel all warm and fuzzy that we're allowed to rub elbows with them at all."

"Who's that?" River wants to know, following my gaze to the well-dressed man with a glass of scotch in his hand, talking seriously with another well-dressed man who holds a similar glass of amber liquid.

"Alec Beckham," I tell her. "Billionaire."

"That's it?" she asks. "He's just a billionaire? I thought you were going to say he's famous. Or infamous."

I shrug. "He may as well be. There aren't a lot of strictly legal ways to get that rich. And even the legal ones aren't good for anyone but other billionaires."

She tips her head, conceding that point. "Can we go to the bar now? We schmoozed, didn't we?"

Gage is still chatting with the group, with Priest at his side. He knows what he's doing, and despite the fact that we make it a point to stick close together at these things, we don't literally have to be joined at the hip.

"Maybe just a quick trip," I tell her. Knox grins, and we break away from the group to make our way to the open bar.

There's a bit of a line already, so we stand to the side to wait. People pass us, moving to greet friends or to avoid enemies, and we just kind of take it all in. The hum of conversation blends in with the music from the orchestra, and it's not so bad if you ignore all the people.

Another group passes us, and I can see one of the women with them checking us out. They pass quickly enough, and the woman turns to one of her companions.

"I thought they were checking invitations at the door," she says, with enough volume that it's hard to tell if she's just loud or wants to be overheard.

"They were," her friend says.

"I'm shocked that some people don't realize how tacky it is to bring a hooker to something like this. Honestly. Do whatever you want on your own time, but this is a classy affair."

I furrow my brows, and it only takes a second to realize that she's talking about River.

She took one look at her hair and her tattoos and made a judgement, and then had to blab about it like a fucking bitch who thinks she's better than everyone else for some reason. Something flares inside me. It's anger, with something else mixed in. Something old and bitter that I don't even want to think about, so I focus on being pissed off that she'd think River is just some hooker.

Before anyone can stop me, I follow her and her friends, walking up to her with the usual charming smile on my face. She looks startled for a second, then eyes me and smiles back.

"Can we help you?"

I turn the smile up a notch, even though it doesn't reach my eyes. "I was just standing over there when you passed by," I say. "And I couldn't help but admire your necklace." It's the first thing I think of, and on someone else, it would be nice. Diamonds and a big emerald pendant that matches the green of her dress. "It's stunning, but I bet it's your own natural beauty that really brings it out."

"Oh," she says, giving me a simpering smile. "You're too kind. Thank you."

"My pleasure. When I see something so beautiful, I have to say something. That's just the way I am. Can I ask where you got it from?"

"It was a gift," she answers. "From my husband." Then her smile turns sly, and I can feel her raking her eyes over me, clearly attracted. "But he isn't here tonight."

I push my glasses up with my index finger. "I see. I have one more question, then."

She steps forward, eyes intent. “Go ahead.”

“How many times did you suck his dick before he bought it for you?” I keep the smile on my face, and it takes a second for her to catch up to what I actually said.

“Excuse me?”

“You heard me. It was an exchange, right? You basically whore yourself out to him for fancy jewelry and nice cars and all that shit? Just like the rest of the gold digging wives in your circle. So when you think about it, you’re not that much better than a common hooker, are you?”

The woman gapes at me, face flushed. She looks shocked and flustered, like she has no idea what to say. Her friends splutter indignantly on her behalf, and probably on their own behalf too if I had to guess.

I can think of plenty more to say to them, but before I can, someone latches onto my arm.

River.

“What the fuck are you doing?” she hisses.

I just shrug, but I don’t put up a fight as she starts to drag me away.

RIVER

WHEN ASH MARCHED up to that woman, I wasn't sure what he was doing at first. He schmoozed and flirted the way he seems to do as easily as breathing. But then his words turned vicious, and I realized that was his plan all along. The woman looked shocked and appalled, and anger flashes through me, hot and impossible to ignore.

Keeping my grip on Ash, I drag him away, pissed as fuck.

I pull him out of the ballroom to the lobby of the hotel, and then into a little one person bathroom tucked into a short hallway. Of course a venue like this has single bathrooms, and of course it's just as fancy as the rest of the place, with the toilet sectioned off behind a little wall, and a chair and table in the corner like someone would sit down and have a little break in the middle of a fancy function.

