

EVA ASHWOOD



QUEEN OF ANARCHY

DIRTY BROKEN
SAVAGES

QUEEN OF ANARCHY

DIRTY BROKEN SAVAGES #2

EVA ASHWOOD

Copyright © 2021 by Eva Ashwood

All rights reserved.

No part of this book may be reproduced in any form or by any electronic or mechanical means, including information storage and retrieval systems, without written permission from the author.

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, organizations, places, events, and incidents are either products of the author's imagination or used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, or actual events is purely coincidental.

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

*For all the readers who ask, “Why should we have to wait until the last
book of a series for some hot group action?”
I got you, boo.*

CONTENTS

1. [River](#)
2. [River](#)
3. [Ash](#)
4. [Gage](#)
5. [River](#)
6. [Knox](#)
7. [River](#)
8. [River](#)
9. [Gage](#)
10. [Priest](#)
11. [River](#)
12. [Ash](#)
13. [River](#)
14. [River](#)
15. [River](#)
16. [Knox](#)
17. [River](#)
18. [River](#)
19. [River](#)
20. [River](#)
21. [Gage](#)
22. [River](#)
23. [River](#)
24. [River](#)
25. [River](#)
26. [Priest](#)
27. [River](#)
28. [River](#)
29. [Ash](#)
30. [River](#)
31. [Priest](#)
32. [Knox](#)
33. [River](#)
34. [River](#)
35. [River](#)
36. [Ash](#)
37. [River](#)

38. [River](#)

39. [River](#)

40. [Knox](#)

41. [River](#)

42. [Priest](#)

43. [River](#)

44. [Gage](#)

45. [River](#)

46. [River](#)

47. [River](#)

[Books by Eva Ashwood](#)

RIVER

LIGHTS FLASH behind us as the Kings of Chaos drag me toward their car. I'm still in the fancy-ass dress I put on for the gala earlier tonight, and the fabric twists between my legs as we practically jog down the street.

I feel like I'm in a daze, stumbling along after the guys and letting them lead me wherever. They could be taking me to the fucking moon for all I notice.

I'm too in my head, focused on everything that's happened in such a short span of time. It all swirls around in my mind, confusion and shock and a desperate need to know what the fuck is going on.

Less than a minute later, I'm in the car, buckled up between Priest and Knox, but I hardly notice that either.

Gage pulls away from the curb and drives away from the massive hotel where the gala was being held, away from the sirens and the people streaming out of the building. We got out of the building before most of the crowd, but now people are practically stampeding as they try to get away from the hacked up body of Ivan St. James, splayed out over an expensive piece of art like some sort of macabre sculpture.

Fuck, that's such a can of goddamn worms.

Even as we drive away, back toward the part of Detroit we—or at least I—belong in, the wail of the sirens keeps going on. The hotel will be swarming with cops, looking for evidence and trying to talk to whoever's stupid enough to still be hanging around.

I can't even bring myself to be that worried about it. The body of Ivan St. James showing up on an art piece in the middle of a shitty gala is pretty

high on the list of things that shouldn't have happened tonight, but I'm still stuck on what happened *after* that reveal.

When people were running and screaming, trying to get away from the already decaying corpse on the golden pedestal, and I ran into that woman.

I'm barely processing anything that happened, but I'm stuck on those eyes. So familiar as they flash in my mind over and over again.

Hannah's eyes.

My sister's eyes.

My dead sister's eyes.

And then I blink, and Ivan's body appears in my mind's eye too. Whatever else is going on, that's still important. It's hard to think about Hannah and not think about Ivan. I killed him because he was involved in killing my sister, and they were both supposed to be laid to rest in a way. Not put on display to shock a crowd and wandering around a gala to shock *me*.

The guys are talking around me, but I barely pay attention to what they're saying. It's half discussion, half argument, the way things always seem to go with them when they get heated, and only snatches of the conversation filter through the state of shock I'm still in.

"Nobody saw us," Knox insists, shaking his head and making a few strands of his slightly shaggy black hair fall over his forehead. "You think we wouldn't have noticed if someone was watching us?"

"I think we weren't paying close enough attention," Gage fires back. His deep voice is strained, and he glances at Knox in the rearview mirror, his piercing green eyes flashing.

"Okay, but even if someone was watching, how would they know who it was that we dumped?" Ash puts in. He's normally the most relaxed of all the men, but the events of tonight have clearly gotten to him too. He lifts his glasses away from his face to rub the bridge of his nose. "St. James was in a bag in pieces. We could have been dumping anything. Did they really dive down there and drag it up on the off chance it was someone they knew?"

"They would have had to know before-hand," Priest says, speaking for the first time in a long time. He's got his long-fingered hands steepled in front of his face as if he's actually a priest and is actually praying.

My brain tries to latch on to everything the men are saying, but it feels impossible to hold on to a single thought for more than a second. I'm still

reeling. I feel like the world is spinning out from under me, leaving me off balance and dizzy. Unsettled.

I close my eyes and drag in a deep breath, trying to find some kind of focus, but all that does is send the image of my sister's eyes flashing through my mind again.

Could Hannah be alive? Is that even possible?

Or maybe I'm wrong. Maybe the chaos and the adrenaline of the whole Ivan thing was playing tricks on me, making me think I saw Hannah's eyes. I only glimpsed them for a second, and she was already on my mind, so it would make a sick kind of sense in a way.

I have no way to be sure, and the uncertainty settles with a sort of sour pang in my stomach.

Before I know it, we're back outside my building. Gage stops the car in the parking lot, and I blink for a second, willing my body to move.

Knox slides out on his side, leaving the door open so I can get out as well. When I move, it's like I'm just realizing that I'm still in the fancy ass dress I wore to the gala.

Getting ready for that thing and walking into the fancy, luxurious space with the guys feels like it happened in another lifetime. And maybe to someone else.

A breeze kicks up, and it cools off my heated skin enough that I can remember how to move. I don't even say anything to the guys, just turn and start heading for the door of my rundown apartment building, still in a fucking haze.

The sound of a car door slamming jolts me out of it for long enough to turn and see the four of them following me toward my apartment.

That pulls me back to the present even more, and I glare at all of them. "What the fuck are you doing?" I demand.

"You're going to come stay with us again," Gage says, dropping the declaration like he means for it to be obeyed. The same way he sounds when he's issuing orders to the other guys, something he does often as the de facto leader of the group.

I bristle at that, irritation edging out the shock enough that I can face off with him. I fucking hate how bossy Gage is. I've lived my life for the last several years with no one telling me what to do, and now this fucker thinks he can boss me around whenever he gets a hair up his ass to do so.

I don't need it, and I don't want it. Adrenaline is still buzzing through me, and my heart thuds wildly against my ribs.

"That wasn't the deal," I snap. "I'm done with this shit."

Gage just looks at me, jaw set in a firm line. The scar on his lip is noticeable in the ugly lights outside my building, and the gleam in his piercing green eyes is all simmering anger. Like always.

He stares me down, like he expects me to fold and give in, and I just glare back at him.

"It's not safe," he says.

"So?" I fire back. "I'm used to shit not being safe. The *world* isn't safe. I learned that goddamn lesson a long time ago. I don't need you four to babysit me because shit got weird. I'll be fine."

The muscle in his jaw jumps as he clenches his teeth harder, and I turn on my heel, trying to get inside the building and leave them out.

Knox moves faster than I'm used to from him, though. He grabs the door as soon as I open it, and we end up in a stupid struggle. I'm not weak, but he's bigger and stronger than me, and grinning like a fucking idiot on top of it. His tattoos are barely visible beneath the sleek suit he wore to the gala, but little hints of ink peek out from beneath the sleeves and collar, giving him a dangerous looking edge, like a lion that someone tried and failed to tame.

Tugging at the door while he's holding it is a waste of time, so I give it up and shove past him. As I stride into the building, the four of them muscle their way in after me.

"Get out," I mutter through clenched teeth. "Breaking and entering is a fucking crime."

"Aw, but you held the door open for us," Knox says cheerfully. "That means you basically invited us in. Same as vampire rules." He smiles his unhinged smile that I wish wasn't so fucking sexy, and I just give him a flat look back.

Getting them out now that they're in the building will be a struggle I don't have the energy for, so I just head up to the third floor with them tailing me up the stairs.

As soon as I get the door to my place open, they're in after me, looking out of place in the middle of what counts as the "living room" in my studio apartment. Dog, the fucking traitor, barks with excitement to see me, then practically loses his fucking mind when he sees the guys, running around in

a circle before bounding over to them to sniff at their clothes and try to lick their hands.

My irritation just burns hotter that this fucking mutt seems to like the guys just as much as he likes me. Did *they* fucking feed him every day? I don't think so. But he's fawning over them like they're the ones who've been taking care of him.

I stand there in the middle of my apartment, hands clenched into fists, as Gage and I face off again. His features always seem harder somehow than the other three men's. They're never as carefully blank as Priest's, but there's something forceful and harsh about them, as if he's spent so much time clenching his jaw that it's turned to stone.

The other three Kings stand behind him, backing him up. It's just me on my side, but that's fine. It's always been just me.

"It's not a discussion, River," Gage says. His voice isn't raised, but it still seems to crack through the air. "You're coming."

"Oh, I'm sorry," I bite out. "I didn't realize I was your fucking slave to order around whenever you feel like it. The deal was that I would stay with you until I killed Ivan. I don't know if you missed it, but he's fucking dead. So I don't owe you shit anymore. It's over."

"It's not over," he hisses, taking a step forward. "You know that. Somebody dragged his body up out of the goddamn river and laid it out for everyone to see tonight. Don't you realize what that means?"

I narrow my eyes at him. "I'm not an idiot, Gage."

"You're acting like one. This isn't going to go away, and we don't know if they can link his death back to you. To *us*. You should be worried about that just like we are."

"I don't give a shit," I insist.

I hate that he's right, though. Someone pulling Ivan up from the water and bringing him out to show a bunch of rich-ass people at one of the biggest social events in Detroit is probably very bad. It sure as fuck can't be good. But I don't want to acknowledge that truth.

"I killed him," I say, sweeping my gaze over all four men as I speak. "I crossed the last name off of my list. It's done."

"Is it?" Gage narrows his eyes, stepping in even more. My hackles go up higher and higher the closer he gets, until my skin is prickling with it. "Then why the fuck didn't his body stay in that river?"

"How the hell should I know?"

“That’s kinda the point,” Knox puts in unhelpfully. “We don’t know. And not knowing is dangerous.”

“You might not care what happens, but we helped you,” Gage goes on, his voice turning even harder, if that’s possible. “And if someone knows what you did, then they’ll know we were there too. It’s bad for business if we get dragged into your mess.”

“I didn’t ask you to get dragged into ‘my mess.’” I make heavy air quotes around those words. “You could have stayed out of it. You could’ve walked away from all of this at the very beginning.”

He sighs, looking like he wishes he could go back in time and do just that. “What’s done is done, River. And like it or not, we’re in this together. So you’re coming with us, even if I have to have Knox throw you over his shoulder and drag you out.”

The burly, tattooed man looks like he’d enjoy the hell out of that, the weirdo. He waggles an eyebrow at me, and I try to set him on fire with the heat of my glare.

Ignoring our exchange, Gage gives the three other Kings of Chaos a meaningful look, and they all nod. As if they share a goddamn brain, they split up, moving through my small apartment like they own the place. Priest finds the bag I brought back from their house, still on the floor next to the bed, halfway unpacked.

He picks it up and starts rummaging through it like he’s taking note of what’s inside.

Knox goes to my drawers, yanking them open and pulling out clothes and underwear with that same grin, clearly enjoying himself even though this shit is serious.

And Gage just stands there in the middle of it, clearly not planning on taking no for an answer. I want to punch him in his stupid face. I hate how he thinks he can just barge into my life and start making demands, and I hate even more that he might have a point about all of it.

I’m clearly not going to get them to leave without me, and I can’t fight the four of them. Watching them paw through my shit just makes my blood pressure rise, so I let out a frustrated growl and give in, if only to keep them from manhandling my stuff.

“Get the fuck out of there,” I snap at Knox, elbowing him out of the way. I snatch the bra he’s holding out of his hands and shove it into the bag. “I can pack for my damn self.”

“Then do it,” Gage says curtly from behind me.

I don’t respond with words, clenching my jaw and flipping him off over my shoulder.

They all stand there, watching me while I finish packing, and I have the weirdest feeling of *déjà vu* from when Knox was here the first time, watching me pack up my shit so he could drive me back to their house.

This time, the stray dog I somehow picked up is inside, curled up on the floor with his scruffy brown tail thumping against it every time I walk past him to get something else.

Gage looks like he’s barely fighting the urge to check his watch and tap his foot on the scuffed wooden floor, wanting me to hurry up. Usually, I’d take my sweet time just to fuck with him and get a rise out of him, but I’m tired and ready to be done with all of this.

Once everything is packed—my bag stuffed with more clothes and shit than the last time, since this time there’s no real timeline for when I’ll be done with them—I push past the four men and heft the bag over my shoulder.

I head for the door, wrenching it open and leaving them all to follow me.

“Come on, Toto,” Knox calls, giving the dog a new name like he does almost every time he talks to the mutt. He jerks his head with a whistle. “Back to Kansas.”

Ash snorts at that. “I’m pretty sure *this* is Kansas, and we’re taking him back to Oz. That makes more sense.”

“What does that make us? Munchkins?” Knox shoots back.

The dog doesn’t care about the metaphor at all and just trots after them happily, following me down the stairs with the rest of them.

They look at me expectantly when we get outside, as if they think I’m getting in their car to go with them, but instead, I head to my own car in the crappy lot next to the building. The thing might be a piece of shit, but it’s *my* piece of shit, and if I’m going to be stuck with them for the next who-knows-how-long, I’m not doing it without my own way to get around.

I open the back door, and Dog hops in eagerly. I scowl at him one more time and then throw my bags in after him. It’s a reverse of how we left the Kings’ place just a few days ago, and I don’t like the way it feels like history is repeating itself. I don’t even give the guys another look as I get in the car, cranking it up before peeling out of the parking lot.

RIVER

THE DRIVE across Detroit doesn't take as long as I wish it would, and when I pull into the guys' driveway, they're right behind me. I could feel them tailing me all the way here, making sure I didn't veer off or try to run or whatever. Like I have the energy to even think about doing that right now.

I let them get out of their car first and unlock the front door of the house, then I slide out of my beater and follow them in, Dog at my heels.

He runs in happily, barking as he bounds around a bit before making a beeline for the kitchen. Probably to claim his favorite spot again.

No one objects.

In fact, everyone is silent, which is fine by me. Before any of the guys can say anything at all, I stomp my way upstairs, back to the room that was 'mine' when I was here the first time.

It's been a few days, but everything is the way I left it, for the most part. The sheets are even still rumpled like they couldn't be bothered to change them once I was gone.

Well, whatever.

I dump my bag on the bed and unzip it, eager to finally change out of the dress from the gala. It's sexy, but by this point it's just getting uncomfortable.

It pools around my feet in a wave of silky fabric when I shove the straps off my shoulders, and I kick it away, rummaging through my duffel bag for something else to change into.

Too fucking much has happened tonight. The reappearance of Ivan's body and the possibility that I might've seen Hannah have knocked the thoughts of what Ash and I did earlier right out of my head, but being back

in this house and stripping down to my underwear reminds me of riding him in that bathroom. I can feel the slight ache in my body and the phantom feeling of his cock buried inside me when I bend over to pull on a pair of sweatpants and a t-shirt.

I left the door open, which I realize belatedly when I hear footsteps coming down the hallway. I turn my head in time to see Ash passing by, and his gaze flicks toward me in time to catch sight of me changing.

He looks like he doesn't want to stop walking, but he does anyway, freezing almost mid-step. Our gazes catch and hold for a moment, and my stomach clenches. The air between us fills with an electric charge, memories of what we did earlier trickling back in over everything else that went on.

But it doesn't feel the way it used to when he looked at me. There's tension there, but instead of being intense and sexual, now it's just... shitty.

There's a look on Ash's face that's almost like disgust. His amber eyes glint behind his glasses, and he stares at me for an interminable second before he turns and walks away.

He doesn't even say anything. Doesn't call me out for what I did or tell me off. He just leaves.

It bothers me, and I hate that.

I've spent years cultivating myself into the kind of person who doesn't rely on other people's approval or love or affection or any of that shit. I've gotten by on what I can do for myself, and that's been fine. Up until now, apparently, which leaves a sour feeling in my stomach.

It never would have mattered before, but now a part of me feels like shit knowing I deliberately hurt Ash. Because that's what I did when I threw myself at him in that fancy bathroom and got him so worked up that he couldn't stop himself from fucking me. I set him up in a situation I knew would hurt him... and it did. Now he's disgusted with me or disappointed or something, and it feels horrible to know I caused it.

The middle of the night after what's turned into a massive shit-show of an evening isn't the time to be dwelling on that, though. I'm not even sure exactly what time it is, but it's got to be getting close to midnight now. I know no one will be going to sleep yet, though, so I grab a couple bottles of nail polish and head downstairs.

I can hear the guys talking as I reach the ground floor of the house, and I know they must be discussing what happened tonight.

Gage, Priest, and Knox are in the kitchen already, so deep in conversation that none of them look up when I walk in. Knox has the whiskey out already, thank fuck. I grab the bottle and take a swig from it, savoring the burn as it runs down my throat to settle in my gut, where I hope it will chase away the feelings from before.

I take a seat at the table and splay my hand out on the wood, opening one of the nail polish bottles to paint my nails while they talk about this latest issue. I could have just stayed upstairs and done this, avoiding being part of this conversation, but if they want me living in their house again, I'm not going to hide away.

They demanded I stay with them, so I'm going to make myself at home, to show them I'm not theirs to boss around. I'll claim space for myself the way I did the first time I got here.

Ash comes walking into the kitchen a few seconds later, the last one to arrive. He gives me a pointed look and rolls his eyes. "Are you really doing that in the kitchen?" he asks.

It's the first thing he's really said to me since we fucked earlier, and I glance up, trying not to let anything show on my face.

"Yeah, I am. If that's a problem, I can just go back home. You know, where I wanted to be in the first place?"

He clenches his jaw, and for a second, he looks spectacularly like an amber-eyed version of Gage, wearing his anger and irritation like a weapon.

"Maybe you should just go," he mutters under his breath. "If you're going to act like you own the damn place."

"Clear it with your babysitter, and I'll walk right out," I shoot back, nodding in Gage's direction. "But with the way you guys were pawing through my shit earlier, it seemed like you wanted me here. So I'm here. Deal with it."

Ash glances at Gage, and I know he's not going to fight his friend on this. Not after they all made that show of backing Gage up when he was demanding I come with them. So there's not much Ash can do about my presence except be pissed about it, I guess.

Usually, the banter between me and Ash is lighthearted and sexually charged. This is just bitter and angry, more like how I get with Gage or Priest sometimes. I can tell that unlike the last time I lived under this roof, Ash truly doesn't want me here. The first time, he was the one who stood

up for me and tried to convince the others that it was a good idea for me to stay. Now he'd probably rather have me be anywhere else.

Well, too bad. He can take that up with Gage if he has an issue with it. I'd rather not be here either.

I look away from him and swipe the brush from the black polish bottle over my thumbnail, taking my time so that I don't flood the cuticles or fuck up the sides. After a moment, Ash takes a seat at the table as far away from me as he can and starts playing with a playing card he produces from out of nowhere.

I can feel someone's gaze on me, and I know without looking up that Priest has been watching us, observing the exchange between me and Ash. He always watches everything closely, taking it all in but rarely reacting to it in any way that anyone can really see. I hate that. It's like he sees too much. Like he can sense all the bad energy between me and Ash and knows what's going on.

For some reason, that makes me feel even worse. A sudden pressure squeezes my chest, and I slam the brush back into the bottle of polish and push the chair back from the table.

"You know what? Fuck this. If no one wants me to be here, then I'll just go. I didn't want to come here in the first fucking place, so there's no reason for me to stay."

Gage slams his hand down on the table, and everyone turns to look at him.

"Sit the fuck down, River," he snarls. "You need to start being smarter about this, and you're not going anywhere. If you try to leave, I'll drag you back here so fast it'll make your head spin. And you won't like it if I have to do that. Believe me."

There's another spike of *déjà vu*, and I remember my first night here all over again—the one I spent shackled in their basement. I remember Gage pointing a gun at my head and saying he'd kill me, after I spent hours down in their basement refusing to answer their questions.

And now he looks like he'd be happy to issue that threat all over again.

The same as it is with me and Ash, it's like whatever relationship Gage and I have built up over the last few weeks has regressed all the way back to the way it was at the start. Antagonistic and angry.

He's on edge, his jade eyes simmering with rage and that muscle in his jaw jumping from how hard he's clenching it. The only emotion I can read

in him right now is anger, and any number of things could be causing it. Ivan's body being back, *me* being back, him feeling out of control... the list of possibilities goes on and on. He's probably just worried about Ivan's death being pinned on him and his brothers instead of on *me* where it belongs, but whatever the reason, it's clear he's not in the mood to be fucked with.

I half want to fuck with him anyway, to see if he'll make good on that threat about dragging me back if I try to walk out—if he even *can*. But before I can decide whether to push his buttons and see if he snaps, Knox clears his throat, drawing my attention.

"Come on, little fox. You have to stay. We'll help you find your sister," he says, his voice a deep rumble.

He's the only one who actually seems enthusiastic about me being here, and considering he went to all that trouble to hunt me down after I left and invite me to go to the gala with them, I guess that makes sense.

"Shut up, Knox," Gage snaps, turning that fierce look on his brother. Well, not his *actual* brother. Only Knox and Priest are related, and they're just cousins. But the four men are so close that they might as well be brothers.

"What? I'm trying to make her see she should be here. It's better than what any of you guys are doing." Knox glances at each of the other Kings in turn, but none of them look very remorseful for not giving me a warm welcome or whatever.

Gage just narrows his eyes, and I know he's pissed about the idea of getting involved in more of my business. Hell, he probably blames me for the Ivan mess in the first place, even though I never asked any of them to be there or to help or anything. I was fine to handle it on my own, and they stuck their noses into it, so it's not my fault if this blows up in their faces.

"Can we get back to the matter at hand?" Gage demands. He squares his broad shoulders and glares at me. I reluctantly sit back down, going back to painting my nails like there wasn't just an outburst in the middle of it.

"Fine," I mutter.

He's agitated and angry, but tough shit. So am I. Nothing went the way it was supposed to tonight. I feel like the world is spinning out from under me, making it hard to keep my equilibrium.

"Why the fuck did Ivan's body show up like that tonight?" Gage demands, glancing around the table now that we're all settled again.

“Obviously it was planned,” Ash puts in, looking everywhere but at me. “A big night with an important reveal. Whoever did it wanted everyone to see it.”

“Question is still why,” Priest says.

No one has an answer for that. I certainly don’t. Ivan St. James is—*was*—a fairly powerful member of the criminal underworld, running his mafia organization with an iron fist and keeping the small fry off his turf. He probably had plenty of enemies, but he also had allies, people who relied on him for business or protection. Him being gone definitely upsets the balance of things in Detroit’s underground, so I can understand why the criminals left in the lurch might have an issue with it.

But enough to drag him out of the river and make a statement like that? Doesn’t seem like something a petty drug dealer or embezzler or whatever would do.

“Do you think the person who dragged him up from the river knows who killed him?” Ash asks. “I mean, it’s a message, right? It has to be. ‘Ivan’s dead, and I know someone is responsible for it. You can’t hide.’ That kind of thing.”

“It could be,” Gage agrees, running a hand through his dark brown hair.

“Maybe the message wasn’t pointed at us,” I comment, unable to stay out of the conversation even though I had planned to not get involved. “Maybe they don’t know who killed him, just that *someone* did.”

I half expect Gage to bite my head off for daring to speak, but instead he nods, his harsh features turning thoughtful. “Everyone in that room tonight could have benefitted from Ivan going down in some way. Yeah, some of them were on his side and probably did business with him, but once you get to that level, you’re always one deal away from being stabbed in the back. So if someone doesn’t know who killed him, there were a lot of possible suspects at the gala.”

Priest’s brows are furrowed, although his tone is as cool and measured as ever. Not a single strand of his short blond hair is out of place, in contrast to Knox, whose hair has gotten even more mussed, as if he’s been running his fingers through it repeatedly.

“So either the person who dredged him up from the river knew it was us,” Priest says slowly, “or they have no idea *who* did it, but they obviously know he was murdered by someone. And putting his body on display was a way to try to smoke the killer out.”

“It’s the only thing that makes any sense,” Gage agrees. “But still, I want to know how the fuck they knew where he was dumped.”

We all look at Knox, who immediately gets his hackles up, his broad shoulders stiffening. He’s changed out of his fancy clothes and into a more casual outfit of a dark Henley and sweats. “Why the fuck are you looking at me? That body was prepped and fine. It should have stayed down. I’ve dumped plenty of bodies in the river, and no one has ever found them. It wasn’t the spot that was the problem.”

“If it wasn’t the spot, then there had to be someone watching. Which means they would’ve seen us dump the body. If they wanted to leave a message for us, they could have done it in a less public way,” Priest observes.