Actually, maybe that's not a bad idea.

I shut and lock the door behind us and round on Ash, eyes blazing with my anger.

"What the fuck was that?" I demand.

"What do you mean?"

"You know what the fuck I mean, Ash. What you said to that woman. You had no right."

He folds his arms and looks at me straight on. "Yeah, I did. People shouldn't talk about you that way. It's not right."

"People *always* have shit to say. Who gives a fuck? She's just some random bitch I'll probably never see again. It's not your job to stop people from talking shit about me. I don't need you or any of the other guys

protecting me. I can look out for myself. I've been doing it for most of my fucking life."

Ash's jaw clenches, his eyes sparking like fire. "Maybe it's not about protecting you. Did you think of that? Maybe it's about recognizing that you're worth more than that cunt out there saw in you. Maybe that's important."

"Why?" I snap. "Why the fuck would I care? Why do you?"

"I just do!" he argues back, taking a step forward. "These people think they're better than everyone. They look down on anyone who doesn't fit into their little mold, and at the same time, they won't hesitate to use them. It's disgusting, and I didn't want her to think she could get away with talking about you like that."

I make a frustrated noise, hands clenched into fists at my side. "So you humiliated her out there. What did that achieve? You think she's going to think twice before she makes another shitty comment about someone else? You think that's how this works?"

"No," he mutters, glancing away.

"Then what was the fucking point, Ash?"

"I already told you the point," he retorts. "She just needed to know."

Tension builds between us, escalating as we argue. We're not full-on shouting, but our voices echo in the bathroom, and anyone close enough to the door could probably hear us if they tried.

I take a step closer to him, the distance between us disappearing as we keep moving toward each other.

"Why do you care?" I ask him again. "If you think I'm worth so much, then why, out of all your friends, are you the only one who didn't fuck me while I was living with you?"

Ash looks startled by that question, so I keep pressing, wanting answers.

"I know Priest can't for whatever reason, but I know your reputation. I've heard the others talking, and I've seen it with my own damn eyes. My first couple of days at the house, you had women coming and going from your room, and I walked in on you getting your dick sucked in the damn living room. You'll fuck anything. So why not me?"

I'm breathing harder when I finish my little rant, and now this is about more than just him going after that stuck-up bitch. The question has been weighing on me since the first time he rejected me, and I want to hear the answer.

He sighs but doesn't look away. There's something firm in his gaze, visible even with the light reflecting off his glasses the way it is. He stands there, all model pretty and dressed to the nines, and I can't decide if I want to hit him or kiss him.

"I've been fucking anything and everything since I was goddamn teenager," he says, and it comes out bitter and with an edge. "I don't want to fuck you like you're one of hundreds. You're worth more than that. I want..." He trails off, then draws in a breath. "I want more."

I just about manage to keep myself from jerking back in surprise when he says that. The thing is, I can tell he means it. It's not just some line he's feeding me to get me to spread my legs for him. Hell, I've been trying to do that already, so there's no point.

He has to mean it. The conviction of it is in his eyes, and I forget to breathe for just a moment.

It scares the fuck out of me to hear that.

I don't like the idea of this being anything real. That's not who I am. I don't do attachments and commitment and all that jazz. I can't do it. I'm still fucked up from everything that happened to me, and killing Ivan didn't change that. I've never tried to change it, and I don't even want to. I am who I am. I use people to get what I want, and then I move onto the next thing. I've never needed or wanted anything different, and I don't plan to start now.

But Ash is looking at me in a way that makes me feel like my whole world could crumble apart.

I can feel the connection between us, tugging at my heart.

It has to be broken. I have to fucking stop this before it gets out of hand.

So I do the only thing I can think of and throw myself at him. My arms go around his neck, and I drag him into a deep, messy kiss.

There's a beat where Ash goes stiff with surprise, but then he groans and wraps his arms around me, kissing me back. His mouth is hot and intense, and I can feel the attraction between us, the way it always is. Strong and potent, building higher and higher as we kiss and grope at each other.