“And no one even knew River was going to be there,” Knox points out. “So if they knew she had a vendetta against Ivan, leaving the body there for her specifically to find was a pretty stupid move.”

“Maybe it’s enough that his body was there at all,” I suggest with a little shrug, dipping the brush back into the nail polish and moving on to my other hand. “I don’t think anyone at that gala was unaffected by seeing Ivan St. James’s dead body up there. It sends a message, even if the killer wasn’t in the room.”

“What, to watch out or they could end up like him?” Knox asks, one dark eyebrow rising.

I shrug. “Maybe. Either as a threat or a warning or something. Him being dead is a pretty big thing, especially considering how the guys who get to his level all think they’re damn near untouchable or are so paranoid they never go anywhere without guards.”

Ivan definitely fell into that last camp, which was why it was so hard to get to him in the first place. He was the most heavily guarded of all the men on my list, which is why I ended up killing him last. The fact that someone managed to take him out is probably making other powerful men in the city’s criminal underworld double down on their own security.

We keep talking for a few more minutes, batting around theories and throwing out random ideas. But really, we’re all just spit-balling. The person who did this could have any number of motivations. Without knowing *who* did it, we have no way of knowing *why* they did it.

I finally say as much to the guys, and Gage nods, although he doesn’t look happy about it.

“Yeah. The ‘who’ is the biggest fucking question,” he mutters with an angry breath.

“Whoever it was, it was someone with balls,” Knox comments, leaning back in his chair. He shakes some of his unruly dark hair out of his face and rolls his shoulders. “I mean, by putting that body up at the gala, they’re fucking with some of the richest, most connected assholes in the city. That takes guts.”

“And us,” Gage reminds him sharply. “They’re fucking with us, too. Even if they don’t know it. Which we have no way of knowing whether they do or not.”

“Fucking hell.” I roll my eyes, blowing on my nails even though I know it won’t make them dry faster. “We’re just going in circles at this point. Rehashing the same five questions over and over.” Gage turns his fierce glare back on me, but I hold my ground. “What? We *are*. We have no idea who it was and no way of guessing. We were out of there so fast, none of us saw anything other than his body lying there and everyone freaking the fuck out.”

“Oh, and I suppose you think we should have stuck around and done some investigating?”

I cock my head challengingly, not taking his bait. “I didn’t say that. I’m just saying we don’t have enough information, and we need some actual intel if we’re going to find out who did this and what it means.”

Gage has a sour look on his face, but I know he knows I’m right. We’re not gonna solve this in one night or magically pull the answers out of our asses. We’ll have to do some digging if we’re gonna get to the bottom of this.

“We need to know if anyone has connected us to his death,” Gage says, taking the lead in the discussion again. “Or if us being at the gala when Ivan’s body showed up is just a coincidence. That’s the most important thing.”

“You think it’s safe to ask questions?” Knox grimaces, rubbing a hand over his jaw. I’m sure he shaved before the gala, but he’s already got a shadow of scruff on his face. “Or will that just make it look suspicious?”

“Asking outright would be stupid,” Priest says. “But we should keep our ears open.”

The conversation keeps spiraling in circles. Every time someone suggests something, either a theory or a possibility, it comes back to the

same thing—we don't *know*, and we have no way of knowing right now.

It's frustrating, and the longer the conversation goes on, the closer Gage seems to get to ripping all his hair out or punching somebody.

"Alright," he says finally, sounding exhausted and frustrated. "That's enough. We're not getting anywhere, and it's late."

"Are you sending us to bed like we're kids?" I ask, my eyebrows rising toward my hairline.

He just gives me an inscrutable look and gets up from the table, stalking out of the kitchen without a backward glance.

With my head even more tangled up in thought than it was before, I gather my nail polish bottles and do the same, slipping out of the kitchen like a ghost.

A S H

PRIEST GETS UP and leaves the kitchen after Gage and River once it's pretty clear we're not going to get anywhere else on this front tonight. I grab a swig of whiskey from the bottle Knox got out, then take another one for good measure, lingering at the table once everyone else has gotten up.

The booze burns going down, lighting a fire in my gut, and I shudder a little bit, but I don't hate it.

Knox is still hanging around, and when I glance over at him, he gives me a look.

I just stare back, not sure what the fuck he wants from me.

The expression on his face is almost *knowing*, which is weird because usually he doesn't know shit and likes it that way. Well, that's not fair. He's not stupid. He knows a lot. He just doesn't get involved in all the emotional shit that weighs the rest of us down. But right now, he looks like he's more tuned into that stuff than normal.

He doesn't even say anything, just levels that fucking look at me and then heads out, leaving me alone in the kitchen.

It's weirdly quiet with everyone gone, and I sit at the table, staring down at the whorls in the wooden surface. There are all kinds of chips and nicks in it, from knives and guns and plates and shit slamming into it over the years we've lived here. None of us have ever bothered to replace it or try to be more careful. It's just a table. And I like that all the marks on it make the house feel lived in.

River's fucking dog is asleep under the table, wheezing softly with his little doggy snores, and the sound irritates me a little bit, even though I didn't really like the quiet either.

Honestly, I don't know *what* I want tonight.

Whatever it might be, I know it's not to sit in the damn kitchen by myself, so I get up and head upstairs. I have to pass by River's room to get mine, but this time her door is closed.

Good.

I go to my own room and crack a window, lighting a cigarette before taking a long drag. The smoke burns the same way the booze did, and I lean into the feeling of it, blowing smoke out the window.

I feel antsy, like there's nervous energy crawling under my skin. I bounce my leg while I lean against the wall and smoke, but I still feel restless, like I need to be doing more.

There's always a deck of cards somewhere in my room, usually several. I grab the nearest one off the dresser and fuck with the cards for a bit, flipping them over and over between my fingers, shuffling, and cutting the deck with one hand. I do little tricks for no one in particular and then make a disgusted noise when I pull a queen.

Shit.

I'm just so fucking agitated. This whole night turned into a goddamn disaster. It was one thing after another, starting with the mess of fucking River in that bathroom and ending with Ivan St. James's body laid out on a golden pedestal.

And now River is here again, just down the goddamn hall, probably in bed, naked or in something skimpy. Making herself right at home.

Hours ago, I would have been thrilled to have her here again. Hours ago, I was thinking about how the house felt weird without her in it. Now it just feels too small. Like there's nowhere I can go to escape her.

Usually, when I need to calm down and chill out, I call a girl over for sex. Focusing my energy on getting a hot woman off and making sure we both have a good time usually has the effect I want it to, but now that thought just feels wrong.

I have a list of women in my phone that I could call, and they'd be here in fifteen minutes flat, but I can't even imagine doing it. It doesn't seem like it would be satisfying.

But I need to do *something* to get rid of this shitty as hell tension. I toss the cards back onto the dresser and sit down on my bed, letting my eyes close as I drag in a deep breath through my nose. I've had so many women in this bed. Soft and pretty, hair spread over my pillows. Some of them were

quiet, biting full lips while I gave them what we both wanted. Some were loud, practically screaming my name and clawing at my back while we fucked.

Holding those thoughts in my head, I shove my pants down enough to get my dick out. It twitches against my palm, responding to my touch easily.

Knox has joked before that it only takes someone thinking about my dick to get me hard, and he's not exactly wrong. I only have to stroke a few times before it's half hard, and I close my eyes, focusing on some of the women I've been with, letting the memories blur into a sort of slide show of nice tits, hot asses, and thick thighs.

I let out a slow breath, stroking myself a little faster, leaning into the heat that starts to curl through me.

And then, like a blast of cold water, an image of River pops into my head. From just like an hour ago, standing in the room I can only think of as hers now, half naked as she changed out of her dress.

All those tattoos on her body, the little scars that she wears like battle wounds, her thighs, her tits. That mouth that's always going off about something.

"Fuck." I snarl around the cigarette in my mouth and then blow out an angry plume of smoke. I don't want to think about her now.

But it's like that first taste is enough to open the goddamn flood gates. Without my permission, my mind flashes back to earlier tonight, in that bathroom at the gala. The way she pushed me down onto the chair and straddled me. How hot and tight her pussy was. Fuck, I've wanted to be inside her for weeks, but I was holding myself back. I didn't want her to be just another notch on my goddamn bedpost, so I refused to let myself have her. But when she threw herself at me like that, all wild and fierce and willing, I couldn't hold back anymore.

And it was even better than I could have imagined. We fit together in a way that blew my damn mind, and she rode my cock like she was made for it.

It was hot and intense, and I grip my dick a little bit tighter, almost like I'm trying to imitate the feeling of her pussy around me. It's not even a close approximation though.

As if my mind isn't done torturing me, it pulls up memories of the first time I ever made River come, the day I caught her standing in the doorway

while another woman sucked my cock. I remember the way she gave Sam snide little instructions, talking about how she could do it better. And then the way she told me exactly how she would do it, describing the way she'd give me head as I stroked myself to a climax that nearly knocked me on my ass.

I think about the way she tasted when I went down on her, sweet but with a bite to her, like a shot of whiskey on an empty stomach. Heady and impossible to ignore.

All of those fucking thoughts and memories crowd my mind, filling my head with images of her sarcastic smile and biting comments. I think about the way her body felt against mine every time we touched. Her ass in my lap, her hands on me. My hands on her.

It's a weird combination of hot as fuck and maddening to think about her while I jerk off, and I feel my cock pulsing in my grip even as the anger inside my chest burns hotter. I'm even more pissed off than I was before, gritting my teeth and blowing out another cloud of smoke.

I pump my cock harder and faster, hips lifting into the motion. I can feel my heart slamming against my rib cage, and my breathing gets all short and quick while I work myself.

The cigarette dangles from my lips, and I know I'm close. I'm hard as fucking diamond in my own hand, and precum oozes from the tip, sliding down the shaft of my cock and slicking the glide a bit while I jerk off. Just thinking about River is enough to get me going, but I don't want to come to the thought of her. I don't want her face, her voice, her pussy to be the thing that sends me over the edge.

Not after what happened tonight.

It feels stupid to say she hasn't earned that, and even stupider to be gripping my own cock, trying to hold myself back so I don't spill all over my hand with her in my head.

When have I ever held myself back like this? Never. When there's an orgasm within reach, I go for it, full steam ahead. But now I don't want to. It's almost the same as if I'd called some girl over, trying not to lose myself inside her while thinking about River.

River, River, River.

Just thinking her goddamn name makes the rest of it keep cascading through my mind, and I curse under my breath and let go of my cock, letting out a ragged sigh.

Every time I get close to that peak, there she is. Like she's waiting for me. Taunting me with the knowledge that I still want her so fucking bad. Even after everything. I hate that. It makes my blood boil, but my cock is still rock hard.

I brace my hands on the bed and breathe in through my nose, the sharp smell of cigarette smoke cutting through the mess in my brain. It's not enough, though. Every time I close my eyes, I see her, and if I even think about touching my dick again, her face is right there.

"Fuck it," I mutter, my voice thick with anger and defeat. I may as well give up at this point.

My dick is still hard, jutting up from my open pants like an accusation. But my head is a fucking mess, so there's no way it's happening tonight.

Who am I, fucking Priest? This has never been an issue for me.

Not until River showed up and couldn't be fucked to give a shit.

I growl and stub out my cigarette, tossing the butt into the ashtray on my dresser. I tuck my cock back into my pants, ignoring the neglected throb it gives when I touch it. I'm not coming tonight, clearly.

The hallway is quiet when I open my door, and I walk through the darkness and head down the stairs. It's quiet down here too, but there's a light on in the living room, so someone is still up.

Priest is sitting on the couch, with the TV playing at a low volume and River's goddamn dog curled up on the cushion next to him. The mutt's head is in his lap, and Priest pets him absently every few seconds, his eyes trained on the TV.

"Why am I not surprised you bonded with the damn dog?" I roll my eyes as I walk into the room.

Priest isn't at all startled by my voice. He just shrugs and scratches the dog's ears.

"You were the one who hated it the most in the first place," I point out.

He glances at me, giving me a once over. It's like Knox all over again, feeling like he's seeing through me to things I'd rather not have on display.

But it's hard when it comes to these guys. We know each other better than we know anyone else. We've been through a hell of a lot together. Walked through fire and burned shit down and still came out the other side as a unit. All of it has forged a bond that will never break, and it means that the masks we might wear around other people are pretty much useless around each other.

“He grew on me,” Priest says finally, looking back to the TV.

I settle onto the couch on his other side, giving the dog a look. The furry little animal doesn’t even open his eyes, either asleep or too blissed out on the attention from Priest to bother with me.

“You mean he finally stopped looking at you like he wanted to take a bite out of you,” I say to Priest.

He shrugs again. “Maybe. I think we understand each other now.”

“Well, congratulations.” I mutter it under my breath, but I know he hears me. His face doesn’t change, and he doesn’t look away from the TV, but there’s a small shift in his posture.

I lean back against the couch, tipping my head back to rest against the back of it, and let out a long sigh.

“Knox thinks you’re having a crisis,” Priest offers neutrally.

I roll my eyes again, staring up at the ceiling. “Knox is dramatic as fuck. What am I, a teenage girl?”

“Well, if one of us was going to be...”

I elbow him in the side just because I feel like I *have* to for that comment, although I can’t be all that mad. It’s rare for Priest to make jokes, and even when he does, they’re just as deadpan and blunt as everything else he says. But I like that he made one.

“I think...” I stop and sigh, scrubbing a hand over my face and adjusting my glasses. “I think you might’ve been right. About River. Letting her into our lives was a mistake. Keeping her in our lives is probably an even bigger one.”

If it were Knox or even Gage I was talking to, me admitting they were right—and effectively meaning I was wrong—would definitely be met with at least a little gloating. But Priest is just quiet. Thoughtful.

“Yeah. Maybe,” he says at last. “She’ll either wreck us, or...”

He trails off, not finishing the thought. I wait, assuming he’s searching for the right word, but when he doesn’t follow it up with anything, I frown and tilt my head to look over at him.

“Or what?”

He stares at the TV like he’s seeing past it, like he’s trying to get a glimpse at our future somehow. “I don’t know.”

G A G E

WE REGROUP the next morning over breakfast.

My brothers and I are used to talking shop in the kitchen while we go about our usual morning routines. Knox makes a shit ton of eggs and bacon and toast, and Priest and I usually just opt for coffee. Ash goes for some cereal, and we sit around the table and plan out the day.

Now, River is a part of the routine, and it's starting to feel just as familiar to have her down here as any one of the others.

I can track what she's going to do before she does it, watching as she comes into the kitchen, barely acknowledging any of us. She goes for the bag of dog food first, grabbing the bowl that's still sitting on the floor and feeding the mutt. The furry little animal barks joyfully, either excited about the food or just happy to see her after a long night apart.

She's got bedhead, her silver hair mussed and wavy, and she's dressed in just some shorts and a t-shirt as if she rolled out of bed and came right down here to have breakfast.

Like she's at home.

Unable to stop my gaze from following her, I let it run over the tattoos that crawl up her arms and leg, stark on her skin, and the shadows under her eyes that point to a restless night of sleep.

She pets the top of Dog's head and then washes her hands and gets herself a cup of coffee. Sometimes she opts for toast, and sometimes she needles Knox into sharing his bacon. She doesn't bother with either this morning, which likely means there's something on her mind.

As soon as I have that thought, I hate it. It bothers me so fucking much that this all feels so familiar. That I've been paying attention to her enough

to know her morning routine and why she might make changes to it.

In the few days that she wasn't here, it felt like there was something missing from the mornings, and now that she's back, it's like things are 'right' again.

Which is wrong as hell, because she was never supposed to be here in the first place. And once she was gone, she was supposed to have stayed gone.

This whole mess with Ivan's body and whoever put it there fucked everything up, and the sooner we get to the bottom of it, the better. We can go back to normal, and eventually things will even out.

I take a sip of coffee, letting the bitterness of the dark liquid clear my head a little so I can refocus on the matter at hand.

"We need to think about who could have done this," I say to the room at large. I don't need to clarify what 'this' is. Everyone knows what I'm talking about.

Knox chews on some bacon thoughtfully. "I mean, we *have* fucked up a lot of people," he offers. "If we're looking for someone who might have a vendetta against us, it's a pretty long list."

"They're not all this stupid, though," Priest puts in.

Knox shoots him a look. "If they weren't stupid, then they wouldn't have deserved to get fucked up."

Priest dips his head like he's conceding that point. "What I mean is that not everyone who has ended up on our shit list would be bold enough to do something like this. Petty drug dealers and thieves? This is out of their league."

I nod, because he has a point. Most of the small-fry criminals in Detroit wouldn't want to have a run in with Ivan St. James, alive or dead. Putting his body on display in a room full of some of the most powerful players in Detroit—both on the legal and illegal side of things—isn't a move for some rando with a grudge.

Or it would have to be a pretty big grudge if it was.

"There was that one guy," Ash says through a mouthful of cereal. "What's-his-name."

"Oh yeah, good old what's-his-name." Knox nods sagely with a smirk. "Can't forget about him."

Ash flips him off. "The guy who was trying to smuggle counterfeits through the club. Knox fucked him up good, and he had a lot of

connections. I don't remember his fucking name, so sue me."

"Monroe," I say, supplying the name. "Last I heard, he's dead. Tried it with someone else, and they were even less lenient than we were."

"How do we know it's someone we pissed off?" Ash asks. "Maybe it's one of her enemies." He jerks his head in River's direction but doesn't look at her.

She bristles, gripping her coffee mug tightly. "My enemies are all dead. I don't go around starting shit with people just for the fun of it. And what I start, I fucking finish."

There's anger in her voice, but something else is there too. Something I can't place.

I don't have time to dwell on it.

I shouldn't even care.

"Focus," I snap, cutting through whatever the tension between River and Ash is. "It doesn't matter who pissed this person off first. If they knew where Ivan's body was, they probably know we were all involved."

Like it or not, and I don't fucking like it, we're all in this together for the moment.

Priest sets his cup down and taps a finger on the table. "I don't think the answer is in some old grudge. This is recent. Fresh."

I nod. "Anyone who wanted to fuck with us before could have done it already. There have been plenty of bodies to choose from over the years, and no one could have known we were coming for Ivan."

"You know who we have fucked over recently?" Ash asks. "The Diamond Devils."

"Hey, they fucked with us first," Knox shoots back.

"I'm not saying they didn't deserve it. I'm saying they have motive. And it's recent."

River frowns, running a finger absently over a little chip in her nail polish. "How would they have found out about Ivan though?"

No one has an answer for that.

"It's worth a shot, anyway," Knox says. "We sent Reggie back to them pretty fucked up. And River helped me do that to him. They're the only ones with any overlap with all of us."

Everyone looks to me, waiting for my verdict, and I turn it over in my head for a moment. The Diamond Devils are a motorcycle gang, mostly involved in smuggling and petty shit. They wanted to smuggle guns through

our club, but we didn't go for their deal. We're picky about who we do business with, and they didn't fit the criteria. So we *do* have a connection to them, a history with them—but it still doesn't seem all that likely that they're the ones who dredged up Ivan's body.

At this point, though, we can't really afford to ignore anything that might lead us to an answer. And it wouldn't hurt to follow up with them anyway and make sure they got the message Knox delivered when he tortured their man.

"Yeah. We should pay them a little visit," I say finally. "See if we can dig anything up."

"I'm coming too." River nods decisively, finishing her coffee and getting up from the table.

"No." The word is out of my mouth before I even realize I said it, but it stands.

"Gage is right," Priest says. "You should stay here."

River shoots him a betrayed look and then looks to Ash for back up. Usually, he would be in her corner, wanting her to tag along with us like a puppy he wants to play with. He's been into her from the moment we brought her into this house. From the moment the two of them got into a knock-down, drag-out fight on the stairs.

This time, he just snorts and looks away.

"I say let her come," Knox says with a shrug. Because of course he does. He's almost as bad as Ash is—or *was*, anyway. She's got him wrapped around her little finger somehow, and he wants her to come everywhere with us. He's the one who went after her after she left our place and invited her to the gala with us.

I press my lips together and try to keep my face blank. I'm not as good at it as Priest, so I know I probably just look angry. It was a reflex to tell her no. To tell her to stay here. At least here, I know she'll be safe. The Diamond Devils have never really seemed like a major threat, but if they really did have something to do with Ivan's body turning up, then they might be.

Before, I didn't want her tagging along because our business isn't hers. Now, it's all tangled up. I hate that, and I hate that my reason for telling her no is also out of some protective urge I can't seem to control. Some impulse that makes me want to keep her safe and take care of her now that I've seen how broken and vulnerable she can be.

It's why I demanded she come stay with us again, why I didn't let up until she was back here. And that impulse is at war with the part of me that says she doesn't belong here and is screaming warnings about letting her get too close.

But it's too late now.

We're in this together, whether any of us like it or not.

I know it's probably pointless to try to stop her from coming with us. She's already shown she can be just as stubborn as I am, and if I tell her no and try to enforce it, she'll just follow us in her car or something and probably bring the damn dog along too.

"Fine," I relent, biting the word out through clenched teeth. "Do what you want."

She shoots me a look that clearly says 'I always do,' and I look away from her, getting up and dumping the rest of my coffee in the sink.

We pile into the car half an hour later, dressed and ready for a meeting with the Diamond Devils.

Their base is across the city, not all that far from Sin and Salvation. It's a squat little clubhouse with bikes parked out front and a shady atmosphere that small-time gangs like this seem to give off in waves.

The place doubles as a shitty bar in the evenings, but during the day, it's all Devils here. As soon as we park and get out, the door is already opening, and a tall guy with tattoos on his face blocks the entrance. He's built like Knox, even a little thicker maybe, clearly meant to be intimidating by his size alone.

"Just where the fuck do you think you're going?" he asks.

Knox looks ready to square up with him, but I step in front of my friend, heading off his aggression. "I'm going to assume you know who we are," I say. "We want to talk with your president."

"He ain't taking meetings right now," the bruiser says. "I'll tell him you stopped by."

"Is that really the attitude you want to take after what happened?" I ask. I leave it up to him to put two and two together and figure out what I mean, and I can tell from the way his eyes dart to one side that he knows exactly what I'm talking about.

His eyes narrow, but he steps back and lets us in.

Three men, smaller than the bruiser but clearly armed, watch us as we step into the entryway of the club. They eye each of us in turn, and River a

little extra, which puts me on edge immediately.

“They wanna talk to the prez,” the bruiser says, sounding pissed about it.

“Who the fuck do they think they are?” one of the others spits.

Knox just grins at him with that ‘fuck around and find out’ grin of his, and it makes the guy back up immediately.

The air feels heavy and thick with tension, as if one wrong move will have guns drawn and a fight breaking out.

The thing about being small-time in a city like this is that you always have to be on your guard. Bigger gangs are always looking to take you out, and smaller gangs think they can take over what’s yours as a way to build up their power. The Diamond Devils are all paranoid and stupid for the most part, trying to cling to what they have while waiting for someone else to try to take it.

After the failed deal with us, I can understand why they’re so on edge, but that doesn’t mean I’m going to let them walk all over us.

In the end, we could take their organization out if we had to. We have more power in Detroit than they do, more connections that would back us up. But if it comes down to a fight right here and now, it could get ugly fast.

“Come this way,” one of the other gang members says, beckoning us forward and making sure we all get a glimpse of the gun at his waist.

We step inside, and I flick a glance left and right to take in the scene around us. There are at least five or six more Diamond Devils scattered around the main room of the club. A couple are playing pool in the corner, and most are sprawled in booths or over the couch against one of the walls.

This place is nothing compared to Sin and Salvation, more like a dingy dive bar than anything, which suits a gang like the Diamond Devils. But they’re all comfortable here. This is their turf, and there are more of them than there are of us.

“No sudden moves,” the bruiser says. “We’ll tell the prez you’re here and see if he wants to talk to you. I wouldn’t get my hopes up.”

Of course, that’s when one of the fuckers who escorted us in decides to make a sudden move.

He’s off to the side, closest to River, and out of the corner of my eye, I see him reach out. His hand moves like he’s trying to usher us forward, but instead, he touches her, sliding his hand over the small of her back and then down to her ass, getting a bold handful.

Anger rises in me like a raging beast, but before I can do anything, River is already reacting. She whips out an elbow, almost too quick to see, catching the guy in the face and sending him staggering back.

His nose gushes blood, and he yells in pain through his hands.

“You fucking cunt!”

Most of the Devils probably didn’t even see what happened, but they see one of their own bleeding, and that’s enough to make them react.

Guns are immediately drawn as shouts rise up, the sound bouncing off the walls.

A heartbeat later, we’re surrounded, staring down the barrels of the weapons pointed at us.

RIVER

THE SPIKE of adrenaline in my blood is so intense that it feels like ice water is pouring through my veins. Rage rattles around in my chest, and if there wasn't a gun pointed at my head, I'd probably beat that slimy motherfucker down even more.

I'm still fucked up in the head from the mess of last night, and I didn't sleep well on top of that. Being here is only putting me more on edge.

I keep thinking about that fucker I helped Knox torture. How Knox told me the guy tried to coerce one of their dancers into helping him—and then when she wouldn't, he tried to take advantage of her.

Assault. Always the first tool in the arsenal of every shitty man who doesn't know how to take no for a fucking answer.

Being here in this stupid clubhouse reminds me of all the men in the world who are just waiting to take what they want from a woman. Ready and willing to assault her for having the audacity to not give in and roll over for them when they want her to.

It's fucking disgusting, and the minute that asshole put his hand on my ass, just because he felt like he could, savage fury flashed through me.

It still boils in my veins, and I glare at the fucker with the gun pointed at me.

All the Diamond Devils look pissed as shit.

"What the hell? You come into our house and attack us?" the bruiser who stopped us at the door asks. "What the fuck is that about?"

"Tell your asshole cronies to keep their hands to themselves," I spit back, jerking my head at the guy who looks ready to shoot me. "It's not exactly good hospitality to get handsy with your guests."

We're in a standoff now. No one moves. No one even seems to breathe. The Kings of Chaos and I stand still, our bodies tense and ready to move as we stare down the guns trained on us, and the Diamond Devils don't seem to know what they want to do.

If they start shooting, it'll be a shit-show. They have the advantage in this moment, but if they know the Kings' reputation at all, they have to be aware what starting a fight with them will mean.

My heart is pounding, more from anger than fear, and I'm certain Gage is probably thinking to himself that this is why he didn't want me to come.

Well, too fucking bad.

Knox, in true Knox fashion, doesn't seem to give a shit. There's a gun pointed at his chest—mostly because the dude holding it is shorter than him by a good bit—and he seems as fearless as ever.

He grins broadly, his dark brown eyes glittering as he looks at the bruiser, the only person in the room bigger than he is.

"Sorry. The Kings of Chaos don't put up with people laying hands on our women," he says, his grin taking on a vicious edge. "Or didn't Reggie give you that message?"

The bruiser frowns in confusion and looks to the guy next to him, who shrugs.

I swear I see Gage roll his eyes. "Derrek," he supplies. "You know him. He's one of yours."

The tension cranks up another notch as that name hits home, reminding the Devils what Knox and I did to one of their members before letting him go.

"Hey," Knox says, shrugging. "We could have killed him. He deserved it. He came into our house and tried to get his way. And when he couldn't make it work, he tried to force the fucking issue. We don't put up with that kind of shit."

The Devils all look angry, but even they can't really argue against that point. Reggie, or Derrek, or whatever his fucking name is, was out of line.

Before anyone else can say anything, there's a commotion from somewhere near the back of the room, and a door opens. A tall, lanky man steps through and narrows his eyes at the scene.

He looks more intimidating than any of the other clowns in this place, and everyone goes silent in deference. He must be the president of this little club of idiots.

Gage steps forward, basically ignoring the gun pointed at his head. Knox bares his teeth at the one Devil who seems like he's going to take issue with Gage moving, and that simmers the guy the fuck back down. I fold my arms and keep giving the man in front of me my worst glare, letting him know that I'm not fucking afraid of him and he's a piece of shit.

"What's all this?" the club president asks, his voice cold and hard. He radiates that kind of vibe that says he doesn't have to be built like a tank to fuck someone up, and it makes sense that he's in charge.

Fortunately for us, Gage gives him back the same energy, letting the anger simmer in his eyes.

"They're the ones who fucked up Derrek," one of the clowns says, jabbing a finger at Knox. "Then they came in here and started shit with us."

Knox laughs. "We haven't even come close to starting shit," he says. "Trust me, you'd know if we were." He looks to the president, who barely spares him a glance in return. "One of your boys here got handsy with our friend just now. We don't take kindly to that shit."

"Thank you, Knox," Gage says firmly, cutting him off before he can launch into the whole thing again. "I've got it from here."

He turns to look back at the president, and seeing Gage like this, I can kind of understand why the others follow him. His commanding, controlled persona makes even Knox bite his tongue, and I would have said it was impossible to shut him up before.

Gage draws himself up and meets the president's eyes easily. "We were within our rights for what happened with Derrek," he says. "He came into our club, stepping over all the boundaries to get what he wanted. And then when he couldn't get a dancer to cooperate with him, he tried to assault her."

From the look on the president's face, he already knows all of this, and Gage probably knows that too. He's just driving the point home.

"He came into our territory when no deal had been agreed upon, and he disrespected us. It had to be punished. We had to retaliate. I don't know if Derrek was acting on his own or on official orders, but—"

"No one told him to do that," the president interrupts quickly. "He was acting on his own from the minute he stepped foot into your club."

I fight the urge to smirk at that. It's clear this guy doesn't want to go to war with the Kings, which is funny, considering how the Devils outnumber them. But if they tried to start shit with us right now, they'd have to deal

with Knox, whose reputation I'm sure precedes him, as well as Gage and Priest, neither of whom have cracked a smile since we walked in. Ash is probably an unknown quantity, since he doesn't walk around giving off 'I'll fuck you up' vibes the way the others do, but either way, it's clearly not a fight the motorcycle gang's leader wants to start.

"Tell your men to stand down," Gage says, and the president looks around the room.

The atmosphere is still so tense you could probably cut it with a knife, and aside from Knox, who can't stop grinning like a psychopath, everyone looks grim and ready to jump into some shit if given the slightest provocation.

I feel a heavy gaze on me as the president looks me over, probably wondering who I am and what I'm doing here—and why the Kings of Chaos are willing to go to bat for me.

Well, he can keep fucking wondering.

The president doesn't immediately give the order to stand down, and I can see the muscles jumping in Gage's jaw as he clenches and unclenches it.

"We didn't start this shit," Gage tells the president in a hard voice. "What happened just now was because, once again, one of yours disrespected us. That seems to be a trend these days."

He puts a threat in the words that everyone can hear, and it snaps the club president out of whatever stupid move he might've been contemplating in his head.

"Put the guns away," he tells the club members sharply, and his men comply with some grumbling. The one in front of me doesn't look away from me as he holsters his gun, his eyes narrowed. There's still dried blood around his nose from where I elbowed him in it, and I hope like hell that it's broken.

I should have hit him harder, the fucker.

Gage folds his arms, appearing even more commanding now that we're not at gunpoint anymore.

"Why are you here?" the president asks, and it's clear he wants us gone as soon as possible. The feeling is entirely mutual. I'm ready to be done with this fucking place, but we came here for a reason.

"I thought we got a message from you," Gage says after a moment's hesitation. It's a subtle response, trying to get a hint of whether the club had

anything to do with Ivan's body without asking directly.

The president just looks confused, though. "A message? We didn't send any message."

"Are you sure?" Gage asks, narrowing his eyes. "Nothing you wanted us to know?"

The lanky man shakes his head. "No. I regret what happened with Derrek, but once you sent him back to us, we had no plans to retaliate. If you got a message you think was from us, then it must've been from someone else trying to start trouble."

It looks like it's not easy for him to say all of that, probably because he thinks it makes him look weak in front of his people or some other macho bullshit. The rest of the Diamond Devils look just as confused as their leader, and a couple of them break into a whispered conversation, probably wondering if they're being set up or if someone else in their organization is going rogue.

Shit. If that's so much of an issue, then their leader needs to get his people in fucking line.

Either the president is a great actor, which doesn't seem all that likely, or it wasn't the Diamond Devils who put Ivan's body out on display. It was a long shot to begin with, I guess.

I don't know if I feel better or worse knowing we can cross them off our list as a possibility. It means we're right back at square one.

Gage just nods, seeming to accept the man's words as the truth. "It must have been a misunderstanding then," he says. "No harm done."

That doesn't do anything to relax the tension in the air. If a car backfired outside right now, it would probably spark a blood bath.

The guns have been put away, but everyone in this place is still on a hair trigger. One wrong move, and this could break bad in a big way.

Time to go, then.

As if he's had the exact same thought as me, Gage turns, putting his back to the president. But Priest and Knox watch the man, making sure there aren't any sudden moves.

"Let's go," Gage says, jerking his head toward the door we came in.

Everyone falls in line at his order, and even I walk along with them, filing out of the clubhouse with the eyes of all the gathered members on us. No one speaks or even breathes too loud until the door is shut behind us,

and then it feels like shrugging off a weighted blanket as the heavy tension eases all of a sudden.

I'm still pissed about that dick hole putting his hands on me, but it's behind us now. We got the info we needed, and we made it out alive.

"So they don't know anything," Priest says, his voice so cool that you'd never guess that he had a gun pointed at his face not that long ago.

"Yea, it seems that way," Gage agrees. "I don't think he's a good enough liar to bullshit about that. And if they had something that big on us, then they wouldn't have been so twitchy about the shit with Derrek. Besides, if they had left that message for us, we just gave them the perfect opening to try to blackmail us or make whatever demands they wanted, and they didn't. They're clear."

"So we're back to where we started," Ash muses. "With no leads and no clue who did it or why."

"Super. This was a really fun field trip, guys," I mutter under my breath, but he doesn't even acknowledge me.

Knox cracks his knuckles, seemingly more for something to do with his hands than as any kind of threat. "Still a long list of people who could be involved," he says. "I mean, Ivan had a lot of allies. People who he conned into working for him, people who thought he was gonna take them to the top with him. Any of them could be out for revenge if they know we killed him."

"There's the cartel, too," Gage points out. "What a fucking mess."

Shit. I almost forgot about them. Back when I was still trying to kill Ivan St. James, I accidentally shot a cartel leader who had set up a meeting with him, and then Priest killed a few of his guards when they came after me. I feel sort of bad for killing the guy when he wasn't my intended target, although I'm sure if I found out more about him, I could find plenty of reasons why he deserved to die.

As we all pile back into the car and head back to the house, the guys keep talking, but they're just going in circles, same as last night. Every time we talk about this, that's how it always ends up going. We don't have enough information, and it's not like we can barge into every criminal headquarters in Detroit and start asking questions.

I'm on edge, clenching and unclenching my fingers into fists in my lap while I listen to them talk it over and over and over. There are too many fucking questions. And not just about Ivan, either. He's the big thing on

their minds right now, but I can't stop thinking about that ghost-like glimpse I think I got of my sister.

There was a time, after Hannah died and I was finally released from captivity, where I thought I saw her everywhere. I don't know if it was my brain still coming to terms with the fact that I was never going to see her again or what, but I would sometimes catch sight of someone with hair like hers or a smile like hers, and I would whip around, hope leaping in my heart.

It was stupid back then, because I watched her die. They killed her in front of me, so I knew there was no way she could be any of those girls I saw. But the grief and guilt that ate away at my soul made that fact hard to internalize.

Even so, the last time I thought I saw her was years ago, and I was pretty sure I'd gotten over that.

So what does it mean that I saw her at that gala? Was it just her memory being too close to the surface in my mind? Because I was fresh off of killing Ivan just a few days before? Some kind of... catharsis because the list was finally complete?

My head feels like it's spinning with all those questions I don't have answers to as Gage parks the car and we head into the house. I barely pay attention to the guys, until I look up and find Gage standing in front of me.

The others have cleared out, and it's just the two of us in the entryway.

His green eyes are sharp with anger, the way they so often are, and I can see the storm cloud of rage simmering behind them. He's pissed, and I brace myself, ready to be pissed right back at him for whatever he thinks he's going to tell me off for now.

"That was really fucking stupid," he snaps. "*That's* why I didn't want you to come. You can't just go into a place like that, their fucking headquarters, and attack one of them. That's not how this shit works."

"So what do you want me to do, Gage?" I snap back, glaring up at him. "Just let any asshole who feels like it put their hands on me? Just stand there and take it while I get groped like a piece of fucking meat?"

"I want you to stop doing shit that'll get you killed!" he grinds out. "Get all of us killed. You see how that went today. It went from tense to nearly a fire fight because you couldn't control yourself."

"Me?" I demand, incredulous. "I couldn't control myself? That's fucking hilarious."

“You know what I’m saying.”

“I know you’re acting like me defending myself is some big crime. Like I owed it to that fuck nugget to just let him have his fun and grin and bear it. Well fuck that. I’m not that kind of girl, and I never fucking will be. If someone thinks they can take liberties with me, then they’re damn well going to deal with the consequences. And I don’t give a fuck what you have to say about it.”

I stare up at him as I finish speaking, defiant and pissed off.

He just stares back, his expression hard and unyielding. He’s not used to people talking back to him in this house, I guess. But whatever. He can glare at me all he wants; I’m not his fucking subordinate or property to boss around.

There’s something else there, though, lurking just under the anger. A hint of worry in his eyes. Concern that one day I am going to bite off more than I can chew, maybe.

My chest tightens, my heart seeming to trip over itself as it tries to beat normally. That sickening feeling in my stomach is back, the same way it was when Ash started saying shit about wanting things to matter with me. I can’t handle it again. I don’t want to do this. I don’t want to see it—don’t want to see anything more than the sharp edges and the walls between us.

So I pretend I didn’t.

I focus on the anger that’s still so clear in Gage’s expression, letting it fuel my own. That makes it easier to shove past him and stalk deeper into the house.

KNOX

THE REST of us are standing in the kitchen while River bites Gage's head off and then storms off to somewhere else in the house.

It's not really a new sight, the two of them going at it, and we all just kind of watch it play out until she's gone. They can both have explosive tempers when they want to, and they seem to just feed off each other's anger.

"You know, Gage," I drawl, leaning in the doorway with my arms folded. "You should think about quitting the nightclub business. Start giving seminars on how to talk to women. You're really good at it. You could probably even give Ash a few pointers."

"Fuck off, Knox," Gage growls under his breath and then stalks off, going to his library and slamming the door behind him.

Priest doesn't look amused, but when the fuck does he ever? Ash has a dour look on his face that doesn't suit him, and I just laugh.

What's the point in being sore about how things went down? We got the info we needed, and no one got shot in the face. Everything worked out, as far as I'm concerned. If the Diamond Devils didn't want to end up on our shit list so often, then they should learn to keep their hands to themselves. Judging by how easily that fucker put his hands all over River in their clubhouse, I can see how Reggie thought he could get away with fucking over one of our dancers. That shit seems to be acceptable for them.

Well, too damn bad, because I meant what I said. We don't tolerate that nonsense, and if it hadn't been such a tense situation, I would have shown that asshole first-hand what happens when you fuck with one of ours. And no matter what Gage and the others say, River is one of ours.

Priest and Ash head off to do whatever, and after a second of standing in the quiet hallway, I go in search of River like an addict casually seeking out his next fix.

I expect to find her in her room, pacing or glaring or cleaning a gun or something. It hits me that I don't really know what she does to calm herself down when she gets this pissed off. I've seen her painting her nails or taking her frustration out on Reggie that one time, but I don't know if stuff like that is her routine. I don't know what she needs when she gets like this, and it doesn't really surprise me that I want to know.

Her bedroom is empty, but from the window, I can see her outside in the backyard, throwing sticks for the dog and trying to get him to fetch them. He just looks at her with his head tilted to one side, like he doesn't understand what she wants from him, and I laugh under my breath and head out there to join them.

It's a nice day, and Slim Shady seems happy to be outside, even if he doesn't want to chase the sticks.

"Get the stick, you fucking useless—" River bites off whatever she was going to call the dog, throwing the stick again in a fit of frustration.

The mutt just flops down in the grass and huffs out a breath.

That seems to piss River off more. If this was a cartoon, she'd have steam coming out of her ears. I like how her emotions radiate from her, like ripples in water, getting bigger and bigger. She doesn't make an effort to hold them back or pretend things are okay, and I can practically feel the heat of her anger coming off her in waves. I just stand there and bask in it for a moment, because I enjoy feeling her emotions like this. The good ones and the bad ones. I'll take them all.

"King Charles over here doesn't wanna fetch the stick," I say, stepping forward and jerking my thumb at the dog. "He's too busy sunning himself."

"Or he's just fucking stupid," she mutters.

I shrug. "I don't know. Maybe. I thought dogs had some kinda... fetch instinct. You know? They see something fly by and they just have to chase it."

River rolls her eyes and levels a glare at me. It's not as heated as the one she was giving Gage earlier, but I can tell she's still pissed the fuck off. "What do you want, Knox? Are you going to tell me off for hitting that dude too?"

I bark a laugh at that, giving her a look. “What do you think? I would’ve hit him for you if I could have. Or more. He deserved it.”

That seems to calm her down enough that she drops the stick in her hand and lets out a sigh.

“Tell that to Gage,” she mutters.

“I would, but it wouldn’t do any good. He’s always looking at the bigger picture. Always like three steps ahead. He had a goal in mind, going to the Devils’ place, and what happened in there could have fucked up the goal.”

Her eyes flash with irritation, and I take a step closer to her, drawn in by the way her dark blue irises almost seem to shift color with her mood, taking on a slight violet hue.

“Well excuse the fuck outta me for retaliating when someone grabs my ass,” she mutters. “Next time I’ll wait until Gage’s precious meeting is over before I knock the fucker in the face.”

I hold up both hands in a gesture of peace. “Hey, I’m on your side. I’m just telling you how Gage looks at it. Thought maybe it would help if you understood where he’s coming from.”

She looks away abruptly, something other than anger on her face for just a second before it’s gone. “It doesn’t,” she grumbles. “It just makes me want to hit *him* instead.”

I understand that feeling. I get being so full of anger and pain and raw fucking emotions that you want to lash out at the first person or thing that pisses you off next. It’s like being a living, breathing volcano—simmering and bubbling and just waiting to erupt.

“You know what always calms me down when I’m pissed off?” I ask her, changing the subject a little.

River looks back to me and lifts an eyebrow. “Beating someone until they look like ground beef?”

I laugh again, tossing my head back because she’s got me dead to rights there. “Sometimes, yeah. But that’s not always on the table. Gage and his goals and whatnot. Sometimes shit has to be strategic and not just... I dunno, a fit of anger. When I can’t lash out like I want to, I like to clean and organize my shit, you know? My tools of the trade.” I draw the phrase out, making it sound lofty and pretentious, just to see if it gets a laugh out of her.

It doesn’t, but she lets out a slow breath and some of the tension eases in her shoulders, so I’ll take that.

“You wanna help?” I offer.

She glances over at me again, and I can see her considering it. Finally, she shrugs. “Sure. Whatever. Beats throwing sticks while the dog looks at me like I’m a fucking moron.”

I flash her a grin, and we head inside, Harry Potter trotting in after us. The dog goes to his favorite spot, and River and I head to the basement.

We haven’t been down here together since she killed Ivan, and I wonder if that’s on her mind as we step into the small space. If she remembers the way she killed him. If she still feels anything about it. She probably does, because something that big doesn’t just go away, but it’s been a long day already, and yesterday wasn’t any shorter. There’s probably a lot on her mind as it is, so I don’t bring up Ivan. She doesn’t say anything as I walk over to the cabinet where I keep everything and start pulling things out.

Scalpels, knives, the taser. The hot stick with the cord coiled around it. Pliers, tweezers, screws, clamps. Hammers and needles and pokers. Even some shit I don’t know the names of, but have invented uses for when it comes to causing enough pain to get what I want.

River watches me and then comes over as I lay stuff out on the counter. She starts sorting through it, putting all the sharp shit together on one side, running her fingers over the flat parts of the blades like she wants to test them.

Some of this, she’s seen before, when we were torturing Reggie together. My cock twitches at the memory of fucking her over this counter while he sagged in his chains. Some of it is new to her, more esoteric, and I can see her turning things over in her hands like she’s trying to work out what they might do.

“You just clamp shit with that,” I say as she squeezes the hinge on a clamp with wickedly sharp teeth.

“Anything?” she asks.

I shrug. “Sure. I usually go for like the tongue or some other sensitive place. Just to make them scream. There’s a humiliation in it, you know? A sharp clamp hanging from a delicate place. Adds to the sensation. Makes ’em squirm. Sometimes you gotta really drive home how helpless they are in the situation. How there’s nothing they can do, and if they try to fight me, it’s just gonna get worse. Stuff like that helps. Knocks them down a peg or five.”

River nods thoughtfully, like she can picture it, and I grin at her. It's an expression that comes naturally to my face when we talk about shit like this.

"What about these?" She holds up another set of clamps, these ones smaller than the first set with wires running from them.

"Electric," I tell her. I rummage through the cupboard and come up with the little box the clamps plug into, showing her how the whole thing fits together. "Sometimes it's fun to give 'em a little shock when they're being stubborn. And if you cut them deep enough, you can sometimes clamp the edges of the wound and then shock that. Judging from how they scream, that hurts like a motherfucker."

A little more of the anger drops away from her as we talk. She touches or holds up various instruments, and I explain how I use them. How I twist or cut or burn or shock with them, until the person at my mercy is in so much pain they either pass out or tell me everything I want to know.

"They can't be that useful if they're unconscious, can they?" she asks.

I shrug. "Depends on what I'm going for. Sometimes I already know what I need to know, and I'm just punishing them. Making sure they're not gonna fuck up again."

"Like with Reggie at the end there?"

"Yeah, exactly. He'd already confessed to everything, so then it was just giving him what he deserved."

"You've got a lot of stuff," she murmurs.

She's not wrong about that, and I shrug again. "I like to collect this shit. Sometimes I get bored with the same old, you know? Variety is the spice of life, or whatever people say. I don't want to get predictable."

She snorts. "I don't think anyone would accuse you of that. Especially not when they're down here chained to the wall, already on your shit list."

"Probably not, but I like to make sure."

"I wish you had shown me all of this before I had Ivan down here."

I laugh and shake my head. "You did plenty well on your own with that one, little fox. You were clearly inspired."

"Yeah, I was." River glances at me, curiosity in those dark blue eyes as she shifts a lock of silver hair over her shoulder. "So what inspires you?"

"Huh." It's an interesting question. I turn a scalpel over and over in my hands while I think about it. "Different things, I guess. Sometimes it's just keeping my brothers safe. They can all handle themselves in a fight, but if

someone's down here with me, it's because they're threatening things on the whole, and I have to nip that shit in the bud. Sometimes it's deeper. More personal than that." I flash her a smile. "I got the nickname 'The Butcher of Seven Mile' because I can find inspiration to hurt people pretty fucking easily."

None of that seems to bother her at all, and I lean against the counter as I continue. "If I ever need more inspiration, I just think about how fucking helpless I felt when my uncle abused me when I was a little boy. That usually does the trick. I can summon up enough rage to murder a man pretty quickly."

There's no pity on River's face when I say that, just like I knew there wouldn't be. She's not like that. She's been through her own shit, and she knows how you turn stuff like that into fuel and inspiration instead of letting it keep you down.

"I remember you said you killed your uncle," she says, her gaze focused on my face. "You mentioned that before."

I nod. "Yeah. He fucking deserved it, the piece of shit. He was..." I shake my head, trying to find the right words to explain. I don't mind telling her more about my past. Hell, we all watched her come face to face with her own past down here when she killed Ivan, and even though I still don't know the specifics of what happened to her, it was obviously traumatic as fuck.

"He was an asshole," I finally settle on saying, even though it's not a big enough word. "He used to touch me, abuse me. When I was just a kid and didn't know how to fight back yet. We grew up in a rough neighborhood, where everyone was just focused on staying alive most of the time."

"We?"

"Yeah, me and Priest. His dad is my other uncle. Priest helped me kill the shitty uncle when the time came, so we've always been pretty close."

River nods, cocking her head a little to one side like a bird as she takes that in.

"My family disowned me after that, but I don't give a fuck. I know the house I grew up in was all lies. My parents cheated on each other and used each other whenever they got the fucking chance, and I was just caught in the middle. They knew what my uncle was doing to me, and they didn't do shit. Just pretended everything was fine because that was all they knew how

to do. That's why I live my life with no apologies now. Not hiding anything. All they did was hide who they were and what was going on, and what good was any of it?"

River watches me for a second and then licks her lips. "I'm sorry," she says softly. "That sounds... shitty."

I shrug and shake myself out of those memories. It was a long time ago, and I'm over it now. I'm not that scared kid anymore. My usual casual demeanor comes back, and I go back to wiping down the blades with the cloth I keep on hand down here.

"I meant what I said, you know," I say, shooting her a look out of the corner of my eye. "If your sister is really alive, we'll help you find out where she is."

"Why?" River asks.

"Because we want to," I tell her bluntly.

She laughs as if she doesn't believe that for one second, but it's the truth.

And it's not just me who wants to help her. The others do too. It matters to them.

She matters to them, whether they want to admit it or not.

RIVER

KNOX'S WORDS have a real effect on me, and I can't get them out of my head as we keep sorting through all of his torture equipment.

He promised to help me. Promised they'd all help me.

I've been doing things on my own for so long now that taking help from other people doesn't come naturally at all. Still, hearing him say it and knowing he meant it makes something settle in my chest. Something I'm not sure how to identify yet.

His story struck something inside me too.

I've never doubted for a second that these men have fucked up pasts, just like I do. The way they act and carry themselves, their whole life situation... of *course* they have fucked up pasts.

Gage practically admitted as much to me before, after I killed Ivan, and Priest basically broadcasts it with his whole... everything. There's definitely a reason Ash is the way he is, and Knox...

Well.

The raw, vulnerable, and broken part of my soul recognizes every bit of fury and pain that Knox carries. I know what it's like to have the people who should protect you betray that duty and practically throw you out to the goddamn wolves. The image of my father standing there, looking down at the floor while men put their hands on me and Hannah, ready to drag us away, is imprinted in my mind, and I'll never forget it. How he couldn't protect us, and the way we were used and abused to pay for his sins. I know what it's like to be toyed with and treated like an object, and I know what kinds of scars that leaves.