Ash's hands roam down my back, gripping my ass and hauling me closer. He bites down on my lower lip, and I groan into his mouth, hitching my hips forward to try to grind against him.

It's a bad angle for it, since I can't exactly move like I want to in this dress. I pull away for just a second, gasping for breath, and plant both hands

on his chest, pushing back.

He stumbles a bit, but the chair behind him catches him, and he ends up right where I want him. I hike my dress up enough that I can crawl onto his lap and straddle him.

That's so much better, and I can feel how hard he is through his pants. I grind down against that hot bulge, and the low groan he makes in response is like music to my fucking ears.

His hands go to my waist, and he draws me forward into another deep kiss.

Our tongues slide together, slow and hot, and the kiss turns even deeper. I rock my hips over the bulge in his pants, grinding down on it and feeling the answering flare of heat in my body. My pussy throbs with need, and I want him inside me, but I don't make a move for that yet.

I have to make him want me. Get so fucking worked up he can't resist me. We have to end this here and now.

His fingers dig into my skin through the fabric of my dress, and I moan into his mouth. He bucks up, grinding up harder against me, like he's seeking out more of the delicious friction. Like he can't get enough.

His cock is hard enough that it's almost bursting out of his pants, and I tease him, lifting up enough that he has to chase me if he wants more of that sensation. He does it, dragging me back down to meet him in the middle.

"Fuck," he pants, his lips shiny and red from the kisses we've been exchanging. "You look so goddamn hot tonight, do you know that? As soon as I saw you come out of your building in that dress, I wanted to..."

He trails off, taking those kisses to my cheek, the corner of my mouth, and then down my jaw. I don't need him to finish the sentence. It's pretty damn clear what he wanted to do, judging from the way he can't take his hands off me.

"You gonna do it now?" I ask, putting a little bit of challenge in my tone. Just to really seal the deal. When he looks up at me, his amber eyes are dark, and that's all the answer I need.

I reach between our bodies and undo his pants, feeling the heat pouring off him. His cock practically springs into my hand, hard as fuck and already leaking at the tip.

I give him a slow, deliberate stroke and then rub my finger over the head of him, smearing that bead of precum around and watching it stretch between his cock and my thumb when I pull it away.

Ash makes a low, choked noise, and I glance up at him to see he's watching my hand, taking in the way it looks on his cock. He reaches downward like he's going to touch me in return, but I bat his hand away with my free hand, leaning up to capture his mouth in another kiss while I keep stroking him.

"If you keep that up," he pants into my mouth. "This isn't going to last long."

I snort, rubbing my thumb over the head of his dick again. "That's all you've got?" I tease him. "And here I thought you were actually good at this."

He growls against my mouth and grabs my ass hard, squeezing it through my dress. My core spasms in response, practically begging to be filled at this point.

I don't make either of us wait any longer. I lift up enough that I can shove my panties to the side and hike my dress up over my hips, so nothing's in the way of us doing this.

His cock stands at attention, and I brace it with one hand before sinking down onto it, taking it all in one smooth motion.

"Goddamn. Oh, fuck," Ash groans, tipping his head back, and I'm right there with him. It feels so fucking good. His cock is thick in all the right places. Not as big as Knox's or as long as Gage's, but it hits all the right spots just the same.

I sit like that for a second, catching my breath and adjusting to the way he feels inside of me. Even when I'm not moving, it's like I can feel him rubbing against my walls, working me up even more.

Ash's fingers are still tight on my hips, and he bucks his own hips upward, snapping his dick deeper inside me.

I let out a choked moan and then start moving, riding him with steady, rolling movements at first. It's as if the ballroom, the rest of the hotel, the gala and everything else falls away. We're in the bathroom of this swanky-ass place, but we could be anywhere.

I look into his eyes as he works his hips beneath me, and he pulls me into another kiss. It's messy, with our teeth clashing and harsh breaths released between us, but that's all a part of what makes it perfect.

It's intense and hot, and it feels like a moment of release. Like all the tension that's been building from all the times we didn't do it before is finally spilling over.

We grope at each other wildly while we move together. Ash grabs my tits, works his fingers into my hair, squeezes my ass and uses it for leverage to drag me downward again and again.