I feel drawn to Knox in this moment, more strongly than ever. He's always been the King who's been easiest to connect with—except maybe Ash, but thinking about him makes my chest tighten for a whole different reason, so I push that thought away.

Right now, it's just me and Knox in this quiet basement room. And right now, I want to kiss him. Not just because I want him or want to fuck him, but for other reasons that are harder to explain.

I'm a little afraid of those feelings. Afraid to peer too deep into them, like I might not come back out again if I do.

So I don't initiate things with a kiss, because that seems too personal. Too intimate.

Instead, I put down the implement in my hand and tug my shirt over my head, letting Knox get a good look.

His eyes darken immediately, the atmosphere in the basement shifting just as fast. Making a noise in his throat, he grabs me, tugging me toward him.

His hands are big, and they go straight for my tits, yanking my bra down hard to expose my breasts to him. He looks hungry, and he goes straight for my pierced nipple, latching on to it with his mouth and sucking hard.

I gasp softly, arching against him from the heat that flares through me as soon as his warm, wet mouth is on my sensitive nipple. The piercing is still healing, and the little stabs of pain just add to the sensation.

Knox pulls off with a wet pop and then moves to the other nipple, biting down on that one hard until I moan his name.

It all goes straight to my pussy, my clit throbbing with the desire to be touched. It takes no time at all for me to reach this point with Knox and his *go for what you want* attitude, and I let myself get wrapped up in it, panting softly while he works me over with his lips and teeth and tongue.

I know he likes the pierced nipple best. It's easy to tell from the possessive way he puts his mouth on it. The way he swirls his tongue around the peaked bud and plays with the ring with his teeth. He likes having marked me, likes knowing that there's something he can go back to that shows he was there.

When he tugs at the ring sharply, the pain grows, and I buck against him, trying to seek out some kind of friction or something to help deal with the growing ache between my legs.

Knox gives it to me, and I can feel him grinning against my chest. He wedges his leg between mine, giving me a solid thigh to hump against.

I grind down on him, pressing my clit against the hard muscle of his leg, moaning gratefully when that eases the ache enough that I can get my hands on him.

“Yeah,” Knox mutters, looking up. “Touch me.” His deep brown eyes are so dark they’re almost black, and that feral grin stretches his face. Usually, it looks a little dangerous or unhinged, but in this context, it just looks like he wants to devour me.

My body pulses in time with my pounding heartbeat, making it pretty clear that I wouldn’t mind being devoured.

I give him what he wants in turn. I run my hands over the broad expanse of his shoulders and down his back, mapping out the firm muscle I can feel through his shirt. Heat pours off him, and he drags me in closer, leaning down to steal a biting kiss.

It’s always hot between us, always burning fast and intense like a forest fire—but there’s something different in it now. Something about the conversation we just had. I wouldn’t admit it out loud, but knowing how well he understands my pain, having that extra closeness with him beyond us both being into fucking people up, makes things even more intense. It builds that heat hotter and faster, and I kiss him almost desperately.

Almost like I need it.

Like I need *him*.

Those big hands run down my back to cup my ass, and he lifts me effortlessly, settling me on the counter, right next to all the tools we’ve been cleaning and sorting. All those instruments for causing pain and agony just inches away from where I’m spreading my legs and letting him fit himself between them.

It’s almost automatic to grind forward against him now that I have more space and leverage to do so, and I wrap my legs around his waist, pulling him in even closer.

Knox gives a husky chuckle against my lips and then goes back to kissing me like he wants to turn me into a puddle of a person. Not that I’m complaining about it.

He gropes my tits roughly while we make out, squeezing the soft flesh between his fingers until I’m panting hard and soaking my panties.

“Fuck,” I manage to gasp out. “Knox, I—”

There are a lot of things I could follow that up with.

I need it.

Need you.

Want more.

But I don't finish the sentence at all, settling for rolling my body against his so he can feel every bit of the need coursing through me instead.

He gets the message pretty quickly even without words, pulling back enough to show me the predator's smile that curves his lips before he grabs for a knife from the neat array of instruments next to us.

The blade is wickedly sharp, and when he slices through the front of my bra, he knicks me with the cold steel. It burns a little, but I lean into it, lifting my hips so he can yank my pants and underwear down.

As soon as I'm naked, my hands go to his shirt, yanking it up and over his head. It gets tossed to the floor somewhere, and Knox makes quick work of his pants, shoving them down so his cock juts out from his body.

He's so fucking big, and the piercing that goes through the tip glints in the overhead light, drawing my eyes right to it. My mouth waters, and my pussy throbs, and I'm too fucking worked up to wait.

"I need you inside me," I pant out.

"Fuck, yes," Knox replies, sounding just as strung-out with desire as I am. He looms over me, using his bulk to press me back until I'm lying down on the counter, legs still draped over the edge.

The smooth surface is cold against my bare skin, and I shiver a little before spreading my legs even wider for him. His cock is right there, and my pussy pulses again, letting me know it's empty and would like to be full now, please and thank you.

I reach for Knox, pulling him down closer so his lips meet mine, kissing him hot and hard.

He kisses me back, but then decides to be a fucking tease, dragging his cock against my opening without pushing in. I make a frustrated noise and arch against him, trying to get him to drive into me, but he just laughs and keeps up the teasing.

The head of his cock nudges my clit, sending sparks all through my body, and I growl softly.

"Stop fucking torturing me," I snap, glaring up at him when we pause for breath. "Either fuck me or get off me, you fucking asshole."

Something flares in his eyes from my words, and I'm not sure what he'll do. When his hand comes up to wrap around my neck, my eyes go wide. But not with fear. Even though his hand is big enough to cover my whole throat, cutting off just enough of my air that I notice, I'm not afraid. The rush that courses through me is pure desire, and I moan his name in a choked voice.

Almost like he's proved his point or something, Knox finally gives in and drives into me hard and fast. His cock bottoms out in me with a wet sound, and I cry out at the throbbing pleasure.

His hand around my neck, his thick cock inside me... they're both driving me nuts, and I writhe on the table under him while he sets a pace that makes the counter creak and has me holding on to him almost for dear life.

But it feels fucking good. So good. My head is clear of anything but the way it feels to have him fucking me, his cock filling me up, his body pressed against mine.

Releasing his grip on my throat, Knox mouths at my neck and over my collarbones, finding the shallow cut he left when he cut my bra off and licking up the blood that's welled to the surface.

When he looks up again, his eyes are so dark they seem to take all the light with them. He drives into me hard enough to make me nearly scream, and that sets off his feral grin again.

"Love the way you sound... when I fuck you like this," he pants. "When you scream for me."

He slams in hard again, getting a strangled moan this time.

Those dark, deviant eyes flick to the tools next to us again, and then back to me. Before he even says anything, I feel like I know what he's thinking. I can see the invitation in his expression, in the way his eyelids droop and his tongue darts out to wet his lips.

"Do it," he says, a hungry challenge in his voice. "Cut me. I wanna feel it."

I reach over and grab the first object my fingers make contact with—the same knife he used to cut my bra. The same one that sliced shallowly through my skin just a bit ago.

I hold the knife in surprisingly steady hands, considering how hard he's fucking me, and drag the blade down his chest. Almost subconsciously, I mimic the mark he left on me, going right between his pecks.

It's a shallow cut, but it draws blood, red and stark against his skin.

"Shit," Knox curses, and it's so thick with pleasure and desire that I have to do it again.

I make another cut, parallel to the first one, just off to the side. He drives into me even harder, turning the sex even more intense. I can feel the heat building between us, searing us both from the inside out, and each stroke of his cock sends pleasure rippling through my body. It makes it hard to breathe, hard to focus. Hard to do anything but take it as he fucks me with everything he has.

His fingers clench on my hips tight enough to bruise, and I can feel his shaft getting thicker, spasming inside me as he reacts to the pain from the knife.

I add a third cut, and Knox moves like an animal, primal, driven by his instincts.

He reaches between my legs and finds my clit, thumbing it lightly. It doesn't even take more than that before I'm screaming again, his name on my lips as I shatter apart into an orgasm that leaves me seeing white and shaking under him.

My pussy goes tight around his cock, like it wants to milk him of his release too, and he manages to hold out for only another few thrusts before he's falling apart just like I did, coming with a roar that shakes the room.

I can feel the wetness from my orgasm mingled with his cum, just like the blood from the cut he left on me has mingled with the blood that's dripped onto my chest from where I cut him.

Knox pants hard, looking at me where I'm laid out before him. His hair is wild and unkempt, his face flushed, and his nostrils flare with every exhale. Reaching down, he drags his fingers through the mess on my chest, and the heat in his eyes threatens to burn me alive.

My body is still trembling from the almost brutal orgasm, and I'm breathless and a little hoarse when I finally speak. "I guess it might be a little weird that the only thing that gets me off like this is rough sex."

Knox just shrugs a shoulder. "You don't have to justify what gets you off," he says. "I stopped trying to justify what gets my dick hard a long time ago."

I snort at that. "You're just saying that because you like having sex with me like this. Cutting me, grabbing my throat."

He doesn't deny it. Not even a little bit.

Instead, he just laughs and pulls out of me, leaving me a sore, sticky, sated mess.

Pressing up onto my elbows, I look down at my chest—then blink in surprise at what I see. Knox wasn't just smearing my blood around into a random pattern with his fingers.

He wrote a word on my chest with our mingled blood, and it stands out in stark red against my pale skin.

Mine.

RIVER

SOMEHOW, whenever I have sex with Knox, I always need a fucking shower afterward. There's always cum and blood that needs to be washed off, and I always feel refreshed and better afterward, as if the sex plus the shower is some kind of magic combo that turns me into a whole new woman.

So I'm not really complaining.

I step out of the shower, toweling my hair dry as I look in the mirror. My silver hair looks darker than usual when it's damp like this, and my pale skin is a little flushed from the rough fuck and the heat of the shower.

Dragging my lower lip through my teeth, I press my fingers to the spot where he wrote 'mine' in our blood. It's gone now, washed away down the drain, but I swear I can still pinpoint the exact spot where the letters were formed.

It would scare me if I thought too much about it, so I don't. It's just Knox being Knox. He's possessive and weird and gives in to his impulses whenever he can. It was just a passing fancy or something. Something that doesn't mean all that much. To him or to me.

That's what I'm going to let myself believe, anyway.

It's easier like that, and I don't have time to get locked in my head, wondering what it all means.

Leaving the steamy bathroom, I slip into my bedroom to get dressed, throwing on some clothes before heading back downstairs. Now that my mind is a little more clear, I'm determined to get back to the task at hand. I want this shit wrapped up before I get dragged in any deeper with the Kings.

Unfortunately, despite the fact that the guys seem as motivated as I am to figure this shit out, we don't make much progress for the rest of the day. We're still chasing stray leads and going around in circles because there are just too many unknowns to be sure who the fuck put Ivan's body there. The things we know don't change, and the things we *don't* know just seem to grow more and more numerous.

It's not like Ivan was some small time crook. He had connections that spanned the whole city. Hell, the whole state and beyond, probably. There are so many people who could have taken issue with him being killed and decided to show their anger this way.

There's just too much ground to cover, and all we have are guesses.

We go around and around, getting more and more irritated with the lack of any solid footing to stand on, until late afternoon when the guys have to go into the club.

"We've been neglecting too much shit there," Gage says as he grabs his keys. "With all this other bullshit going on."

Priest hums a sound of agreement, and the other two men nod. Neither Ash nor Knox look super excited about having to handle what will probably be some pretty mundane business, but neither of them complain either. It's clear they're all used to sharing the workload at the club, and that they all take it seriously.

They head out a few minutes later, leaving me home alone.

This isn't like the last time I stayed with them, and it hits me that I could just leave. Skip town if I wanted, and leave no trace for them to hunt me down with. No one is here to make me stay, and it's not like we have some deal in place that makes it so they can tell me what to do.

That ship has fucking sailed.

I could go wherever I wanted and be free of all this shit for once.

But even just thinking about it, I know I'm not going to go anywhere. The guys would find me. I'd have to go pretty damn far away to keep them from hunting me down and dragging me back to this house. It would be a waste of time to try to run away only to get brought all the way back, and Gage would be in a foul fucking mood the whole time. Not really worth it at all.

I tell myself that's the reason I stay, anyway.

Still, being home alone makes me antsy. There's nothing to do.

I try to kill time for a while, alternating between lazing on the couch, flipping through the countless TV channels the guys seem to have, and trying to get Dog to learn to fetch. He's still being stubborn about it, and nine times out of ten, he just comes over for pets after I throw the stick.

Whatever.

I wander the house, going into the piano room and jabbing my fingers against the keys for a little while. Of course, it's nothing like when Priest was playing in here. His fingers seemed to dance effortlessly over the keys, making hauntingly beautiful music. If I hadn't seen it with my own eyes, I probably wouldn't have believed he was capable of creating something so ethereal.

I remember how he looked, his light blue eyes shadowed and his jaw tight while I spread myself out on this piano, trying to tease him. Trying to get a reaction out of him.

In the end, I got what I wanted—and some stuff I hadn't bargained for too. I had one of the most intense orgasms of my life, and I also got a closer look at Priest, at what makes him tick. Why he is the way he is.

It's hard to forget.

Standing here, running my fingers over the keys, it occurs to me that we've spent all this time debating possible culprits for who put Ivan's body on display, and the guys never once seem to have considered *me* as a possible suspect.

Not that I'd have any real reason to do it. Still, that wouldn't usually stop someone as suspicious and generally on edge as Gage from side-eyeing most people.

But they seem to have lumped me in with the four of them, as someone who's automatically on their side. As one of them, and therefore not a possible suspect. It's... weird. Since I've known them, they've always had a kind of "us versus them" mentality, standing as a unit against the rest of the world, and I guess I've somehow been dragged into the unit with them.

Even Ash, who's pissed at me and seems to hate me right now, didn't start throwing accusations my way.

Everyone else in Detroit with a possible connection to Ivan or the Kings or anything close to it is a suspect, but not me.

I don't know how to feel about that.

On one hand, it's nice to not have to defend myself or argue the obvious—that it would be really fucking stupid of me to kill Ivan, be seen with

them disposing of the body, and then try to pin the murder on them or drag the corpse up at all. On the other hand, I don't want to think about what it means that they just consider me one of them now. I never asked for that. I never wanted it.

I *don't* want it.

My thoughts are interrupted by the doorbell ringing, and I frown. It's early evening by this point, but past the time when salespeople might be out soliciting or whatever.

Dog barks from the other room, and I hear his nails scrabbling on the floor as he runs back and forth in front of the door.

Rolling my eyes, I go to see who it is.

I'm half expecting a Girl Scout or some old woman peddling pamphlets about Jesus, but there's a middle aged man standing at the door. He's nondescript looking, with sandy brown hair, a slightly crooked nose that looks like it might've been broken at some point, and broad shoulders. But he holds himself straight, with the kind of posture that screams "official business" and screams it loud.

"Good evening, ma'am," he says, nodding to me. "My name is Mitch Carter. I'm with the FBI."

He flashes his ID, and my stomach tightens. Shit. He's the real deal.

"I need to ask you a few questions," he continues. "Is now a good time?"

"Oh. Uh, sure. Come in, I guess." I open the door a little wider, stepping back to let him in. I can't exactly shut it in his face, even if I'd really like to, and his question about whether this was a good time definitely seemed like it only had one right answer.

After closing the door and calming Dog down a little, I lead the man to the kitchen, because that seems like the most neutral place in the house.

"We're following up with all the guests who were at the gala," he continues once we're settled. "After the discovery of the body of Ivan St. James."

"I see," I reply, going for an expression of bland interest.

"You were there, weren't you?"

"Yes."

"And were you acquainted with Mr. St. James?"

I shake my head. "No. I mean, I know *of* him. Most people in the city do. But I've never met him before."

It's a lie, of course, but I don't think there's any evidence that can tie us together. The time he kept me and my sister captive is definitely off the books, and I never got to leave the house they kept us in anyway. There wouldn't be any witnesses that could link me to Ivan.

Carter tugs a small pad of paper from one of the pockets of his jacket and makes a note on it, nodding. "Do you have any close friends or family that have been involved with Mr. St. James or his business?"

That's a laughable question, considering everything that man put me and my family through, but once again, I shake my head. "Not that I know of. I don't know everything my family has ever done, but they didn't tell me if they did."

He writes something else down.

"How many of the guests at the gala would you say you're acquainted with?"

"Four," I answer honestly. Aside from the guys, I didn't know anyone else there.

As soon as the words are out of my mouth, though, I think about that flash of what looked like Hannah's eyes. Even still, I can't be sure of what I saw or who it was, so the answer remains the same. I'm not about to tell this guy that I thought I saw my dead sister at the gala.

"Four. Okay. And those four would be the owners of this house?" Carter asks.

I nod. "Yeah, that's right. I was their guest. I'd never met anyone else at the gala, and I mostly stuck with them all night."

"Can you walk me through what happened that evening?" he asks.

I furrow my brow. "The whole night?"

"Just the part where the body was discovered will do."

That's even easier. "We were all standing around talking, and they announced the silent auction was about to start. The guy in charge did the whole thanking everyone song and dance and then revealed the piece. Only, it wasn't just the art piece. There was a body on top of it."

"Did you recognize the body?"

"Not at first," I answer smoothly. "It just looked like a dead body to me. But then someone in the crowd said his name. They called him Ivan St. James."

"Do you know who that was? The person who said his name?"

“No. There were so many people around, and everyone was freaking out.”

He nods and scribbles down more notes. “That seems to be the general consensus. Chaos. Pandemonium.”

“Oh, yeah,” I agree. “There were people running everywhere. Like a stampede. We got out so we wouldn’t get crushed in the panic.”

Carter eyes me for a second and then writes something else down. “And once the body was revealed, you left?”

“Well, yeah. I wasn’t going to stick around, in case whoever did it was looking for more victims or something. It didn’t seem safe.”

I try to answer all of his questions as easily and openly as possible. Being cagey around the feds just makes them think you have something to hide. I play the part of the helpful, concerned citizen, as interested in getting to the bottom of this as he is.

Carter’s facial expression doesn’t change, but I can tell he doesn’t completely buy the act. My tattoos and hair paint a picture of a different kind of person than the one I’m acting like right now.

He doesn’t challenge any of my answers, though. Either he buys them enough to accept what I’m saying, or he’s not fazed one way or another by the fact that I might be lying.

“And what is your relationship to these men?” he asks me. “The four who own this house?”

“Oh, I’m fucking all of them,” I reply, keeping my tone even.

Carter’s brows twitch at that, as if they *really* want to move up toward his hairline, but he keeps his stiff professional façade in place. It’s almost impressive that he doesn’t take that bait even a little bit.

He writes it down though, and I can just imagine him noting down something like “relationship: sexual” in those clinical terms cops and feds use.

“Since the night of the gala, have you had any contact with any of the other guests? Anyone reaching out to ask you for your story or get information?”

“No. Just the guys. And now you.”

“No one else has contacted you?”

“Nope,” I say again. “Like I said, I didn’t know anyone else there.”

I can’t tell if he’s fishing for something or trying to catch me in a lie, but either way, my words are the truth. Aside from the guys, I wouldn’t be able

to pick most of those rich fuckers out of a lineup. Maybe the woman Ash went off on or a couple of the super rich guys he pointed out, but other than her being rich and snooty and them being bland and middle-aged, I don't remember much about them.

Carter isn't done, though. Apparently, he's going to ask every question in the book before he's satisfied.

"Did you plan on bidding on the art piece?" he wants to know.

I snort because I can't help it. "No. That's not really the kind of thing that's in my price range."

"What about your... companions?"

I shrug. "You'd have to ask them, but I doubt it. I don't think a solid gold pedestal is really their style. We just stuck around to see what it would look like since everyone was talking about it all night."

Before Agent Carter can ask any more questions, I hear the sound of a car in the driveway. As if talking about the Kings has summoned them to the house, the front door opens a moment later. Dog starts losing his mind again, barking joyfully and running to the door to greet the guys as they come walking in.

Their footsteps grow louder as they all stride toward the kitchen. Gage enters the room first, but he stops short the moment he notices that I'm not alone.

GAGE

THE LAST THING I expect to see when I come into the kitchen with the others is some random man sitting at the table with River. He's older than us, holding a notepad and watching her intently, and it gets my hackles up just seeing them together.

I don't know who the fuck this guy is, but I don't like him already.

River doesn't look either distressed or happy to see him, but something about the way he's leaning toward her just a bit sets off that protective possessiveness in me, making me want to get between them and demand to know who he is and what he wants.

Before I can act on any of that, River catches my gaze. Her expression is... off, somehow. I've seen a lot of different looks on her face, usually ranging from annoyed to irritated to downright pissed as shit when she's looking at me, but none of those match how she looks now.

There's something there, something only people who know her would be able to see and recognize. Like she's wearing a mask, keeping her true feelings hidden.

"Ah," the man says, getting to his feet and holding out a hand toward me since I was the first one to enter the kitchen. My brothers are all standing behind me, and even though I'm sure it's not visible, I can feel the tension in them. "You must be the owners of the house. Mitch Carter. FBI."

That explains more than it doesn't, and understanding floods me in a rush. River is keeping herself so neutral because she's being questioned by the feds.

I keep my own mask in place, giving a tight nod and reaching out to shake Carter's hand.

We've had cops sniffing around our business plenty of times, but we've made a point to keep everything air-fucking-tight. No loose ends, nothing suspicious. That's why we had to fuck Derrek up so bad, and why we ended up with River in our lives in the first place. We make sure that Sin and Salvation is clean on paper, and that there's nothing the cops could nail us for.

Mitch Carter is clearly looking for something, and whatever it is, I don't think he got it from River. She knows how to play this game and play it well, I'm certain.

"Is there something we can do for you?" I ask Carter, keeping my voice even.

"I just have a few questions for you all now that you're here, if you don't mind," he replies.

I know better than to think it matters even a little if we do mind, so I just nod. The others will follow my lead. This isn't our first rodeo with this kind of shit, even though I'm pretty sure we all know why a federal agent is here now.

"You were all at the gala the other night, correct?" he asks. "At The Chalet?" He names the expensive-ass hotel we were all at for the event.

"That's right," I answer.

"And you all arrived and left together?"

"Yup. Sure did," Ash chimes in.

"We picked up River from her apartment, and we stayed together the whole night," Priest adds.

Carter glances between us all, looking away only to make a few notes.

"Did you know Ivan St. James?" he asks, his gaze still focused on the pad of paper where he's jotting things down.

"I knew him by name and reputation," I reply. "He owned the apartment complex I grew up in."

I can feel it when River's eyes land on me, and I know she's absorbing that information. Carter looks to the others, and they all say they knew Ivan by reputation and not in any real way.

None of that is a lie, either. Aside from River, none of us ever had any personal dealings with the man. He owned the building I grew up in and was a fucking slumlord, so I've never lacked reasons to hate him, but I've never had a face to face meeting with him either.

The agent jots it all down, then looks up again. “Just a few more questions, if you don’t mind.”

Again, a useless statement. If I did mind, it’s not like I could say anything about it. So I just put on a bland smile and nod. “Of course.”

“Our forensics team was able to estimate the time of Ivan’s death. We believe he died just a few nights ago, actually. Which is probably good for whoever wanted to put him on display. Still easily identifiable, but not too much of a smell.”

I make a face at the thought of someone’s rotting corpse being put out for everyone to see. What the fuck is this guy aiming for, setting up an image like that? Does he want to see how I’ll respond? If one of us will crack from the mental image of it?

No one really makes a face, although I see Ash shudder a bit in my periphery. That’s fine. It’s a normal reaction that Carter glosses right over.

“Yeah,” I agree with the agent. “I guess it’s good whoever it was didn’t hang on to his body any longer, then. Lessens the nightmares for everyone who had to see it all hacked up at the gala.”

As if any of us are bothered by dead bodies anymore.

The blank looking man nods vaguely in response, then sweeps his gaze over all of us. “What were you all doing the night Ivan died?”

He rattles off the exact date of Ivan’s death, proving that his forensics team really does know their stuff.

It’s a good thing, in times like this, that my brothers and I know each other so well. We’re used to lying on command, to spinning stories that grow between us, picking up details without having to consult each other or talk privately. It’s second nature by now.

I can tell from the look on River’s face that he hasn’t asked her this question yet, and I know the guys will back me up, so I just start talking.

“We were having a meeting at the club that night,” I say.

“All four of you?”

“Yes. We’ve been running out of liquor faster than usual, so we were discussing whether or not to switch suppliers and try to get a better deal for more.”

“Which I said was dumb because if it ain’t broke, don’t fix it, you know?” Ash puts in.

Priest rolls his eyes with the practiced exasperation of someone who’s had to deal with this attitude before. “But it clearly *is* broken, Ash, if we’re

out of gin before Thursday.”

“So make ’em drink vodka,” Knox says. “I don’t see the issue.”

I roll my eyes and look back to Carter. It’s a good act, like we’ve had this argument before. There’s a little furrow in his brow, as if he’s unsatisfied with what we’re telling him but can’t call us out on it.