I run my hands over his broad shoulders and down his arms, letting them rest on his chest. When I reach up to take his glasses off and toss them to the side gently, he laughs and bites down on my neck in retaliation.

It's on the tip of my tongue to moan his name and beg for more, but I swallow it down. I don't need to say it, though. It's like he already knows. His fingers dig in even harder, and he fucks me harder too. I'm bouncing on his lap, taking his dick down to the root over and over again.

Our breath mingles together, and that heat inside me builds higher and higher. The chair creaks and groans under us, but that's not enough to deter us from fucking it out hard and fast, each of us chasing the bliss that rises between us.

"You're so fucking—" Ash starts, but whatever he was going to say is lost when he moans again as my pussy clenches around him. "Fuck."

He's one to talk, although I don't have the breath to tell him that. All I can do is lean forward and kiss his neck above his collar, letting my gasps and desperate little sounds clue him in to how close I am.

Neither of us can stop ourselves now. Even if someone walked in right now, we wouldn't be able to quit. Not with the heat and the passion and that overwhelming feeling of *finally* that's overtaken this whole thing.

"River..."

Ash moans, and my name sounds fucking good on his lips when he's half wrecked and chasing his orgasm.

I just moan back, and he bucks up hard, slamming his cock right into the place that sparks the avalanche of my orgasm.

I manage to hold back a desperate scream of pleasure as it rushes over me, and I can feel myself clenching down on his cock, going tight like a vise to try to get him to follow me over the edge.

Judging from the cursing and the sudden rush of warmth, it clearly worked. I fall apart on top of him while he comes undone inside me, filling me up.

For just a second, just a little blip of time, the space between one heartbeat and the next, there's an intense connection between us. It's like we're breathing together, caught in a cycle of shared pleasure, and when he looks into my eyes, I can't help but stare right back.

But then the moment breaks, and I remember what this was all for. I lick my lips and pull back, away from him, giving him a little smile.

“See?” I say, still a little bit breathless. “It’s just sex. It’s nothing special.”

I can see the exact moment he closes off after I say that. The open pleasure and relaxation that was on his face before disappears, and his expression hardens into something that would look more at home on Priest’s face than his own. His fingers grab my hips, and he uses that grip to lift me off him so he can stand up.

He tucks his cock away, jaw tight, and then leans down to pick up his glasses, shoving them back onto his nose.

The reality of the situation comes rushing back all at once, where we are and what we’re doing. The bathroom suddenly seems a whole lot smaller than it did before, and the silence is deafening.

Ash goes for the door, looking pissed and disgusted with me. I can see it on his face and in his eyes when he looks at me over his shoulder.

“You’re right,” he says, sounding bitter and tired. “It wasn’t anything special.”

RIVER

I WATCH ASH GO, my body still buzzing from the sex. There's a pleasant throb between my legs, like the phantom feeling of where his cock was, and the high of my orgasm is still coasting through me.

But my heart feels like a dead lump in my chest.

For some reason, I feel sick to my stomach. Pissed and hurt and fucked up. I'm so used to using sex to get what I want, and usually that's enough in the end, but now it feels empty. Hollow. And I fucking hate that.

I clean up the mess between my legs, then fix my dress and go over to the sink. I turn the water on, letting it splash into the sink for a bit before gathering some in my hands and using it to wash my face. My makeup is smeared from what Ash and I did, and I neaten it up with a wet paper towel, looking at myself in the mirror.

For just a split second, I swear I can see the skeletal makeup I wore the other night, when I killed Ivan. As if it's still on my face. Or a part of my face. Like it's inside me.

I swallow hard and press the heel of my hand against my breastbone, feeling that weight in my chest where my heart should be, then clench my jaw and shake my head.

I don't have time to come apart in the bathroom in the middle of this fucking gala. All I have to do is get through this shit, and then I can go home and get back to my life. I won't have to see any of them again, and I won't have to deal with whatever this feeling is that makes my stomach twist sourly when I think about the look on Ash's face as he walked out.

It's better this way.

It's better.

I know it is.

The bathroom is quiet, and I drag in a deep breath and run damp fingers through my hair, fluffing it back up. I need to get back out there. I'll make a beeline for the bar and spend the rest of the night there. Gage can get over himself with the whole "you came with us, so you stay with us" bullshit. I can do what I want.