“And you, Ms. Simone?” he asks, looking to River.

“I was with them,” she answers smoothly. “I usually hang out in the back room when I have time. I like it when they argue, and once you get them going about supplies, they never shut up. Really sets the mood.”

That makes him frown harder, and I wonder what River told him before we got here.

“I see,” he says, and doesn’t write anything down for that. He shifts his attention back to me. “Prior to the event, you weren’t acquainted with any of the other guests, were you?”

I shake my head. “Again, only by reputation. We knew that a lot of them are rich and powerful. Some names, a few faces. But nothing more than that.”

“It makes me wonder why you chose to attend the gala in the first place,” Carter comments, tapping his pen against his pad of paper. “If you didn’t already have friends who would be there.”

“Networking,” I tell him. “People with that kind of money are always looking to invest it. I’ve got a business to run that could use more funds all the time. If someone wanted to invest in the club, I wouldn’t want to miss that opportunity.”

He studies me for a second or two, again with that air of being not satisfied, but he doesn’t say anything. Instead, he just scribbles a bit more and then pushes his chair away from the table, getting to his feet.

“Well, thank you for your help, gentlemen. Ms. Simone.” He nods to us, and then to her. “I’ll be in touch if I think of any other questions I might have for you. As you can imagine, getting to the bottom of this is a high priority for us. A lot of people are very shaken up.”

“Sure,” Knox says, stepping forward to walk Carter to the door. “Someone going around doing fucked up shit like that needs to be caught. We’ll all sleep better at night.”

He flashes a grin that I know has made a lot of people not sleep well at night as he leads him out of the room. I know he’ll make sure the agent

goes right out the door and to his car, not poking around in anything he shouldn't be.

Once they're both gone, and I hear the front door shut behind them, I look to Priest and Ash. "We'll need to fabricate a trail that backs up our alibi. I don't think he's going to just blindly accept it."

Priest nods. "I actually did make a note a week or so ago that we were running low on stuff. If he wants to pull records, we've got them. And we can talk to the dancers too. Tell them if anyone asks, we were in a meeting that night."

I nod. It's a solid plan, and it's good that the liquor supply was actually an issue to begin with. If Carter wants to question the dancers or the bartenders at Sin and Salvation, I know they'll back us up. We keep them out of our business for the most part, but they're loyal, and there's peace of mind in that.

Knox comes back in a moment later, and nods to confirm that Carter is gone. As if that's the signal we've been waiting for, we all turn to River.

"What did he ask you?" Priest demands, voicing what we all want to know.

"Mostly the same stuff he asked you guys. Whether I knew Ivan personally. Whether I knew anyone at the gala. I told him no and no." River glances away from us for a second, twisting a lock of silver hair around her fingers. "There's nothing to trace Ivan back to me, or any proof that we ever met at all, so don't worry. He won't find anything on that front."

"Is that all?" I ask her, arms folded over my chest.

She shrugs. "Some other stuff about whether we planned to bid on the art piece and just what we were generally doing that night. I told him the truth about all of that. We were just there, we stayed to look at the piece when it was revealed, and then when everyone started freaking the fuck out and running away, we left in the chaos." There's a little smirk on her face before she continues. "He asked me what our relationship was. I told him we were all fucking."

Ash's brows furrow at that, but Knox laughs heartily. "Oh, I bet he loved that," he says, grinning at her. "Uptight fuckwad like him? You probably blew a few of his brain cells by telling him that."

The smirk on her pouty lips grows a bit. "It definitely seemed like it threw him off. I don't know what else he expected me to say."

Something in my chest relaxes as I listen to her explain what happened. The stuff about us fucking aside—which isn't even strictly true, since I know she hasn't had sex with Priest—her answers to the FBI agent's questions were solid.

It's not like I thought she was going to say anything to rat us out, because there's no way she could without taking herself down in the process. But there's always a kind of tension in putting trust in someone who isn't one of my brothers. I already knew how they would react in a situation like this one, and now I know how River handles it too.

"You did well," I tell her. "No outright lies that he can see through, nothing to lead him to anything we don't want him to know."

Surprise flashes across her face, and then she cocks her head. I sometimes forget how delicate her features are because there's so much strength beneath them, but in the glow of the overhead lights, she looks almost regal.

"Actually... this gives me an idea," she says. "Carter's questioning everyone who was at the gala, right? That's what we need to be doing."

"Making house calls to everyone who was there?" I ask, then grimace. "We don't have the time. Or any legit reason to speak to most of them—nothing to use as a cover story for why we're asking them questions."

"No." River shakes her head again. "We need to know who was there that night. Everyone who was there and what their affiliations are. It's the best place to start tracking down answers."

I hesitate, mulling that over. I can see the logic in her argument. Whoever put Ivan's body up on that stage was probably on the guest list. Most of them will have connections. To each other, to the various gangs and groups in the city. Knowing who we're up against is a good idea.

"How do we get the list, though?" Knox wants to know.

"I'll work on tracking it down," River tells him. "Carter had to get it from somewhere, which means it's accessible. I just have to do some digging."

"It's a solid plan," Priest murmurs. "And as much of a lead as we have right now anyway."

I nod. "Yeah. We need something to go on, so it might as well be this."

Determination burns in River's dark blue eyes. "I'll get started tomorrow, then."

PRIEST

IT'S DARK.

It's always dark.

No lights, so I'm barely able to see a few inches in front of my face.

For just a bit, I have no idea where I am. It could be anywhere. My nose is full of the scent of sweat, and I can taste my own pulse on the back of my tongue.

I've been running. Toward something? Away?

I don't remember.

I don't know.

At first.

But then things become clearer. In the darkness, I hear laughter. I hear taunts. Harsh voices calling my name, telling me I'm going to fucking pay for what I did.

Something slams into my back, hard. Whatever it is feels like it breaks on the impact, and I fall forward onto my hands and knees, wheezing from having the breath knocked out of me.

A light flares in the distance. First one and then another one.

It's not enough to make things easy to see, but it casts some flickering illumination. Enough that when I look up, trying to get my breath and my bearings, I can see the man standing over me.

I remember him, and the details get sharper. Even though it's hazy at first, I can't forget that face. Mean and ugly, with a nose that looks like it's been broken more than once, and a scar running down the right cheek.

Brody. The leader of the gang I crossed.

Even though part of my mind knows I'm dreaming right now, the images and sensations are as vivid and sharp as they were the day this all really happened. Every detail has been preserved with perfect clarity in my memory.

Brody jerks his chin, and his men grab me as he laughs and spits at me.

"You're gonna pay now, motherfucker," he drawls.

Something else breaks over my back, knocking me down again with such force that I'm wrenched out of his men's hold. My body aches, bruised and battered, and I feel feet kicking at my sides. I roll over, trying to protect myself, to get my arms over my head and protect my middle, but suddenly, it's not just Brody beating me.

I'm surrounded. Even more of his men have come to join him.

There's more jeering, more laughter. I can't make out any faces. They could all be wearing the same mask for all I know. Wide grins, wild eyes.

They're spoiling for a fight. For carnage and violence. The scent of blood is in the air, and they smell my weakness. They want to hurt me, to rip me apart and make me pay.

Brody leads the pack, and they jump on his order, lighting into me. Fists and feet and bats. Beating me and telling me I deserve it.

The raucous laughter drowns out my grunts of pain, and my jaw is tight from trying to hold back anything more than that. They won't get screams from me. They won't see me break.

And even as they attack me, those lights keep flickering in the distance.

Through the haze of pain and anger, I look up and see that they're not electric lights at all.

It's fire.

As soon as I realize that, the screaming starts.

Jade.

I'd recognize her voice anywhere. She's in pain, and she's terrified. Her screams are wordless at first, but then I can make out my name, over and over again. Like a prayer, but edged with terror.

I try to push myself to my feet, try to get to her, but there are too many hands on me. They grab me and hold me, and the more I struggle, the tighter they seem to hold on.

I open my mouth and scream her name, but no sound comes out. Smoke fills my mouth, my throat, my lungs.

Someone is laughing, and it cuts through the sound of Jade's screaming.

The flames are closer now. As if Brody's men have dragged me closer just so I can have a good look at what's happening. It's all red, red, red, heat and a horrible flicker like a bad movie. Then, through all of that, I see her eyes. Usually so warm and gentle, now wide and frantic.

They lock on mine, so much pain and fear in their depths.

No.

I was supposed to save her. I tried to save her.

Darkness falls suddenly again, surrounding me in a rush and cutting off everything else. I can't tell if the fires have been put out or if I'm in a different place. Everything feels heavy, and my heart is still pounding. The taste of ash and smoke is still thick in my mouth, and I clear my throat, trying to find my voice.

In the space of a heartbeat, I'm back at the gala from the other night.

People are dancing and drinking, clustered in little groups with their champagne flutes, talking about investments and fucking over poor people or whatever it is these people talk about when they get together.

Then River is there.

She looks so out of place with these people. Her beautiful tattoos are stark against her pale skin, exposed by the lack of sleeves on her dress. She stands out in any crowd, but especially in this one, and she looks so gorgeous. Ethereal, in a way she never seems to realize she is. Her long hair catches the light of the chandeliers overhead and shines like liquid silver.

I try to move toward her, but before I can, she's being pulled away. Her eyes go wide, and it's not anger in them, but fear and dread.

She tries to fight back, but the attackers are stronger than her, and they seem to be made of nothing but shadow. Just hands growing up from the darkness, reaching out to grab her.

I run forward, trying to get to her, trying to save her, but the more I run, the faster they pull her away. I can't stop them. I can't protect her.

The others at the gala may as well be mannequins, standing still and watching it all happen with dead eyes. A heavy velvet curtain drops, and River vanishes behind it, stolen away.

Then, like a magic trick, it's lifted again.

That golden pedestal from the gala is there—the art piece that no one ever really got a good look at.

But now, instead of Ivan's body lying there on display, it's River's. Hacked into pieces. Blood staining her gown, her dark blue eyes staring without seeing.

It's as if they pierce right through me anyway, and I feel like the breath has been punched from my lungs. I'm helpless. Frozen.

A failure.

Again.

I wake up violently, drenched in a cold sweat. My skin feels clammy and cold, and I can barely breathe. It's like there's a weight on my chest, keeping me from getting a deep breath in. Light filters in through the blinds, and it feels too bright as my gaze darts around my bedroom.

I struggle to get control of myself, shaking as I manage to sit up in bed. Clenching my jaw, I force myself to drag in slow breaths. One and then another.

My heart hammers in my chest, and it takes a good few seconds for my body to stop trembling.

I don't have nightmares as often as I once did. After Jade died, they were almost nightly for years. I would wake up with my jaw so tight it ached, the memory of her screams of pain ringing in my ears. Every time I closed my eyes, it was like I was seeing the after-image of the flames flickering in the darkness, and the smell of *anything* burning made my stomach turn.

It's been a while since I've had to deal with this, and this nightmare is the worst one I've had in a long time.

It leaves me feeling all raw, like every single nerve is exposed.

I think about Jade and River, both so different from each other. Jade, who looked to me to protect her, and River, who never would. So different... but apparently important enough for me to dream about them being taken from me.

I drag a hand down my face and suck in another deep breath, filling my lungs with air and holding it before letting it out slowly. Gradually, my heartbeat slows down, and I stop feeling shaky and cold. I force all the pain and raw emotion back down where it belongs, imagining it as a little ball of pain, spiky and black, that I lock away and ignore.

Control settles over me, and I feel the tight, almost emotionless state that I prefer coming back.

Good.

I'm still a sweaty mess, so I get up and head for the shower. Along the way, I don't think about anything. I don't remember the screaming or the invisible hands. I keep my mind blank once I reach the bathroom too, focusing on the hiss of the water from the shower head and the smell of my soap as I wash the sweat and fear from my body.

The suds swirl down the drain, and I imagine them taking the last of the nightmare with them, even though I know it doesn't quite work like that.

It helps, though.

When I step out of the shower and wipe the steam from the mirror, I look like myself again—the version of me I've been for so long now. My angular face is impassive, and my eyes don't give away the pain of that nightmare. I can still feel it lingering at the edges of my mind, but it's easier to ignore. Easier to move on from.

I'm back in control, so I run a comb through my hair, then get dressed and head downstairs.

River's dog comes rushing up the stairs to greet me when I'm halfway down, whining softly before lapping at my hands in some weird animal form of comfort.

It's like he can sense my distress from before, or he can smell it on me or something. But animals are like that. It's why they usually don't like me.

I pet Dog's head, letting myself enjoy the feel of his soft fur beneath my fingertips.

"Alright, out of the way," I say softly to him after a moment, nudging him back down the stairs. Despite my initial distrust of the mutt, I've come to like him. We have an understanding in a way.

It's kind of the same thing with River herself.

Speaking of, when I step into the kitchen, she's there, pouring coffee into a travel mug and clearly getting ready to head out.

"Where are you going?" I ask her, pleased when my voice comes out steady and even. There's barely even a flash of the nightmare when I look at her, which is definitely progress. The last thing I want is for her to be able to tell something is wrong. I don't want to talk about it.

But then, River is used to not wanting to talk about things herself. I doubt she'd push.

"I want to get a head start on trying to get that guest list," she says, flipping her hair over her shoulder. Her nails are a new color today, one I've never seen her wear before—a soft pink that shimmers slightly as it catches

the light. "I figured heading over first thing in the morning would mean fewer people to deal with."

I nod, my gaze darting from her nails to her face. "I'll come with you."

The words are out of my mouth before I even realize I'm saying them, but I don't take them back. Something settles in my chest at the thought of going with her, making sure she's safe in all of this.

She hesitates for a second, looking like she wants to tell me no. I'm prepared to argue if I have to, but she ends up nodding.

"Yeah, okay."

We head out, and she walks immediately toward her car.

Compared to the others in the driveway and garage, it's a piece of shit. Hell, compared to *most* other cars, it's a piece of shit.

Rusted in patches, peeling paint. It probably started life out as a dark blue color, but now it's faded to an almost gray. It looks like it's older than she is, and it might just be. When she opens the driver's side door, it groans as if the car itself isn't looking forward to being driven.

I don't say anything, just move to the passenger seat and get in. The leather is worn but comfortable, and River slams her door when she gets in, then opens it and closes it again for good measure.

When she goes to start the car, nothing happens. She rolls her eyes and tries the key again, which makes the engine try to turn over halfheartedly.

"Come on, you piece of shit," she mutters under her breath, but she doesn't seem overly worried about it.

She presses down on the brake a few times, then gets out of the car and lifts the hood. There's a minute or so of fiddling under there, then she slams the hood back down and gets back in the car.

If I were Gage, I'd make some comment about her making so much noise this early in the morning and disturbing the neighbors, but I'm not, so I don't.

Even so, River glances at me like she expects me to say something about her little car rituals, but I don't. I just watch her fiddle and then turn the key again with a little almost-smile tugging at my lips.

The car cranks right up, and River grins, putting her hand on the dashboard. "Ah. There we go."

There's something about her smile and the way she knew just what to do to get her old clunker to start up that makes the lingering tightness in my chest ease up a little. It's soothing, in a way. Being around her is soothing.

River glances over before she pulls out of the drive and notices me watching her. She arches one eyebrow, resting her hands on the steering wheel. "What?"

"Nothing."

"It's too early to be checking me out, Priest."

I don't even respond to that, just turn to look out the window as she backs down the driveway and pulls out onto the road.

It's not as far from our place to The Chalet as it was from hers, but it's still a little bit of a drive. I settle in, glancing over at River again.

Her fingers are tight on the wheel, and there's something about the set of her jaw that gives away the tension inside her. Something has been different about her since the night of the gala. She's always been a firecracker, ready to go off at the slightest hint of a spark, but she's seemed to be wound more tightly these last couple days.

Gage has been the same way, but that's down to the mystery around Ivan's body and the fact that it's a loose end. He hates loose ends, especially when they could come back to bite us in the ass.

I think whatever is bothering River, it's not just about Ivan's body or even the possibility of her sister being alive. There's something else, too.

Something that makes her sit rigidly in her seat and periodically tense her fingers around the steering wheel.

"What's your plan?" I ask her, more just to have something to say than to actually hear what she has in mind.

"Go to the hotel, get someone to give me the guest list," she says flatly. "Simple."

"You think they'll just hand it over?"

She shrugs. "I'm good at getting what I want from people. I don't think it'll be a problem."

I hum under my breath, and River flashes those dark starlight eyes at me. "You didn't have to come, you know," she says. "We don't have to be working together on this. I know Gage thinks we're bound together or some shit because of what happened at the gala, but I can handle my end of it."

Her saying that gives me a flash of my nightmare again. I think about her standing in the middle of the ballroom alone, trying to make her way over to me but being grabbed and dragged back. I think about how I couldn't get to her, couldn't even see who was taking her away. How there was nothing I could do to stop it or save her.

Bile tries to climb its way up my throat, but I swallow it back, refusing to let any of that show on my face. River has been headstrong and determined to work alone since I met her, and at first, that was how I wanted it too. I didn't want to get mixed up in her mess.

But now, the thought of not having her close while we figure this out is too much to deal with. If someone knows we're behind Ivan's death, then she's in danger, and I need to be able to protect her.

I don't let her see any of that, though. She'd probably hate it if she knew. Instead, I just shake my head, letting her interpret the little gesture however she wants to.

She huffs a frustrated sigh but doesn't argue any more. Maybe she thinks the four of us are united on this so she doesn't want to have to go through with pushing back against all of us again, like she did when Gage first demanded she come back to the house. Maybe she just wants to focus on getting to the bottom of this mess so she won't have to deal with it anymore.

Either way, we drive in silence the rest of the way to the hotel. She parks quickly, and we both get out and head toward the large building, trying to look casual.

It's a lot quieter than it was the night of the gala. No cars streaming in, no valets out front. The police tape that was probably everywhere during that first night is gone, already put up and then taken down.

"Are we walking right in the front door?" I ask River, glancing over at her.

She shakes her head and diverts our path to the side. "Nah. These kinds of places always have a—"

She doesn't finish that sentence, but she doesn't have to. We come around the side of the building and find a side entrance, propped open with a rock.

It's near the smoking area, so probably some housekeeper or bell boy popped out for a smoke break and didn't want to get locked out.

In the distance, I can make out sounds of a one sided conversation, and River flashes a grin as she grabs the door and eases it open, slipping inside with me following her.

We leave the rock where it is and make our way down the quiet hall.

This place is one of the nicest and most exclusive hotels in Detroit, catering to people who want to spend too much money just so the rest of the

world will know they *can*. But since we came in through a staff entrance, we're seeing the less glamorous side of the hotel. There are no guest rooms on this first floor, and we make our way past maintenance closets and closed doors with labels like *Grand Ballroom* and *Executive Lounge*.

The place seems quiet and empty. After what happened at the gala, I bet it's going to be a bit before anyone wants to host a big event here, which works in our favor.

We come out into the lobby just in time to see a harried looking woman go rushing past, holding a phone to her ear before disappearing behind the front desk.

The only other people in the glittering lobby are the bored looking guy behind the front desk, and a security guard who eyes us as we step in. He glances at the desk guy, who doesn't look up from his phone, and then shakes his head, moving to intercept us.

"Can I help you?" he asks.

Instinctively, I size him up. He's shorter than me and a little broader, but the weight isn't muscle, judging from his frame. Tired eyes, and a weapon on his hip. Hard to tell in the holster if it's a gun or a taser, but better not to take the risk.

River doesn't even pause, just flashes him a smile that I've never seen before. It's like she shifts into a different person in front of me, and I blink at her, remembering what she said about being good at getting what she wants from people.

"Is it true?" she asks, dropping her voice down to a murmur and leaning in closer to him. "About the other night?"

The guard glances around. "I'm not supposed to talk about that."

"But you were here, right?" River continues, her voice low and a little breathless. "Did you see it? The body?"

He shakes his head. "No, ma'am. I was out here in the lobby."

River nods. "Keeping everybody safe, right? Making sure no one could get in to hurt anyone. Everyone got out safe, I bet. You seem like you're really good at your job."

She puts a hand on his arm, like she's going to feel his bicep or something, and the guard practically preens. I'd say she's laying it on a little thick, but apparently, it's working. He's eating it up.

"Well, I do my best, you know," he says with false self-deprecation. "Room full of some of Detroit's most important people, someone has to

keep them safe.”

She nods again, like she’s in complete agreement. “It’s just so crazy what happened. I mean, a body in a place like this? How did they even get it in? Why did they mutilate it like that? So many questions.”

“Why are you so interested?” the guard wants to know, narrowing his eyes a little.

River glances around like she’s about to tell him a secret. “I just really go wild for this kind of stuff,” she whispers. “I run a true crime blog, and whenever something like this happens close to Detroit, I just have to try to get all the details, you know? It’s just so fascinating.” She bites her lip and twirls a bit of hair around one finger. “Do you think...? No, never mind.”

The guard is following her every movement with his eyes, and he watches the way her teeth sink into her lower lip with heat in his gaze. It makes me bristle, but I keep my face neutral and my mouth shut. River can handle this.

“What?” he asks. “How can I help?”

“Well... I was wondering if you had any information about who was here that night?” she presses on. “It would make for such a compelling story if I had names, you know? Or even just descriptions to make the story feel more real for my readers. This is the first time I’ve been able to get in so early on something like this. It would really help me out, but I don’t want to get you in trouble.”

Her hand is still on his arm, and she trails it down a little bit, making the guard swallow hard. I can see him struggling between doing his job and pleasing a pretty girl, and in the end, the pretty girl wins out.

“I shouldn’t do this,” he says, dipping behind his little kiosk stand in the corner. “But Dorothy—she’s the one in charge around here.” He makes a face that says all it needs to say about what he thinks of Dorothy. “Dorothy needed copies of the guest list for the police and the feds, you know. She made me go make them, even though I told her that’s not my fucking job. I’m not the fucking copy guy. Next thing I know, she’s going to be asking me to make her coffee or something. Anyway, I made a bunch of copies because I didn’t want to have to go back to make more if she needed them.”

“Ugh. She sounds like a bitch,” River agrees.

“Oh, she is.” He huffs a quiet laugh, then pulls out a piece of paper and folds it up into a square. After a second of thought, he grabs a pen and

scribbles something on it before handing it to River. “You didn’t get this from me.”

She nods eagerly. “Of course not. I’ve never met you before. Thanks so much for your help.”

“Sure. Hey, are you staying here?”

“Mm-hm,” River says. “Third floor.”

“Maybe I’ll see you around. My shift ends at six today.”

River gives him a wink and shoves the folded paper in her pocket. “Maybe I’ll come down around five fifty.”

He grins at her, and she actually manages to flush on cue. She gives him a little wave before leading the way right out the front door.

As soon as we’re out of sight, the giggly, flirtatious look drops from her face, and she rolls her eyes.

“He’s going to be waiting by that stand all night, you know, hoping you come down to see him,” I tell her.

River just shrugs. “That’s not my problem. I said what I needed to say to get what I wanted. With no help from you, by the way.” She glances over at me with a teasing smirk. “It’s a good thing you’ve never had to charm your way out of anything. I don’t think people go for the blank stare so much.”

I just roll my eyes right back at her, but that’s the only response I give to her teasing. It used to annoy me how quick she was to tease, and her loud mouth. But now, those things don’t bother me so much anymore. It’s just a part of being around her. It soothes me, same as everything else about her.

“Just get in the car,” I tell her, motioning for her to go ahead of me as I look over my shoulder to make sure no one’s following us out of the hotel. We’re in the clear.

She gets in and the car starts up on the first try this time, so it’s easy enough to drive away, leaving the hotel in the distance as we head back toward the house.

The drive home is mostly quiet. River seems lost in her thoughts, staring at the road and sometimes dragging her bottom lip between her teeth. I just leave her to it, as content to sit in silence with her as I am to hear her talk.

As soon as we get back, Dog runs into the foyer, jumping around excitedly and barking with happiness to see us. He runs to River first, nudging at her hands with his head until she gives in and scratches him

behind his soft brown ears. If a dog could look over the moon with happiness, then that's how he looks.

Then he comes over to me and gives me the same treatment, practically head-butting me in his eagerness to get head pats. I can feel River's eyes on me while I stoop down and pet the dog, but she doesn't say anything, so neither do I.

She starts up the stairs a second later, probably planning to disappear into her room to go over the list. I have a wild thought about joining her—the two of us going over it together, trying to get to the bottom of this. It would be easily explained away as just trying to help because the situation is tense and dangerous. Gage would approve. Probably.

I hate the thought of River trying to go after these fuckers on her own. Some of them would sell her to the highest bidder as soon they got her in their clutches, and that thought makes a flare of protectiveness rise in my chest again.

Without even thinking about it, my footsteps follow River's. I'm not sure if I'm planning to go to her room with her or head to my own room, but before we even make it halfway down the upstairs hall, a giggle interrupts my thoughts.

Ash's door is cracked, and there's no question about what's going on inside his room. It's a familiar sound in this house, Ash entertaining his... lady friends or whatever he chooses to call them.

I tune it out, intending to just walk past like I always do, but River stiffens in place.

RIVER

MY FEET FEEL like they've somehow gotten stuck to the floor. My whole body feels frozen in place, as if I'm a character in a movie and someone just hit 'pause.'

There are the wet sounds of kissing and a woman with a high pitched voice moaning and giggling. I can imagine what he's doing to her in there. Kissing her neck, trailing his hands down her chest. Maybe tweaking her nipples through her bra as he goes.

Maybe she's already naked, and he's going to kiss his way down lower and lower...

I shake my head, not wanting that image in my brain. But it's too late. It's fucking lodged there like a burr, playing out in vivid detail inside my mind.

Something lights inside my chest just thinking about it.

The last time Ash had a woman over at the house, I walked in on him getting his dick sucked in the living room like he didn't have a fucking care in the world. It was annoying then, even if the sight of him with his fingers buried in her hair and his head tipped back in pleasure was a little hot. But mostly, I was just irritated that I had to walk in on shit like that. In the middle of the fucking living room, which was supposed to be a common space.

I fucked with him that time just because I could. Giving him and the girl sucking his dick shit as a way of getting back at Ash for being part of the reason I was stuck with the guys in the first place.

It seemed fair at the time. They were fucking with my plans, fucking with the one thing that I needed to do more than anything else, so Ash

deserved to have his afternoon delight ruined. Only, it ended up being something completely different.

What I feel now is different too.

It's not irritation or annoyance, but a whole different beast altogether. It fills my chest, burning and bright, impossible to ignore. It floods my whole body, making my skin buzz and my heart pound until I can hear the heavy beat of it in my head, like a monster inside my body, taking over me.

My eyes narrow as something inside me snaps. Instead of moving past Ash's door to my own room and locking myself in until I can get a handle on this shit, I turn and shove his door open.

Ash is on the bed, down to just his pants—although they're already open, the zipper and button undone. The woman with him is a redhead with freckles dotting her pale skin. She's practically naked except for a pair of black, lacy panties.

Both of them look shocked as hell when they notice me standing in the doorway, and the woman's eyes go wide with shock and confusion as she glances between me and Ash.

This is usually when I would say something snarky or insult both of them, but the monster in me doesn't care about banter or witty comments or any of that.

It just wants this bitch out of here and away from Ash.

I let it propel me forward, bursting right into his room. I grab a handful of the woman's bright hair and drag her away from Ash and out of the room.

"What the fuck?" she screeches, her voice going even more high pitched as she tries to fight my hold.

She hits at my arm and wrist, trying to get me to let her go, but I just tighten my grip and haul her toward the stairs.

"Let me go!" she screams. "Who the hell are you?"

I ignore her, dragging her down the steps. She stumbles, almost falling as I steer her toward the front door.

Ash and Priest are hot on our heels, and both men watch as I yank the door open and shove the girl out of the house.

"What the *hell*? You can't do this! You're—you're a *bitch*, you know that?" The woman whirls around to face me from the front stoop. It seems to hit her all of a sudden that she's standing there with nothing on but her

panties, and she wraps her arms around herself, glaring at me with big gray eyes.

She's angry, but there's fear there too.

Good.

"Get the fuck out," I snarl at her.

"Give me my clothes, at least!" she snaps back, her eyes darting around like she's trying to make sure there's no one around to see her like this. Other than me, Ash, and Priest, I guess.

"What the fuck did I just say?" I shoot back. "If you wanted to keep your clothes so bad, you shouldn't have taken them off here in the first place. Now get lost and stay that way. If I ever see you here again, you're going to fucking regret it. I promise you that."

I slam the door in her face before she can say another word. Not even bothering to give her a second thought, I pivot on my feet and round on Ash.

Kicking that woman out didn't make me feel better. It didn't tamp down the torrent of emotions rushing through me. All of that is still inside me. My head is full of angry buzzing, like a hive of bees got kicked over and is trying to defend itself and its territory. I'm not thinking, not stopping to consider anything, just reacting to the way I feel and the heat of the anger coursing through my veins.

Ash stands there with his arms folded over his chest, glaring at me.

Two can play that game, so I glare back, giving him the full force of how pissed off I am. "What the fuck was that?" I demand. "Any random bitch will do, is that it?"

His eyes narrow, his brows snapping down in a frown. He left his glasses upstairs in his bedroom, and I can see every shade of gold, amber, and brown in his irises.

"This is what you wanted, right?" he shoots back. "What happened between us was nothing. Just sex and no big deal. I wanted another lay, and I didn't feel like having seconds."

It's like a slap in the face hearing him say that. Throwing my words back in my face and then making it seem like I'm nothing. Like he used me and now he's done.

"Oh, fuck you," I spit at him, acid in my tone. "We all know that's never stopped you before. Nothing with a pulse is safe from your dick, apparently."

He drops his arms, hands balled up into fists at his side. Part of me wishes he would hit me. Or try to anyway. That he'd lash out, so I could lash out right back and get rid of some of this sharp anger in my body.

"I don't tap anything that's not willing," he retorts, taking a step back. "And what I do with my dick isn't any of your business. You made it pretty damn clear how you feel about it, so I don't know what your fucking issue is."

"My issue is you!"

He snorts and turns to walk away, heading toward the kitchen. There's a little voice in the back of my head that warns me I should let this go, but it's drowned out in a torrent by everything else in me urging me to follow Ash.

My feet move as if they've got a will of their own, and I stalk after him into the kitchen. As soon as he hears me coming, he turns and gives me a disgusted look.

"What?" he snaps. "What the hell are you doing? Haven't you fucked up my afternoon enough already?"

"You're one to talk. I'm sure everyone just fucking loves coming home to the sound of you sticking your dick in the first thing that caught your eye today."

"You are such a goddamn hypocrite, I swear to fuck, River."

"Excuse me?"

"You heard me!" He takes a step toward me this time. "You made it pretty damn clear that I was just another fuck for you. So what the hell does it matter to you if I bring other women back here?"

"It just does," I mutter, chest heaving as I pant for breath. The anger just grows in me the more he pushes, and I can feel something building and building, like it's about to reach a snapping point.

"That's not an answer," Ash shoots back. "Why does it matter, River? All this time I've been trying to get it to matter to you, and you go and pull that shit at the gala. Now all of a sudden you care who I'm putting my dick in."

I shake my head, and he steps closer again. There's not much distance between us now. I can see the anger in his face so clearly, but I don't back down. I can't, now that we've started this.

"Why does it matter?" he demands again. "What the fuck is your problem? You just don't want me to sleep with anyone now? You don't want me, but you don't want anyone else to have me either?"

“I didn’t say that!” The words burst out of me with force, and I take a shuddering breath.

“Then what are you saying?” he practically roars. Like he’s sick of this, like he needs an answer. “What the fuck is this about then?”

“She doesn’t get to touch what’s mine!”

The kitchen is silent after those words explode out of me, leaving the lingering echo of the sentiment in the air. I almost wish I could take them back as soon as they’re out, but it’s definitely too late for that.

Ash stares at me for a second, like he’s trying to process what he just heard, and then he closes the distance between us in a few steps and grabs my chin with one hand.

I meet his gaze defiantly, breathing hard through my nose.

For a second, his grip on my chin tightens so much that I can feel his fingers digging into my jaw. Then he pulls me closer and crushes his lips to mine in a hard, hot kiss.

The press of his lips against mine sparks the heat between us that’s always been there. Even when I wanted nothing to do with him, there was always chemistry between us, impossible to deny, no matter how much I tried to ignore it.

He reaches down to grope at my hips and my ass, and I drag my hands down his bare chest as we kiss, mouths and tongues battling over and over again.

My nails graze his nipples, and he groans into the kiss, retaliating by biting down on my lower lip hard enough to make me gasp.

I can feel him smirk at that, and I dig my nails in a little harder.

Before, there was always the lingering question of how things would be if we were ever to have sex. Everything else was so fucking good. All the almos and false starts. But now, we know how good it is. We were both there the other night, losing control in that bathroom. The knowledge that we’re good together is there in the way we touch, the way he grips my ass and hauls me closer, grinding against me.

It would be good enough if it was just the desire that always hangs in the air between us, but there’s more to it than that. There’s the knowledge that there are emotions involved, and the growing possessiveness I feel when it comes to him.

I said as much just now, and he didn’t run for the hills, so maybe that was what he wanted. It definitely seems to be, judging from the way he

paws at me. The way he abandons my mouth to start kissing my neck, tugging at my clothes like he wants to rip them off me.

It makes it so much more desperate and hungry than our other encounters, the two of us just grinding against each other with wild abandon right there in the kitchen.

I can feel my pulse throbbing through my body, chasing out that bright, agitated jealousy and rage from before and replacing it with desire like molten lava. My heart pounds in time with the way Ash ruts against me, and my pussy throbs with need. It's not enough to feel how hard he is through his pants, and it's not enough to have his hands on me through my clothes.

I want more than this. I *need* it.

I feel consumed by it, and when Ash finally leaves my ass alone to grope at my chest, tweaking my nipples through the layers of clothes, I moan for him, loud and needy.

There's a smirk on his face as he pulls back, but there's still an edge to that look in his amber eyes. He still seems angry, almost like he's being driven by the need to prove something to me or punish me for acting the way I did.

He goes for my neck again, and this time he bites down hard, making me cry out and buck against him. He doesn't break the skin, but I can feel the intent behind it, and it makes me drip with desire.

His hands go back down to my waist, and he quickly gets my pants open so he can yank them down. Then he hoists me up onto the kitchen counter, dragging his palms down my now bare thighs.

"Ash," I pant, more out of the need to say his name than anything else.

His eyes are still so heated, and without his glasses, I can see just how much gold there is in his irises when the light hits them. They're a dark amber now, pupils blown wide with the force of the desire that's connecting us in this moment.

He drops down to his knees on the kitchen floor, and my body hums with the anticipation of what he's about to do. Before he even spreads my legs, I'm already quivering, and the first touch of his tongue to my clit is like electricity, shooting through me hot and fast.

I groan louder and tip my head back... then jolt in surprise when I catch sight of Priest standing in the kitchen doorway.

In the heat of the moment of my fight with Ash, I didn't notice that Priest had followed us to the kitchen. I assumed he'd have wandered off somewhere else in the house—his piano room, maybe—not wanting to deal with the two of us screaming at each other over something he probably doesn't care about.

But there he is, standing in the doorway watching us. His eyes are hard to read, and his face is just as impassive as always, but there's something about the way he's so still and silent that makes my heart race even faster.

As if realizing what I'm looking at, Ash glances up from his work between my legs, catching sight of Priest himself.

"Either join in or get out," he mutters, not wasting any time before he dives right back in and keeps licking at my clit with long, smooth flicks of his tongue.

I open my mouth, not sure whether I want to moan in pleasure or say something to one or both of them. A strangled noise is all that comes out anyway, so I guess it doesn't really matter. I can't get my brain to cooperate enough to form words. Not with that molten pleasure shooting through me from Ash's mouth on my pussy.

My eyes don't stray from Priest, though. When I drag my gaze down his body, I can tell he's hard in his pants. The bulge is noticeable, and it sends a thrill through me. For someone who has a hard time getting it up, Priest's dick definitely seems to be working now.

There's something there in his eyes, something that makes me think he wants to stay and watch, at the very least.

He glances at Ash after his friend delivers his ultimatum, and there's a hesitation in the way he moves. Something is making him pause, like he's unsure of what he wants to do.

My stomach clenches with the anticipation that he might stay—that I might get both of them. In a split second, my head fills with a torrent of all the things we could do together, making use of the kitchen counter or the table or whatever other flat surface we can find.

But then Priest turns and walks away without a word. Disappointment washes over me, but it's not enough to kill the mood entirely. And it doesn't last long at all, with Ash's mouth working over time between my legs.

He's going down on me almost aggressively, lips and tongue with an edge of teeth to it.

As if to make sure I don't forget what the fuck this is all about, he grabs my ass, dragging me right to the edge of the counter until I don't have anywhere to go. All I can do is grind against his face while he feasts on me. His fingers dig into the meat of my thigh, almost hard enough to be painful, and definitely hard enough to keep me on edge, unable to focus on anything but the way he plunges his tongue into my wet hole.

He sucks on my clit and drags his teeth against it, making me gasp out loud. My hips buck forward, and I bite down on my lower lip as pleasure rises up in me in a hot rush.

It's almost like Ash wants to take out his frustration on me this way. Like he's eating my pussy as a punishment and a way to turn what I said back around on him.

I called him mine. And this feels a little like he's trying to prove that I'm his, too. That at least in this moment, my pussy is his... and he'll do whatever the fuck he wants with it.

The pleasure from the force of his mouth on me is almost painful, but I don't ask him to stop. I don't try to pull away. If anything, the rough, almost vicious movements just make me want it more. I moan his name breathlessly as I feel my orgasm building and building, the burn of ecstasy growing too intense to ignore.

I practically scream when the climax breaks over me, threatening to drag me down and steal my breath.

"Fuck! Oh, fuck! Ash!"

As if I'm a glutton for punishment, I grind my hips forward, riding his face through the pleasure and the slight edge of pain.

I never want it to fucking stop.

ASH

RIVER'S FINGERS find their way into my hair, holding on tight as she writhes and screams out her pleasure.

I can taste it on her when she comes, the way she's helpless to stop shaking, to ignore what I'm doing to her. And I like that. I want her to feel it. I want her to know that I'm the one making her feel like this, and it *does* fucking mean something.

So I don't let up.

One orgasm isn't enough for me, and even though she's still shaking from that one, I keep going. I lap at her folds, licking up every drop of the sweet, tangy evidence of her falling apart for me.

I know she must be sensitive from the way she jerks against me, but that doesn't stop me either. I dig my fingers harder into her thigh and then work the fingers of my other hand into her pussy, letting her soaking wetness ease the slide as I press two digits into her.

"Ash!" she cries out, her hips jerking hard.

I just smirk into her pussy, savoring her like I can't get enough. She tastes fucking divine, and it's like I'm drowning in it. Her flavor, her smell, all of it coating my senses and making it impossible to focus on anything else. All I want is for her to fall apart for me again and again, to feel it each time she loses control.

I'm insatiable for it. I can't get enough of the way it feels, so I keep pressing her, thrusting my fingers into her, while I lick and suck at her clit and everywhere else I can get my tongue.

It's not long before she's pulling my hair again, probably still coasting on the remnants of her first orgasm as I pull her right into a second.

She tries to muffle her yell of pleasure, but she doesn't do a very good job, and I smirk again, humming against her as she falls apart.

I finally pull back to catch my breath, looking up at her. Her face is flushed, her silver hair a mess. She's got one of her own hands wound into it like she needed something else to hold onto.

Her dark blue eyes are basically black with lust when she looks down at me, and they're hazy and unfocused in a way that just strokes the fire inside me. She can pretend all she wants that it doesn't mean anything, but I can see how turned on she is, how much she likes this and how helpless she is to resist it.

That makes two of us, considering that my cock is so hard it hurts where it's pressed against the front of my boxers.

The fight killed the hard-on I had earlier, before River dragged Jennifer out of the house by her hair, but it's back with a vengeance now.

Before River has a chance to come down from that second orgasm, I grab her thighs and yank her down from the counter onto her feet. She sways a little, looking surprised. Her lips part like she's going to say something, but instead of giving her the chance, I spin her around and bend her over the counter, pushing her ass out.

It's a fucking glorious view, her ass pert and perfect and her pussy still sopping wet from when I had my mouth on it.

My cock twitches hard, and I can't ignore it anymore. I shove down my pants and boxers and grab my dick to line it up. Just the touch of my own hand is enough to have me hissing through my teeth, but I don't let myself get distracted. I'm not going to be satisfied until I'm inside her.

So I do what I've been craving since the last time we fucked. I thrust my hips forward and bottom out inside her, feeling her wet heat envelop me like I belong there.

"Goddamn," I groan, closing my eyes for just a second. "You feel so fucking good. So fucking tight. Like you were meant for this."

River works her ass back, and I slam into her, meeting her in the middle with the sound of skin on skin. She gives a strangled moan, and I reach down and grab a handful of her ass, squeezing hard.

"Wanted you since you walked your perfect ass into our house," I force out through gritted teeth. "Wanted to slam you up against a wall and fuck that attitude right out of you."

"Fuck off," she pants. "And I didn't *walk* into the house."

Instinctively, I pull my hand back and spank her bare ass hard. Talking about her attitude made me feel like she needed a spanking, I guess.

I expect her to lash out, to tell me I'm an asshole or something, but she moans instead, going tighter around my cock.

That's all I need to keep going.

I spank her harder, making sure she can really feel it. The kitchen echoes with the sound of my hand making contact with her ass, as well as the sound of my cock slamming into her wet pussy again and again.

The anger from before is still there, in the pit of my stomach. Being balls deep in her again makes me think about the other night at the gala, and how she made me feel like what we did was nothing. Like I could have been any asshole off the street that she could just walk away from.

It's not a lie to say I wanted her from the moment I saw her. All flashing, defiant eyes with that silver hair and those tattoos. It isn't just anyone who can stare down Gage with a gun, or talk back to Knox and Priest like it's nothing.

There was something about her even then, even when I didn't know shit about her, and my attraction toward her only got stronger the more I learned.

She's been keeping us at arm's length, or at least trying to. But hearing that she wants me? Hearing that she considers me hers? That really does it for me.

It doesn't completely fix the anger or change that I hate how she tried to push me away, and thinking about the way she tried to drive a wedge between us makes me fuck her harder.

I shove her down until her cheek is pressed against the counter and spank her a few more times. Her ass is glowing red on one side now, and I grind my cock into her hard, making sure she can feel every inch.

"You love this," I pant, leaning down to say it right into her ear. "All that playing hard to get. Acting like you didn't want me. Like you didn't want it to mean anything. That was a big fucking lie, wasn't it?"

I pull out of her until just the tip of my cock is left inside, and she gasps out a whimper of disappointment.

I spank her hard for it, grabbing her ass right where it's the most red. River dances up onto her toes, squirming like she can't tell whether she wants to get away or push back into my touch.

“Does this mean something?” I ask her, shoving back inside her with a force that rattles the shit on the counter. A bottle of water falls over and rolls off the edge, hitting the floor with a thud.

I don’t even look to see where it went. I’m too focused on this, on River’s body and the way it keeps sucking me in every time I pull out, like her pussy is admitting how much she wants me and how much it means even if her mouth has a hard time with it.

“Tell me,” I demand, fucking into her in short, hard bursts.

“Ash,” she chokes out. She tries to push herself up onto her hands on the counter, but I shove her back down, keeping her in place with one hand and my cock inside her.

“Say it. Tell me you want me.”

“I want you!” she cries out. “Fuck, Ash. I want you. Please!”

It’s music to my ears, so I fuck her even harder, alternating between spanking her ass more and thrusting inside.

More shit rolls off the counter to the floor, and I know River’s hips must be digging into the edge of it, but I don’t stop. I don’t let up.

I can taste my own pleasure in the back of my throat and feel it building in the pit of my stomach. I’m probably not going to last much longer, but that’s fine.

From the way River’s pussy is going tighter and tighter around me, I know she’s going to fall apart soon, too.

It’s intense as hell, and nothing at all like the first time we fucked, although that felt amazing at the time. I know she messes around with the other guys too, so she’s obviously not shy about sex. But this feels like she’s letting me claim a part of her. Like she *wants* me to claim her, the same way she seems to have claimed me. Like maybe she’s finally accepted it, even if she has a hard time admitting that.

I can feel the anger in me fading away a bit, like I’m fucking it out of my own system with each thrust into River.

Finally, she screams again, going tight as a vise around my cock, her pussy putting a strangle-hold on me while she falls apart again. She shakes through it, writhing on the counter, working her ass back against me.

It’s enough to spark the pleasure in me to spill over too, and I follow her right over the edge, groaning her name as I lose it and fill her up.

For a second, we stay like that, locked together, breathing hard. My heartbeat roars in my ears, and I can feel River’s heartbeat through her body

where we're connected. We both need a bit of time to come down, to pull ourselves together.

After a long moment, I pull out of her and step back. She's a mess. Her juices and mine mingle to spill down her thighs, and her ass is a bright cherry red from the spanking I gave her.

She doesn't seem to mind it.

Her knees wobble, and she gives in to it, slumping down to the kitchen floor in a worn out heap. I can feel gravity and exhaustion tugging at me too, so I follow her down, leaning my back against the cabinets under the counter.

River hesitates for just a second before she scoots closer to me and tucks herself against my side. Her head comes down to rest on my shoulder, and I can feel it when all that tension she must have been carrying before melts completely out of her.

She's just boneless, sated and tired against me, and I like the way that feels.

Gradually, we can both breathe again, and my heart stops galloping like a runaway horse.

My fingers find their way into her hair, stroking it back from her sweaty forehead and then just brushing through the long, silver strands. It's soothing for me, that repetitive motion, and it must be nice for River too because she slumps against me even more, letting out a soft, contented sigh that I've never heard from her before.

"Content" isn't usually how she does things. Usually, she's all anger and determination and fire and sex appeal. But right now, she's quiet and nestled against me, and somehow I feel closer to her in this moment than I did when I was balls deep inside her.

I open my mouth, not even sure what I want to say to her, but the story starts coming out before I can even decide if I want to stop it or not.

"I grew up in a real shitty neighborhood," I tell her, keeping my fingers moving through her hair while I talk.

I feel her startle as my words break through the quiet of the kitchen, and she turns her head to look at me.

"You don't have to tell me your life story, Ash," she says, but her words aren't sharp or cutting. Not like she's saying she doesn't want to hear it—just that I don't have to tell her.

Still, part of me feels like I *do* have to tell her. I usually don't get into this shit with people, except my brothers, who know pretty much everything about me. But with strangers or acquaintances, I've never felt any urge to talk about my past. I prefer to leave it far in the rearview mirror usually, something I think about in passing but generally ignore.

But with River, it's different. I want her to understand who I am and where I come from. So I clear my throat and keep looking straight ahead at the refrigerator across from us.

"It won't be my whole life story," I tell her, letting a grin tug at my lips. "For that epic saga, we'll need a full bottle of whiskey and a whole lot of time. But... I want to tell you this."

"Okay." She looks up at me through her long, dark lashes, then nods and settles in even more.

"So, like I said," I continue, piecing my thoughts together as I go. "Shitty neighborhood. But it was one of those areas where there was a nicer neighborhood right across from it, you know? They probably put it in because there used to be a park or something there, and fuck the poor kids, let em play in the street, I guess. It always felt like they just wanted to make sure we had a really good view of what we would never have, watching these rich assholes coming and going in their fancy cars and shit."

I can picture it when I talk about it, even though I haven't been there in years. The way the road curved down from where we lived, leading into a neighborhood not that different from the one we live in now. How shiny BMWs and luxury SUVs went up and down that road, speeding along because they didn't give a shit if they hit one of the kids from the shit hole neighborhood across the way.

It leaves a bad taste in my mouth just thinking about it, but I keep going.

"There were all these housewives in that nice neighborhood, rich and bored and always drunk on wine at three in the afternoon. Some of them had kids, some of them didn't. They used to look at me when they'd see me out in my yard, cutting grass or bringing in groceries or whatever. They'd slow down and look before they drove on to their big ass houses. I guess my mom noticed that. Or she just knew how thirsty these bitches were. So she started pimping me out."

River sucks in a sharp breath at that, but she doesn't say anything. She just puts a hand on my thigh, and I'm grateful I don't have to deal with her pity. I don't want it.

“I was... advanced for my age, I guess. Already muscular and good looking even when I was a teenager. I don’t know if they thought I was older, or if they just didn’t care, but business was fucking booming, so to speak.” I snort dryly. “All these women with more money than I’d ever seen in my fucking life. I’d go to their houses and do whatever they wanted for a couple hours, before they shooed me off. Couldn’t let their husbands find out they were cheating on them with some scum from around the way. That would be like the ultimate slap in the face.”

“I guess so,” River murmurs. “But it would have been better if it was someone ‘on their level,’ right?”

That gets a dry laugh out of me. “Probably. At least then they’d be getting cuckolded by someone who ‘deserved’ it. But instead, it was just me. I was good at it, too. I learned how to please them, how to keep them coming back for more. That was part of the deal, I guess. It was important that they kept coming back for more because we needed the money. Not that I ever saw a cut of it, but I had to eat, had to keep the lights on. Whatever. It made it really hard to understand how normal relationships worked. Kids my age were going to prom and having dates at the skating rink or whatever, and I was eating out women old enough to be my mom in the middle of the day.”

“That’s why you...” River trails off like she’s not sure how to say it.

I shrug the shoulder she’s not resting against. “Have more sex than the rest of the three Kings combined? Probably. I mean, don’t get me wrong, I love a good fuck. It’s not all because of the trauma or whatever. But it definitely screwed up how I see stuff like that. I can admit that to myself.”

She hums thoughtfully and runs her fingers along my thigh. “Did you ever get caught? By one of the husbands?”

“Oh, yeah. One of them came home early while I was fucking his wife from behind on their bed. I don’t know if he knew ahead of time and wanted to catch us in the act or if he just forgot his lunch or something, but he came in and saw us and lost his shit. Chased me out of the house while I was trying to put my pants back on. I managed to lose him on the way back to my mom’s place, and I figured I’d lay low and that would be that. The guy probably wasn’t going to tell anybody what happened because it would make him look bad. But I told my mom, and she kicked me out. Said she didn’t want to deal with the drama.”