And right now, I want to get very drunk and then get the hell out of here.

I slip out of the bathroom and make my way back to the ballroom where the gala is still in full swing. The orchestra is playing a cheerier tune than before, and it's not hard to spot the guys in the crowd. They're all together again, standing off to one side.

Knox has a drink in his hand and is making jokes. Of all of them, he's the one who seems the most unaffected by all of this.

"There you are," he says when he spots me, lifting his chin. His tattoos are mostly hidden by the long sleeves and starched collar of his suit, but bits of ink peek out, crawling up his neck and down the backs of his hands. "Where'd you go?"

"Bathroom," I tell him. "Or did I need permission for that, too?" That last part is directed at Gage, who looks pissed, as usual. I don't know if it's directed at me or someone here or the world in general, and I'm not about to ask.

Priest has his usual blank mask on, and considering he's in a room full of people he doesn't know and probably doesn't like, I can't blame him.

Ash stands a little apart from the others. He's gotten a coin from somewhere, and he flips it over his fingers again and again, looking off into the distance at the people dancing to the orchestra's music.

He doesn't even look at me.

That antsy feeling creeps under my skin again as I stand here with all of them. I hate it.

I hate the way I want Ash to look at me. The way I want all of them to look at me. It was never supposed to be like this. It was never supposed to go this far. They were just obstacles in the way of me getting done what I needed to get done, but something shifted at some point. I did what I needed to do, and it should have been finished and over, but here I am. At a pretentious as fuck gala with them, sulking like a goddamn child because my own fucking plan worked too well.

It's too much, and I don't want to be here. I should have told Knox no when he followed me that night and told me I was coming with them. I should have drawn a line in the sand and refused to cross it.

I should just leave. I should just slip out. Tell them I've gotta go and call a cab or something to take me back to where I belong. It would be easier than getting through the rest of the night and then the car ride back to my place, enduring that awful silence while being pressed between Knox and Ash in the back of Gage's car all over again.

But before I can make a decision one way or another, someone moves onto the little platform stage at the front of the room. The orchestra cuts the music as the sound of someone tapping on a mic catches everyone's attention.

We all turn toward the stage to see an older man wearing a well-tailored suit standing there. The lights go down a little, just enough that a spotlight is visible when it shines on something hidden under a thick cover on the stage.

"Can you all hear me?" the man says, tapping the mic again. He doesn't wait for a reply before continuing. "First of all, I want to thank you all for coming out tonight. I know most of you have impossibly busy schedules, and I hope that this little get together proves worth it for all of you."

I scoff under my breath at the idea of calling something like this "a little get together."

The man rambles a bit more, naming people who helped put the gala on and talking about plans for the next one. Then he clears his throat and gestures to the thing next to him, illuminated by the spotlight.

"We wanted to cap the evening off with something spectacular, so it's time to unveil the art piece, and then the auction will begin."

He claps his hands, and a few of the event staff hurry forward. The room goes silent, and the air is heavy with the feeling of anticipation. I fight the urge to roll my eyes. All these rich people in a room with something expensive and limited edition? I bet they're beside themselves waiting to see it so they can try to outbid each other for it.

With a flourish, the tuxedo clad staff members pull the cover off the platform.

I blink.

The atmosphere in the ballroom shifts from anticipation to shock—and not in the good way. A woman near the front screams, the sound seeming to

cut through the suddenly silent space. For a second, my brain can't quite process what I'm seeing.

What... what the fuck?

The "art piece" is a big, metallic thing. Like some kind of pedestal made of a shiny, gold material. The real issue is what's on top of it. A body, hacked up and draped over the pedestal. It's barely recognizable, bloated and starting to decay, but there are two cuts on either side of the mouth that stop me dead.

It's Ivan.

I know it is.

I gave him those cuts myself, taking pleasure in the way he screamed in pain as I cut him. I helped the guys hack his body up and stuff it in the bag. And then I stood there and watched Knox weigh it down and drop it into the river.

Now, somehow, it's here.