“The drama *she* started.”

I shrug again. "Yeah. She wasn't exactly winning mother of the year awards. I lived on my own for a while after that. I was only good at the one thing, so I was a prostitute for a while. Made enough money to survive on. Then I met the rest of the guys, and we got close and went into business together."

"And the rest is history?" River asks.

I laugh. "Sure, we can go with that. Until we have a bottle of whiskey and more time to kill."

She chuckles. "Alright. But I'm gonna hold you to that."

That's perfectly fine by me. I like having that hanging over us, a date between the two of us and a bottle of whiskey in the future. It makes River seem more permanent in our lives, somehow, making plans for some future day when we'll get drunk and spill more of our life stories.

I turn my head to brush my lips over her soft silver hair, inhaling her scent. As I do, something else pops into my mind, and before I can let myself worry that it will scare her away, I add, "You know, you used to give me shit for fucking anything that moved or whatever it was you said, but I haven't fucked anyone since you came to live with us."

Even though I can't see her face, I can feel her eyebrows shoot up. "Really? Are you serious?"

"Yeah." I huff a little laugh. "Even when I wouldn't let myself have it, the only pussy I wanted was yours."

RIVER

EVEN WHEN I wouldn't let myself have it, the only pussy I wanted was yours.

Ash's words seem to hang in the air for a second, and my breath catches as I absorb what he just said. Maybe it's not exactly the kind of sentiment that most girls would find sweet, but it hits me right in the chest. His whole story sheds so much light on who he is and why, but the last part makes my stomach flutter in a way I'm definitely not used to.

Things like that have never been a turn on for me. I've never wanted to be owned or treated like some kind of prize. I've always had shit to do, stuff that was way more important than trying to make someone want me past one night or a few sweaty hours. Hell, sometimes even just a few minutes.

I try to pretend the words aren't a turn-on now, but they are. They really fucking are.

No one has ever wanted me above anyone else. Even to the men who kept me locked up, I could have been anyone. That wasn't about me, River. That was just about them trying to punish my dad, and me fitting their fucked up tastes.

But I'm not just anyone to Ash. His tastes have always seemed to lean toward 'female and willing,' and I know there are plenty of women who fit that bill. But he turned them all down because he wanted me.

It starts to make sense now, why he brushed me off and seemed to reject me for so long. Even when I was practically begging him to fuck me.

Not because I was no one.

Because I was someone.

Because he didn't want me to be just another fuck that he could get whenever he wanted. He wanted it to be special. Because he thinks I'm

special.

My heart is racing again, and I move from my spot resting against him to crawl into Ash's lap. He looks at me, and I stare back for half a second before giving in to the urge to kiss him.

I put my arms around his neck and melt into him, kissing him deep and long.

It's a new kind of kiss between us, not frantic and needy, not edged with challenge, not even just about sexual pleasure. This kiss is about a whole bunch of other things, too.

We just got done fucking, but all of a sudden I need him again. I grind against him, making soft noises into the kiss.

Ash plunges his tongue into my mouth, tangling it with mine and working me up even more. I can feel him getting hard again under me, and his hands roam up and down my back, cupping my ass so he can drag me in closer.

The mess from before combines with his precum and the arousal I'm leaking now, but I don't give a shit, and I can tell Ash doesn't either.

He trails kisses down my neck to my shoulder, setting his teeth into the flesh there to bite down hard enough to make me gasp. Then he drags his hands up my stomach to my chest, and those nimble, clever fingers find the ring in my nipple and tease it for a bit, tugging at it and making me arch against him.

"You're going to wear me out," he murmurs, his breath ghosting over my skin.

"Is that a complaint?" I shoot back.

Ash laughs and shakes his head, his golden eyes bright with arousal and good humor. It's so much better than when he looked at me with disgust and contempt before. "Not even close. Come here."

He drags me in close again, and his cock nudges against my pussy. I'm still so wet and open for him that it only takes a few seconds of shifting and arranging before he's slipping inside me like he belongs there.

It feels so fucking good, and even though I'm sore from how hard he fucked me earlier, that doesn't stop me from moving with him now, rocking in his lap, trying to get his cock deeper inside me.

"Fuck, River," he groans, dipping his head down to rest his forehead against my shoulder. "You feel so fucking good. I knew you would. Knew this would be so damn good."

I'm breathless from the sex and the sentiment, and all I can really do is cling to him and keep moving. Each thrust forward buries his dick deeper in me, brushing it against that spot that makes my vision go a little blurry around the edges.

The kitchen is filled with the sounds of our breathing, our groans of pleasure, and the wet noises of fucking. I could easily fall apart like this, but before I can get too into it, Ash grabs me around the waist and starts to pick me up. He doesn't even pull out, and he doesn't put me down once he's standing. So I just wrap my legs around his waist and let him carry me up the stairs.

Other than Priest, I have no idea which of the other guys are home, and clearly Ash doesn't care if any of them see us like this. He walks right to his room and lays me out on the bed, moving with me and settling between my legs so he can keep fucking me.

It's a little less desperate than before, now that we've worked out some of our bullshit and taken the edge off, but Ash is still intent on top of me, making sure I feel every fucking inch of his cock as he slams it into me.

"Fuck, you take me like you're made for it," he gasps out, rolling his hips in a move that sends the head of his cock rubbing against that perfect spot again. "I'd do this all fucking day if we could. Just keep you here in my bed, impaled on my cock."

I laugh breathlessly and lift my hips, meeting him in the middle for a particularly deep thrust. "We'd have to—oh, god—we'd have to eat some time," I manage to get out, moaning when he grabs my hip with one hand and spreads my legs open wider with the other.

He fucks me hard and fast, bouncing the bed against the wall and clearly not giving a single shit about the noise.

"I'd just live off your pussy," he shoots back, staring down at me with hunger burning in his eyes. "That's all I need. It's so tight and wet and perfect."

"You're crazy."

"Maybe."

But that doesn't stop me from wanting him.

Licks of fire are curling through my veins, and I can feel the sheen of sweat on my skin. After coming so much in the kitchen, I wouldn't have thought I still had it in me to climax again like this, but Ash seems determined to prove me wrong.

He pulls out of me after a bit, and I moan in disappointment, my pussy throbbing from the sudden emptiness. Ash just grins and flips me over, pushing me down onto the bed so I'm prone, face down, with him on top of me. He grabs a pillow and lifts my hips just enough to slide it under, angling my ass up toward him.

When he pushes back in, I spit muffled curses into his blankets because *fuck*. In this position, I can feel him so much deeper. His body is tight against mine, his weight keeping me pinned down, so all I can do is let him have his way with me.

He reaches for my wrists and drags my arms over head, pinning them down with one hand. He's not as big as Knox, but still, I can feel the strength in him. I could maybe get free if I fought him, but I don't want to fight for once. I just want to take it.

"You're so fucking tight like this," he murmurs, licking the shell of my ear. His smooth, deep voice in my ear is enough to make me shiver, and I clamp down with my inner walls in retaliation, making him groan loudly. "Oh, *shit*." He chuckles roughly. "I like having you like this, killer. Needy and wet and desperate for me. Do you want me to make you come?"

"Fuck, Ash. Don't be a tease."

"Who's teasing?" he replies, grinding his cock in harder.

It's good, but not enough all at the same time. I'm right there on the edge, so close to tipping over into pure pleasure that I can feel every muscle in my body starting to shake from it.

"I'll give you what you want if you ask for it," he croons, nipping at my ear this time.

Oh, he's *definitely* teasing, the motherfucker. I try to buck back against him, to make his thrusts deeper and harder, but there's no room and no leverage with him on top of me the way he is. I groan, writhing under him, chasing that feeling of bliss and sensation, trying to push myself over.

"Tell me what you want," Ash reiterates. He bites my earlobe again, then my neck, grinding into me like he has all the time in the fucking world.

I can tell from how strained his voice is that he's close too, nowhere near as put together as he's pretending to be.

We're in a standoff of sorts, my stubbornness butting up against his teasing personality. But for the first time in a long-ass time, I want to give in. I want him to know that I want him. That I want to fall apart with him—*because* of him.

“I wanna come,” I moan, the words half muffled with my face in the covers. “Please, Ash.”

I can feel him grin against my neck, and he drags his cock out halfway before slamming into me once more. He sets a fast, hard pace, chasing his own pleasure as he works me up to mine.

My hands clench into fists, and I’m glad he’s holding me down because it feels like he’s also holding me *together*, too. Pleasure rockets through me, and I scream his name as I hit the edge and fly over it, my body convulsing and shaking, my pussy going tight like it wants to milk Ash’s load from him.

He follows me, losing himself while I’m still trying to remember how to breathe right. His cock thickens as he spills inside me, and I feel it pulse a few times until the last of his release is spent.

We stay like that, boneless and limp in the aftermath, until he gets too heavy and I start wiggling under him. He laughs and rolls off me, and I push myself up so I can see him.

He looks happy, sated and mussed, like I know I probably do too. Warmth blooms in my chest as I look at him, a feeling I’m not used to at all.

“Shit. You’re fucking up my head, Ash.” I lean over and shove at his shoulder, but there’s no real anger in my words, and a smile tugs at my lips.

He shrugs, not looking too bothered about that. “Maybe it’s not a bad thing if we’re getting close. You could use some people on your side. I don’t trust many people, but I have three guys that I care about and trust without question. Three men I love like brothers. Who do you have?”

The question makes my chest go a bit tight. The soft tone of his voice makes it clear he didn’t say it to hurt me, but the truth of it still stings. I’ve made a point of *not* letting anyone into my life for a long time.

“I used to have my sister,” I murmur quietly. I think of Hannah, of the way she was before we got taken and how she was during our captivity. “Maybe I still do, somewhere. Fuck.” My throat gets tight, and I puff out my cheeks as I force myself to let out a breath. “I don’t know whether to hope that she could still be alive or not. I *watched* them kill her. I saw her die. Part of me is sure I’m crazy to think I saw her at the gala at all.”

“You said you recognized her eyes?” Ash draws his lower lip between his teeth, gazing at me intently.

“Yeah. I thought I did. But I only got a look at them for a second or two at most, and she had a mask on like so many of the guests did that night.

The more I look back on it, the more I wonder if I saw anything even close to what I think I saw. Maybe it was just an illusion. Just my mind playing tricks on me.”

Ash leans in and kisses me, softly but with purpose. When we separate, his eyes bounce between mine. “Maybe you’re right about that. But the thing about illusions is, there’s always some truth hidden beneath them.” The corners of his lips twitch. “Take it from someone who’s spent an ungodly number of hours learning magic tricks.”

Sitting up a little straighter, he shows me his hands before putting them behind his back for a split second. When he pulls them back out, they’re still empty—until he reaches for my ear and produces a coin from out of thin air.

“See?” he says softly, flipping the coin over the backs of his fingers so that it catches the light. “Just because you can’t see something, that doesn’t always mean it’s not there.”

RIVER

I'VE NEVER BEEN big on cuddling after sex, but I actually find myself reluctant to leave Ash's bed after the marathon sex. I finally plant one more kiss on his fucking addictive lips, then leave his room and slip into my own room to grab some clothes and get dressed. There's still shit I need to do today, and I really want to start going through the guest list I conned out of the security guard at the hotel.

As soon as I step out into the hallway, Dog comes running up to me, eager for attention. Apparently, the couple of hours I spent with Ash were too much for the mutt, and he thought I was dead or something, because he immediately attaches himself to my side, looking up at me with his tongue hanging out.

Either that or he can sense that something in my emotional state has shifted, and he wants to be close.

Whatever the reason, I take him outside with me, where I settle on the back stoop. It's a nice day out—warm and sunny with a gentle breeze that rustles through the trees that line the back of the neighborhood.

Of course a place like the guys' house has trees everywhere. None of the concrete and dumpsters that pass for a backyard around my place.

Dog fucking loves it.

He runs around in the grass, yipping and rolling around on his back. I smoke a cigarette while I watch him run around and bite at buzzing bees and his own shadow, amused by his goofy antics.

I'm pleasantly sore from fucking Ash, and something feels lighter in my chest.

When he would barely look at me in the aftermath of the gala, there was a weight there, heavy and impossible to ignore. But now that the bad blood has been cleared, it feels like I can breathe again. It was fucking me up to be on the outs with him, and I didn't like it.

With things better between us, even if they're still not quite clearly defined, I can think and focus again. Which is good, because the other problem from the gala isn't even close to being settled yet. The guest list from the event is still burning a hole in my pocket, so I pull it out and finally give it some attention.

The list is pretty long, which tracks with how many people it felt like were milling around at the event that night, all of them glittering in their fancy clothes and thinking they're better than everyone else. Most of the names are unfamiliar to me, although a few jump out as people I know by reputation. A guy named Desmond Hunter, who comes from the oldest money there is in Detroit. A woman named Celeste DuPree, who I'm pretty sure is a fashion designer. And Alec Beckham, the rich guy Ash pointed out to me. Powerful people on the level of Ivan himself, who have enough power and status in the city that their names get spoken even in the underbelly with all the criminals.

I make notes of the names I recognize, even though I'm not sure any of them would stoop to being involved in something like this. As far as I know, none of those people are involved in anything criminal, they're just filthy rich.

Dog barks at something, and I glance up to see a bird sitting on the back fence, checking him out with its head cocked to one side. The shaggy little mutt mirrors the bird's movement and barks again, but the bird doesn't fly away, clearly not bothered by this weird animal yapping at it.

I block the barking out and go back to the list, humming a little tune under my breath.

But as my gaze settles on the paper again, my throat closes, cutting off the sound with a choked rasp.

I stare down at a name that makes my heart stop in my chest.

Maduro.

Julian Maduro.

The last name sends a chill washing over my skin despite the warmth of the day, an immediate and visceral reaction. I shiver almost violently, and I drag in a deep breath that barely does anything to settle me at all.

It's not Julian that I know—or *knew*—but his dad. Lorenzo.

A sudden rush of memories rise up in me so suddenly that it's like they block everything else out. The grass and the sunshine and the sound of Dog's barking all fade away, replaced by the heavy thumping of club music and the flashing of lights. I can feel sweaty bodies around me, pressing in on me.

Vaguely, I'm aware that it's all in my head. Everything I think I'm feeling and hearing happened a long time ago. It's over and done with.

But even that thought isn't enough to keep the memories of my past from pulling me under.

He's the first one on the list.

The first name I have to cross off.

The need for revenge burns under my skin like a fire, hot and impossible to ignore. Even when I'm just going about my business, buying bread and milk, brushing my teeth, using the bathroom, I think about it.

They all have to die, and he's going to be the first.

I have the intel I need to hunt him down. He's not careful about his comings and goings, not important enough to think he'd ever be taken down a peg by one of the bigger players in Detroit, or just too stupid to see it coming. I've been watching him for a while, learning his habits so when the time came, I'd know everything I need to know to make sure he doesn't get away. He hangs out at the same club every weekend, blowing his money on poker games and expensive scotch, trying to tempt the younger women who come in to dance with him or sit in his lap.

It leaves a bad taste in my mouth, and I'm more sure than ever that he has to die. I'd be doing the world a favor at this point, but that's not why I have to do it.

Fuck the world.

This is for my sister.

The club is loud, the music pulsing and pounding. Bodies grind on the dance floor, and the air is thick with the scent of cigar smoke from the smoking lounge and the salty tang of sweaty bodies.

It's supposed to be a classy place, exclusive. But if you wave enough cash at the door, they'll let you in, easy.

My pockets are a little lighter from paying to get inside, but it's worth it. Because he's here.

I see him at the bar, laughing at something. His mouth is wide and cruel. Even when he smiles it doesn't make a difference. I can still see the mockery there, the coldness in his eyes. I still remember the way he laughed when Hannah cried. When he threw her to the floor when he was done with her and then laughed harder when she tried to scramble away from him.

Rage and bitterness rise in my throat, a harsh cocktail that makes me want to throw up a little.

But there's no time for that.

It has to be tonight.

Lorenzo finishes his drink and puts the glass back down on the bar. He gets up and winks at a passing group of girls, probably college-aged. They keep walking, and he heads for the back of the club.

The sign above the narrow hallway says it's for the restrooms.

Perfect.

I follow him, letting myself blend in with a couple different groups of people on the dance floor along the way so he won't notice me.

It's overkill because he's barely paying attention to his surroundings anyway. He strides confidently down the hall and disappears into the men's room, letting the door bang closed behind him.

I wait a few seconds, counting down from ten inside my head before easing the door open and stepping inside. It's pretty fancy for a men's room, with urinals on one side and stalls on the other. I can smell air freshener masking the usual bathroom scents, and I can taste my own heartbeat on my tongue. It looks empty except for Lorenzo, but I check all the open stalls just to make sure. Luckily, I'm right.

I'm nervous. Determined, but nervous. My hands shake a little when I pull the doorstop I've been carrying out of my bag and jam it under the door. No one's getting in now. I can't risk being interrupted.

I can hear Lorenzo humming absently as he goes about his business, and the noise puts that sour taste in my mouth again. Just the sound of his voice makes me want to be fucking sick all over again. That stupid hum, the way he always had to fill the space with his fucking noise. Like anyone wanted to hear it.

He clears his throat, and I make my move.

I kick in the stall door, breaking the lock from the flimsy material. Lorenzo is there, sitting on the toilet with his pants down and his eyes wide.

Before he can get a word out or even move, I lift my gun and aim it for his head.

I think about saying something, making sure he knows why he's dying in a bathroom tonight, but in the end, I decide to just kill him and get it over with. I pull the trigger—

—but nothing happens.

My heart drops into my stomach, ice flooding my veins.

Fuck, the safety is still on.

It's a stupid, rookie mistake, and I fumble for a second to flick it off before pulling the trigger again to fire for real. The silencer is screwed on, so it barely makes a sound, but that second of hesitation and fuck-up is enough for Lorenzo to react.

As soon as I fire, he ducks and lunges at me, rushing me and throwing off my shot. The bullet hits the back wall instead of his head, breaking off a chunk of the white tile.

There's anger in Lorenzo's face, and he grapples with me, trying to get the gun away from me. I don't know what he'll do if he gets it. Probably nothing good. Definitely nothing good. Panic and adrenaline are surging through me, making everything bright and sharp. My head is buzzing, and I stop thinking and just start reacting, trying to make it through this. I can't let him leave this room alive, and I can't let him kill me.

I have to kill him by whatever means I can.

But he's not a pushover.

He shoves me back hard, and I go crashing into the sinks, hitting my head on the mirror over the row of them and splintering it.

The gun falls from my grip, clattering across the floor and clanging into the bathroom wall. For a second, my head spins from the force of the blow, but when I see Lorenzo coming for me again, I shake myself out of the daze and get back in the fight.

I won't fucking give up.

Lorenzo says something, but I'm barely paying attention to anything other than the driving need to end him. His words go over my head, so much static, blending in with the muffled beat of the music outside in the club.

He's probably just spewing abuse anyway, and I don't need more reasons to want him dead.

He takes a swing at me, and I manage to duck out of the way. Now it's his turn to go crashing into the mirror, and that hit knocks several large shards of glass out of the frame, sending them crashing to the floor.

I can feel my heartbeat in my head, and I lunge forward and grab one of the shards, whirling around and lashing out fast. I catch Lorenzo right in the arm as he's reaching for me, slashing him from elbow to wrist.

He howls in pain as the glass shard cuts through his suit jacket and deep into his skin. There's blood everywhere, bright splashes that stand out starkly on the white tile under the florescent lights.

He clutches his arm, the blood seeping down between his fingers, and I take the chance to finish this. I rush in and stab him this time, cutting through his fancy shirt down to the meat of him beneath it.

The glass cuts into my hand, but I ignore that.

When Lorenzo stumbles, I kick him down to the floor, and he falls back, crashing through the door of one of the other stalls. His eyes are wild, and I don't let up. I don't give him a chance to recover himself.

I'm on him in a second, dropping the large chunk of glass and grabbing his shirt front. It's sticky with blood and sweat, and I use the damp fabric to haul him up and then smash him back down. His head hits the rim of the toilet with a sickening crunching sound, and I let go of his shirt and grab his hair instead.

I'm running on pure adrenaline and emotion, and I lose count of how many times I slam his head into the unforgiving porcelain of the toilet. Over and over again until he's just a bloody, battered mess.

By the time I finally stop, I can't remember if he struggled while I did that, or if he just laid there and took it. But either way, he's still as a corpse when I drop him for the last time.

My chest heaves as I fight to catch my breath, and I stand up, grabbing the gun that I dropped in the fight. I fire two shots, just to be sure. One into his chest and the other into the remnants of his face.

I'm covered in blood and sweat, but somehow I manage to make it out of the bathroom without being seen. I walk down the long hallway toward the rear of the building until I find a back door, and I slip out that way, into a dark, dank alley.

Then I run through the darkness, getting as far away from the scene as I can.

I run and run and run, blood covering my hands.

It's so dark that I can't see anything. I can't see two feet in front of me, and even though I keep running, my arms and legs pumping frantically, eventually the blackness around me swallows me up.

RIVER

I WAKE up somewhere soft and warm, and it takes my brain a second to make sense of what's happening. At first, a panicked feeling grips my chest, and my head screams at me that this isn't where I'm supposed to be. That something went wrong, that I got caught and it's all over.

But as I force my dazed mind to focus, the rational part of my brain reminds me that what happened with Lorenzo was a long time ago. It's the present, and I must be somewhere in the house with the Kings of Chaos.

I open my eyelids, which feel sticky and swollen. As I do, the now-familiar walls and ceiling of my room in their house swim into view. Relief crashes over me at the confirmation of where I am. It's funny to think that I'm relieved to be here rather than anywhere else, but I am.

It was just a dream. Or a flashback. Or a nightmare. A nightmare of a nightmare.

Either way, everything that's churning around in my head already happened. It's in the past. My list is all crossed off.

The sound of shuffling alerts me to the fact that I'm not alone, and I turn my head to see all four of the men in the room with me. They stand near the bed, staring down at me with pinched, concerned looks on their faces. Even Knox looks worried, rather than cavalier and unhinged like usual.

I'm glad to see them. Having them here means I'm safe, and that feeling rises up before I can stop it or think about it too much. It's just instinctive. I'm safe, and I'm not alone.

I can still feel the panic attack buzzing under my skin, though—that feeling like ants are crawling all over me. The flashback pounds inside my

brain, and when I close my eyes again, I get a sudden image of that bathroom drenched in blood. My stomach churns threateningly.

I bolt up from the bed with a groan and rush to the bathroom, making it to the toilet in time to barf right into it instead of all over the floor.

The guys follow me. I can tell from their footsteps, which gather in the small room behind me. Cool, surprisingly gentle hands smooth my hair back, holding it out of the way while I lose the contents of my stomach. I think it's Priest, just from the way he holds himself, but it could be any of them, and I'm grateful for it.

Eventually, the nausea passes, and I push myself back shakily.

Gage fills a cup in the sink and passes it to me. I gulp the water gratefully, my hands trembling around the glass. Getting up off the floor sounds like too much work, so I settle into a seated position with my back against the bathtub, breathing through my nose to try to calm myself down.

None of the guys speak, giving me space and time to work through this, thank fuck. But they stay, looking down at me like they're waiting to hear if I'm alright or not.

It's a hard question to answer.

They know what happened to me in vague terms, since I reminded Ivan why he was about to die when I faced off with him in their basement. But I've never really told them the specifics. I've never told them the whole story.

"I don't know where to start," I say, my voice raspy and rough.

"The beginning is usually a good place," Ash points out quietly.

I glance up at him and remember how several hours ago, we were sitting on the kitchen floor together and he was telling me his story. So maybe he's right.

At the beginning, then.

I take a deep breath and then another, looking back down at the bathroom's shiny tile floor. This will be easier to say if I don't have to look at them while I do it. I close my eyes, but then all I can see is my dad standing in the middle of the living room, refusing to look at me. It's better than seeing Lorenzo's caved in head, but not by much.

So I keep my eyes open instead.

"You asked me at the beginning of all this shit why I had such a vendetta against Ivan St. James," I say, the words coming slowly.

“Something to do with your sister.” There’s a little line between Gage’s eyebrows, and he gazes at me intently. “You talked to him about her before you killed him.”

I nod. “Yeah. He...” *Fuck, this is hard.* I lick my lips and try again. “Ivan was the last name on a list of people who deserved everything they fucking got. When I was like sixteen, my dad pissed off a bunch of mafia men. He was a little fish in a big, shitty pond, and he tried to play out of his league. He crossed the wrong people, and they weren’t going to let that stand. And these people, they weren’t the types to just kill you when you fucked up. No, that would be too easy. Too quick, I guess. So to punish our dad, my sister Hannah and I were taken and held captive for... fuck, I don’t know. Six months or so, I guess. It was hard to keep track of the time when we were in there.”

I chance a glance up at the Kings, and they’re all still silent, their faces hard as they listen. I know my story will resonate with basically all of them. They all know what it’s like to be taken advantage of and hurt.