It's easy to tell when everyone else realizes what they're seeing. The shock ripples through the crowd, and more people start screaming. Pandemonium breaks loose as people start demanding answers or rushing to get away from the body. I wonder vaguely how many people recognize that it's Ivan St. James, whether they can tell from what's left of his face or his expensive clothes.

But my mind can't seem to process anything else. I feel frozen in place, just staring at the body on that stupid gold pedestal, reeling from the shock.

A hand wraps around my wrist, and I glance up to see Gage grabbing me.

"Goddammit," he curses sharply. "We have to go. Now."

He starts dragging me through the crowd before I can think of anything to say, and I just go with him. Knox and Priest are on either side of me, pushing their way through the surging mass of people who are all running around like chickens with their heads cut off.

It's pure chaos in the ballroom, and I rely on Gage's grip to keep me heading in the right direction because I can't see the exit through all these people anyway.

Someone presses in close beside me, and I jerk away from them, managing to step on the hem of my dress and almost stumble as Gage keeps dragging me along. I knock into someone else's shoulder and turn in time to see their face, which is concealed behind a mask.

For just a second, we lock eyes as we pass.

My heart stops, and time seems to freeze right along with it.

It's a woman, and as I stare at her, I'm hit with memories all over again.

I'd recognize those eyes anywhere.

I've seen them light up in happiness when she laughed or brim with tears when she was sad. I've seen them wild with fear and dull with resignation more often than I ever wanted to. They're eyes I never thought I would see again, eyes that are burned into my mind and my heart, and it doesn't make any fucking sense for me to be seeing them here and now.

Before I can do or say anything, the woman I knocked into is pulled one way, and I'm pulled another. The exit looms ahead, and I stumble along, feeling numb and even more in shock than I was before.

We burst out of the hotel and into the night air. It's quieter than inside, but only for half a second. Sirens fill the air, and Gage curses again, getting us farther away from the hotel and the mess inside.

The police are already on their way.

We get to a quiet side street, and finally they all stop, giving us a moment to catch our breaths. That's easier said than done.

My heart is beating so fast it feels like it's going to burst out of my chest, and my mind is spinning in circles.

I lean against the wall of a building, one hand over my chest, gasping for breath. I don't know how I can feel numb and freaked out all at the same time, and it's a weird mix of running cold and hot, feeling my blood beating through my body in icy rivers.

I stare down at the pavement, illuminated weakly by the streetlight a little way away. I know I'm not crazy. I know what I saw. Ivan's body was in there, yeah, but after that...

"That was Hannah," I mutter, and saying it out loud doesn't make it make any more sense than it did before. "I know it was her. My... my sister was in there."

My sister, who I thought was dead. They killed her in front of me. I saw her die. So how... how was she in there?

The guys all look at me in surprise. Even Priest and Ash. None of them know the story—not the whole story, anyway. They've heard parts of it, bits and pieces from shit I've said and when I was taunting Ivan in the basement, but none of them know the details of what really happened.

Gage's face sets into grim lines as he looks at me.

“That wasn’t just your sister in there,” he mutters, sounding angry and confused all at once. “That was Ivan’s body up on that stage. Someone went into the river and pulled him up so they could lay it out there on purpose.”

“That’s fucked up,” Knox says.

“Coming from you, that’s saying something,” Ash murmurs, but instead of his usual teasing banter, his voice sounds strained.

Gage clenches his jaw, something burning in his deep green eyes as he holds my gaze. “I was wrong. We both were. This isn’t over.”

His words break through the shock crawling through my body like an electric current.

He’s right. Somebody went to a lot of trouble to find Ivan’s body and put it where they did.

But who? And why?

Queen of Anarchy, book two in the *Dirty Broken Savages* series, is on Amazon [HERE](#).

If you’re dying to talk about book (and maybe want to form a mob to come after me for that cliffhanger), come hang out in my Facebook reader group, *Eva Ashwood’s Sinners*. It’s my favorite place on the internet, and we’d love to have you there!

Looking for a complete series to binge? Try my enemies-to-lovers RH romance, *Black Rose Kisses*. If you liked this book, I think you’ll love that series! River makes a small appearance in it, and the story is centered around Mercy, the girl River mentioned in her conversation with Knox. It’s full of steam, intrigue, danger, violence, and enemies-to-lovers hotness.

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