“It was supposed to be about punishing our dad, but they started to have fun while we were in there too. They abused us. Raped us, beat us. Anything they could do to make sure we didn’t know a single fucking second of peace, they did it. And they got off on it like the twisted fucks they were. My sister died in there. I tried to protect her, but they killed her anyway. Or, at least... I thought they did. Now I have no idea what to think.”

There’s silence for a bit when I’m done, everyone absorbing that. Even me.

Then Knox speaks up. “I wish we’d met you earlier so we could’ve helped you smoke those fuckers.” He grins at me, something a little closer to his usual feral expression passing over his face. “Not that you needed the help.”

That settles something in my stomach and my heart. He wants to protect me, to help me take down the people who wronged me, but he also recognizes that I’m strong enough to have protected myself.

“Is...” Ash trails off like he’s not sure how to word his question. “Is Ivan’s death catching up to you?” he asks finally.

I shake my head, grimacing. “No. He deserved worse. This was... I was going over the guest list from the gala, and I recognized one of the names. It fucked with my head. Julian Maduro.”

Gage blinks. "I didn't even see him there."

My brows shoot up, my heart thudding a little harder as I tilt my head to look at the broad-shouldered man. "You know him?"

"No, but everyone knows of him. Of the family. After Lorenzo Maduro's death, Julian and his sister built the family back up. They're pretty damn powerful now, even after the ground they lost when Lorenzo died."

I hold Gage's gaze as steadily as I can. "I killed Lorenzo," I tell him. "He was one of the names on my list. My first, actually."

A whole host of emotions flicker over his face, quick as a flash. I can tell he's surprised and maybe a little impressed, but he doesn't say any of that. He folds his arms and furrows his brow as he thinks. Then he glances at Priest.

"Did you know Julian was going to be at the gala?"

Priest shakes his head.

"That's a connection," Gage continues. "I don't know if the Maduros ever worked with Ivan, but if his dad and Ivan were buddies when it came to their sick hobbies, then..."

No one needs him to finish that sentence, but Knox does anyway. "You think Maduro might be the one who put Ivan's body up at the gala?"

"It's possible. He has the connection, and if he knows River, then the connection gets even more solid."

"He *doesn't* know me though," I say, chewing on my lip and trying to keep the analytical side of my brain working so that I won't fall into a panic attack again. "He was never around when Lorenzo and the others were fucking with us. I've never met him. As far as I know, he'd have no idea who I am."

"It could be less personal than that," Priest puts in. "His dad died under... mysterious circumstances. Everyone knew it was a murder, but no one knew who or exactly why. And then the same thing happens to Ivan. Maybe Julian is assuming—correctly—that the two things are related and wants to draw out the person who did it."

"For what?" Ash asks. "For revenge? I highly doubt he's going to call the police or anything."

"Could be revenge," Gage replies with a shrug. "River had a list of people to take down because they killed her sister. Who's to say Julian Maduro isn't on a similar mission to get vengeance for his dad?"

“It’s not the same thing,” I say, my voice sharp. “Lorenzo Maduro was a fucking asshole. My sister was just a kid.”

The hard lines of his face soften. “I know. I’m not saying it’s actually the same, I’m just throwing ideas for a motive out there.”

“So what do we do?” Ash glances around at everyone clustered in the small bathroom. “How do we figure out if Julian had a hand in Ivan’s body reappearing?”

“The easiest way would probably be to pay him a visit, just like we did with the Diamond Devils,” Priest says. “We could make up an excuse to ask for a meeting with him and then feel him out.”

The thought of seeing that man makes my stomach turn all over again, and for a second, I think I’m going to be sick one more time. I breathe through it though, letting out a shuddering breath.

Seeing any of the Maduros, anyone related to Lorenzo, will just bring back more bad memories. All the same, I’m not going to sit around here while the guys do all the work. I’m in this too.

“I’m going with you,” I tell them, and I’m glad my voice doesn’t shake when I say it. I look up, almost daring them to tell me no.

They all exchange glances, and I can see the reluctance in each of them. But after a long beat, Gage nods.

“Alright. You can come.”

KNOX

WHEN GAGE SAYS we're going to go meet with Julian, he doesn't mean in a few days. He means fucking now. He's a man of action, and I like that about him. Always have. No waiting around, no sitting back on our heels. We're just going to go have a nice little chit chat with him about the gala and see if we can suss out what the fuck he knows and doesn't know.

But we're not stupid, and I'm not walking in there empty-handed.

So before we leave, I head down to the basement to grab some of my more... unconventional weapons. Things that aren't like guns or big knives, but smaller and easier to conceal.

I finger a scalpel, and the distinct urge to use it rises up in my chest.

I haven't stopped thinking about River's story since she told it, and I picture having Lorenzo down here, chained up to the wall. Or any of the other men who hurt River and her sister so badly. Even Ivan again would do. I want them to suffer. I want them to pay. I want to make them feel even just a small bit of the pain they put my little fox through.

I bet they'd all beg for mercy before the end. Try to pay me off or offer me some kind of bribe. None of them have any fucking decency in them because that's how people like that are.

I know I'm not a good guy, and I've killed and tortured and fucked people up, but not kids. I've never tried to make someone innocent pay for the shit someone else did. And thinking about it happening to River makes my goddamn blood boil. She's strong and can take care of herself now, but back then? Before she'd even really dipped her toe in this world?

Probably a different story.

The rage inside me expands like a monster hungry for its next meal, and I indulge in the images cascading through my mind, savoring each one of them like a fine whiskey. I think about getting all six of those fuckers down here in my basement, hurting each one of them in turn and making the others watch and wait. I bet they'd be ready to shit their pants in fear, wondering if I was going to do the same thing to them or make it worse as I moved down the line. I think about taking a pair of clamps and using it to pull out teeth, one by one. Dragging knives and scalpels and razor blades down their arms and watching the blood spill out. Smashing their fingers with a hammer until the bones are in so many pieces they'd never be able to grab another girl again.

These are all happy little daydreams, and I spin the scalpel in my hand, my face spreading into a smile while I let myself get carried away with that for a bit.

But there's not enough time to lose myself in fantasies. The fun will have to wait while we go gather intel and play the long game. I sigh and finish arming myself, grabbing clamps to go with the other things I have, and then head back upstairs where the others are finished getting ready.

Gage has a look on his face that I recognize well, somewhere between being pissed off and thoughtful. I know he's thinking about what River told us just like I am. He glances at her every once in a while like he wants to say something, but he keeps quiet.

She looks determined, but also paler than she usually does. Better than she did when we found her outside, slumped over in the grass with the dog barking his ass off and alternating between running around in circles and nudging her to try to get her up. There's something... not really fragile, but delicate maybe, in her eyes, but I don't comment on it. I know why she wants to be a part of this, so I just give her a grin as we head out to the car.

Julian Maduro owns a boxing ring in the city, so we head there, going to see him at his place of business.

There are a few cars in the lot, and we park and head in. Without talking about it or coordinating or anything, all of us move to flank River protectively. It's second nature to me, to make sure she's not exposed and alone, and my brothers are doing it too, probably just as instinctively.

I look around the room we walk into, eyeing back anyone who eyes us, almost daring these people to fuck with us.

Honestly, I'm hoping someone will.

I've got that feeling under my skin that's like a monster pacing its cage. Wanting to be let out. I want to work off this energy and fuck shit up. I want a knock-down, drag-out brawl, so I'm hoping someone takes my dare.

Gage gives me a narrow-eyed look, like he knows exactly what I'm doing, and I just grin back at him.

He's no fun, but at least he does let me go nuts sometimes when I need it. When the time is right. He lets me handle the torturing that needs to be done, so I know he knows how I feel.

But this isn't the time or the place, and we have bigger fish to fry.

"Can I help you?"

A big man comes over to us as he asks the question, his arms folded. He looks us all over, and if he knows who we are, it doesn't show on his face. His eyes flit to River for a second, but his expression doesn't change.

"We'd like to speak with Julian," Gage says smoothly.

The bouncer, or whoever the fuck he is, gives Gage a look. Gage doesn't say anything else, doesn't add a reason why or anything, just stands there with that expression of cool authority on his face. There's a reason we all look to him as the leader of our little family. He knows how to handle shit like this.

Finally, the bouncer nods and turns on his heel to go open a door a little way down a hall at the back of the building. He pokes his head in briefly and then comes back out.

"Alright, he'll see you," he says, waving us to follow.

We keep the same formation we came in with, making sure River stays in the middle of our pack as we head toward Julian's office.

A woman with highlighted blonde hair pulled back in a ponytail and a straight, pointed nose stands up as we enter. She sweeps past us, giving us a cool look as she leaves the office.

"My sister, Natalie," Julian says, by way of belated introduction. Then he jerks his chin toward the doorway. "Shut the door."

Gage glances my way, so I do it.

There's a chair opposite Julian's desk, and the guy waves a hand at it like he doesn't care who takes it. So Gage does, sitting down and leaving the rest of us to stand behind him. I bet it makes him look powerful, sitting there with us as his backup, while Julian is alone on his side of the desk.

But this is Julian's turf, so it wouldn't be smart to get too confident. Even I know that.

“I’ll admit I’m surprised to have a visit from you,” the man says, speaking to Gage but glancing around at all of us. “I know you by reputation, but I wasn’t sure we’d ever have the pleasure of doing business together. Is there something I can do for you?”

We all know why we’re here, but we can’t just come out and ask Julian if he’s the one who put Ivan’s chopped up corpse out at the gala. Gage always has a plan, though, and the rest of us let him handle it.

“We were at the gala the other night, just like you were,” Gage says, leaning back in the chair. “After the surprising turn of events that night, we’ve been doing some talking. Ivan St. James’s death left a fairly large gap of power in the city, wouldn’t you say?”

Julian nods. His hair is a darker blond than his sister’s, but the family resemblance between them is easy to see in the sharpness of his features. “Of course. Whenever someone that well-connected and well-established dies, all the little worms come out to try to fill his spot.”

“Exactly. We’ve been worried about a new player trying to rise up on the scene here. Someone untested and not aware of how we do things in Detroit. We think whoever killed Ivan and displayed his body like that might be trying to fill his spot and take his power.”

“So why are you talking to me about this?” Julian asks, a wary, cunning look passing over his face.

“If that happened, it would concern all the current mafia operations in Detroit,” Gage says. “Anyone with an established business here would be affected. So we’re trying to find out if anyone knows anything about who this new player might be.”

Julian sits back in his own chair, mirroring Gage’s pose a bit. There’s a smug look on his face, and he doesn’t look bothered by anything Gage just said.

“I don’t know who went after Ivan,” he says. “Although I can think of plenty of reasons why someone would. He was arrogant and hoarded his power, which always makes someone an appealing target. Him dying doesn’t bother me all that much, but the fact that his body was displayed like that? That fucked me.”

“Oh, really? Why?” Gage asks. “You don’t strike me as the squeamish type.”

Julian snorts and shakes his head. “It’s not the fact that he was hacked into pieces. It’s that he was put out at all. I had a deal that was supposed to

go through, and it was maybe infringing a little on Ivan's turf, but whatever. He's dead. But the buyer got spooked when Ivan showed up like that. Thought maybe he was next or something, I don't know. Point is, it cost me. Whoever had the bright idea to put Ivan's body on a fucking pedestal like that is an asshole, and they better hope I don't find them."

"I'm sure a lot of people feel the same way," Gage points out.

He shrugs. "Maybe, maybe not. Either way, I don't have any info for you." The smug look returns as he sits forward again. "And if I did have information, I'm not sure I'd share it. It helps to have the upper hand in situations like this, don't you think?"

Julian winks at Gage, and I have to hold myself back leaping over the desk to punch his stupid face in. Not that we need his info at this point. He basically just admitted that it wasn't him who dredged Ivan's body up from the river and put it out at the gala. Since he's all mad about it and it fucked up his business deal, it wouldn't make a lot of sense for him to have done it.

Gage smiles back at the guy, and it's his predator smile—the one that usually comes before he fucks someone up. Part of me kinda wishes that Julian *was* involved in all of this, so we'd have a reason to come after him and start some shit. Compared to our trip to the Diamond Devil headquarters, this meeting is boring as hell.

"I understand," Gage says, his tone chilly but not rude. "Hopefully your deal recovers once people stop being skittish about Ivan dying."

Julian shrugs again. "It'll be someone else eventually. That's how things work, it seems. You get too big for your britches and then someone takes you out. Ivan was a paranoid son of a bitch, but he wasn't entirely wrong to be, in the end. Someone did want him dead. And then someone was sick enough to turn his corpse into 'art.'" He drums his fingers on his desk. "This shit just happens. All you can do is try to make sure you're not next on the list."

He smiles at Gage, and Gage smiles back, all polite aggression. It's dumb posturing, because no one's going to start shit in here, so Julian's just trying to seem like he's top dog or something. None of us are afraid of him.

I glance at River, but her face is blank and composed. She's looking at Julian, but it's like she's not really seeing him. You'd probably have to know her to be able to tell this, but I'm certain her mind isn't on him at all. At least not on the conversation we're having with him in this moment.

Gage and Julian talk a bit more about the state of things in the criminal underworld of Detroit, discussing how the landscape is likely to shift now that Ivan is gone, but I tune them out. No one's getting hit or stabbed or fucked up today, so I don't feel like I need to know everything they're talking about. One of the others will be listening, and if it's important, I'll find out from them.

Eventually, Gage scrapes his chair back and gets to his feet. He nods at Julian, who doesn't get up or show us out or anything, just goes back to his laptop.

Smug fucker.

We head out of the office and back into the main part of the building where the ring itself is. No one really spares us anything more than a few curious glances as we head for the door. But before we make it out, River glances to one side and then stiffens, stopping in her tracks.

Her face goes pale, and her jaw drops. Stepping out from the little formation of bodies that surrounds her, she strides over to a woman off to one side of the gym who has her back partly turned to us.

There's something almost manic in her eyes as she reaches out a hand, putting it on the woman's arm. "Han—"

The woman turns around, and River's voice cuts off. Whatever she sees in the woman's face makes River's expression shut down as if someone slammed a door on her emotions. She shakes her head and backs up quickly, looking rattled and a little bit lost.

"N-never mind," she says. "I'm sorry. I thought you were someone else."

"Oh. Okay."

The woman looks confused and a little annoyed, but she gives River a semi-polite nod before she turns back to whatever she was doing.

When River comes back over to us, her face is still shuttered and drawn. None of us say anything, heading out to the car in silence. She climbs into the back seat between me and Ash, craning her neck a little to look back at the building as Gage starts the car and pulls away.

"I thought that was her," she whispers to herself. "I was so sure."

RIVER

MY STOMACH FEELS like it's turning itself inside out over and over again as we drive through the streets of Detroit.

I feel like shit, shaky and nauseated. Seeing Julian was fucking horrible. It brought back so many memories. Even though I've never seen him before, he looks enough like his dad that my head is swimming with thoughts of my onetime captor. I remember Lorenzo's face *too* fucking well. He was always there, always touching me, always grinning that stupid smug grin. Just like the one on Julian's face while Gage was talking to him.

And then, when we were leaving, I was so sure I saw Hannah. Just from the side, in partial profile, I was certain that it was my sister.

But I was wrong.

It was just some random woman, minding her own business, who probably thinks I'm a crazy person.

And maybe I am. I definitely feel like I'm going crazy. I killed the last name on my list, but it doesn't feel like it's over. It's like Hannah's ghost is haunting me, like the demons in my mind will never let me go.

I keep thinking I see Hannah, but it's not her. She's dead, and I'm never going to see her again. That was the whole point of the list in the first fucking place, and now that our onetime captors have all breathed their last breath, it's supposed to be as though Hannah is laid to rest.

But I feel as if I'm going to see her face on every woman who even vaguely resembles her. I'm going to walk through the world constantly reminded of my past, of my loss. Of how I fucked up and couldn't protect my own damn sister.

I've killed six evil, vicious men—either with my own hands or through someone else—over the past several years. But it was too late to save Hannah's life.

I always told myself that going after them was about revenge. It was about making them suffer for what they did to us, what they did to *her*, but maybe that wasn't it. Or at least, not all of it. I wanted to feel like she was at peace, like maybe she'd know, wherever she is now, that I'd done it and her death was avenged.

But there was a part of me that was probably trying to bring Hannah back, too. As if killing all those men would somehow undo everything that had happened, and we could be together again.

But that's not how it works.

No amount of death will bring back a life.

The car lurches slightly as Gage pulls to a stop in the driveway, and I realize with a start that we've made it back to the house. I can't even remember most of the drive. I get out of the car with the others, feeling dazed and off balance. My head is fucked up. I'm vaguely aware of everything happening around me, but I'm not focused on any of it. I hear Knox say something to Gage, and Gage's mouth moves as he responds, but I can't really make out the words. They sound hollow and tinny, like they're coming from a long way away.

"River?"

The sound of my name jerks me out of my stupor enough that I can look over at Priest.

"Are you okay?" he asks.

The others are gazing at me with concern too, having realized how fucking weird I probably look, but I just shake my head. "It's fine."

They don't push it, so I move past them as we walk into the house, then head upstairs to my room.

My hands are shaking by the time I close the door, and when I sit down on the bed, I immediately know I won't be getting any peace that way. I'm too agitated. It's crawling under my skin—everything that's happened all piling up too fast for me to fight it.

Ivan's body.

Seeing Hannah—or *not* seeing her and being so sure I did.

Seeing Julian.

Thinking about Lorenzo over and over again.

I feel like a thousand different emotions are filling me up, pressing against my skin like they're going to rip me apart from the inside.

Desperate to make the torrent stop, I go to my nightstand and find my blades, right where I tucked them when I moved in here for the second time. The metal is cool between my fingers as I shuck my pants and settle back on the bed, and that soothes me enough that I can take a deep breath and press the razor blade to my thigh. I make a cut, smooth and straight, and it takes a second for the pain to kick in and the blood to well to the surface. It's bright and stark against my skin, almost pretty. I focus on it, trying to will everything else out of my head.

It kind of works, but not well enough. So I cut again, making another line parallel to the first.

My thigh burns with the pain of it, and I sink into that feeling, adding a third cut with the first two.

Before I can draw a fourth line, the door opens and Gage comes in.

There was probably a time when I would have yelled at him for barging in or tried to hide what I'm doing. Not because I'm ashamed of it, but because it's none of his business. But now, I don't even bother to try to hide it or pretend I was doing something else. I'm done trying to hide any of my fucked-up-ness. Especially from these guys who have plenty of their own.

Gage stands in the doorway for a moment, just looking at me with those perceptive bright green eyes.

I stare right back at him, lifting my chin almost in challenge. Like I'm daring him to pity me or judge me. I've got words for him if he decides to go that route.

But he doesn't.

He just comes fully into the room and closes the door behind him. When he walks over to the bed and takes the blade out of my hand, I don't resist, letting him have it.

He glances down at the small silver blade, the sharp edge of it wet and red with my blood. Then he sets it on the nightstand and looks down at the cuts on my leg. He drags one finger through the blood that's starting to run together from the neat lines, and for a split second, I think he's going to write 'mine' or something on my skin, the way Knox did.

Instead, he lifts his bloody finger and smears it on my face, dragging it over my cheeks like war paint. His eyes are intent as he looks at me.

"Are you ruined?" he asks.

My heart lurches a little at his words. It's a question he's asked before, and there's no easy answer in this moment. There's so much inside my head, so much going on that it's hard to know one way or another. I think about Lorenzo and Ivan and Hannah, and I see them in my head, standing there and waiting like they want to know the answer too. It would be so easy to sink into the pain of the memories, to let this shaky, awful feeling take over.

I'm tired, that much I can admit to myself. I've been grinding for so hard and so long, trying to cross every name off my list, trying to do something to make it up to my sister for not being able to protect her when she needed me. Even now that it's done, I don't feel like I can rest. I feel haunted. Hunted. Like it'll follow me for the rest of my life.

But somewhere underneath all of that, I remember that even through everything, I still managed to survive. I killed them all, however it had to happen. They didn't get the better of me. They all thought they were untouchable, so secure in their fucking arrogance. And now none of them have anything to show for it.

And I did that. *Me*. I was their reckoning, the way I always intended to be. Even if it didn't bring my sister back, even if I can't properly lay her to rest, none of them will ever hurt anyone ever again.

I take a deep breath, trying to hold on to that line of clarity.

"No," I murmur back to Gage. "I'm not."

He nods, and his eyes burn. "That's right. You're not ruined. You're a fucking warrior."

As if he's trying to consecrate those words, he leans in, one hand sliding behind my neck as he kisses me.

His palm is firm on the back of my neck, his fingers threading through my hair, and the moment our mouths touch, he pulls me even closer, pressing his lips to mine with bruising intensity.

A soft gasp escapes me at the feel of it, and I chase that sensation. I'd rather feel Gage than the demons clawing at me, so I focus on him instead.

His hands roam down my back, pulling me closer, and I touch him just as freely. His shoulders, his chest, down the strong planes of his stomach, and then lower where I can tell he's already starting to get hard in his jeans.

That heat between us is exploding, threatening to burn us both alive, but we don't stop. We've had sex before, but it's been a while, and we both

threw our walls and guards up hard after that. But there's none of that right now.

He already knows. He's already seen me struggling, trying to fight back against the feelings that are holding me down and keeping me all twisted up inside.

I can't hide from him.

Not my pain or my demons or the fact that I want him so fucking bad in this moment.

Gage breaks the kiss after what feels like an eternity, and I'm left gasping for breath, staring up at him as he looks down at me with those deep green eyes. It looks like he wants to devour me and can't decide where to start. But it must only take him a second to make a decision, because he moves again quickly, kissing my neck and working his way down my body while he pushes me back against the bed until I'm flat on my back.

My legs hang over the edge, and Gage settles himself between them. Even down there on his knees, he's still every inch a predator, still in control of this—and I can't find it in me to have a problem with that.

Not when he's looking at me with a ravenous expression that makes me shiver all over.

He hooks his fingers in my underwear and drags them down, tossing them off to the side somewhere. With those big hands, he spreads my legs wider, and there's nothing I can hide from him like this.

I don't even want to.

I'm already wet, just from his hands on me, his mouth on me, and I know he can see it clearly. The scent of my arousal is in the air, and he leans in toward the source, his fingers digging into my thighs.

His mouth feels just as good on my pussy as it did on my lips, and I arch toward him, moaning his name.

He growls, and the sound reverberates through me, making it all feel even better. He flicks my clit with his tongue, and my hand goes down to his hair just to have something to hold on to while he works me up.

It's relentless, the way he eats me out like he's at a feast, leaving no corner of my pussy unexplored. I moan his name again and again, writhing on the bed as he licks and sucks at me, like he wants to savor every last bit of me.

Sensations pour through me, pleasure boiling in the center of my body like a furnace. My fingers go tighter in his hair, and he groans into me, his

hips bucking forward.

There's nothing down there for him to rub against, and when he lifts his face, his lips shiny with my arousal, I can see it in his eyes how much he wants to fuck me.

Eating me out isn't enough.

He grabs my hips and flips me over onto my stomach easily. I'm breathless when I land, and before I can look back at him, Gage is grabbing handfuls of my ass and squeezing, spreading me open even more for him.

My face lands in the sheets and my moan is muffled there, but fuck, it feels good. He's manhandling me however he wants to, and a part of me feels like I should rage against it, but an even bigger part needs this too much to let my stubborn streak ruin it.

"I'm going to fuck you here," he growls, letting go of my ass with one hand so he can rub at the tightly furled hole between my cheeks.

I nod, almost frantically. Just the touch of his finger sends sparks of electric pleasure through me, and I shiver at the thought of him pushing his cock in there and taking me. Fuck, I want it.

I want everything he can give me, so desperate for the pleasure and pain.

"Touch yourself," he orders, his tone commanding me to obey.

"Fuck," I manage to get out, my voice hoarse. I do as he says, sliding a hand between my body and the bed so I can rub at my pussy.

I'm so fucking wet already, and Gage's fingers briefly dance with mine between my legs so he can collect some of my slick arousal on his fingers. He spreads me open again, and I hear it and then feel it when he spits right onto my hole.

That hits me like a shock to the system, filthy and raw, and I almost come apart right there, moaning deeply and shuddering under his touch.

Gage snorts, like he's darkly amused by that. "Good girl," he murmurs, and starts working one finger into me.

It's a tight fit. I work to relax, but I'm so keyed up that it feels like every cell in my body is vibrating.

Just the feeling of him breaching through that tight seal is enough to make my breath catch in my throat, and I squirm, fighting the urge to buck back against him for more.

"That's it," he grunts, working his finger in deeper. "Take it for me. Keep touching yourself."

I circle my clit with one finger, whimpering softly when Gage adds another finger to my ass.

I already feel full from just that, and I know his cock is going to be even more to take. He's being rough and dominating, but taking his time in a way, making sure I'm stretched when he adds a third finger.

That's enough to have me shivering, right there on the edge, my fingers working overtime on my pussy in time with how he's fucking my ass with his fingers.

There's a high, whimpering sound in the air, and it takes me a second to realize it's coming from me. I'm gasping for breath and begging him for more, and he chuckles, low and deep.

"Is this what you want?" he asks, pulling his fingers free.

I lift my head and look over my shoulder at him. "Gage, please."

"Please what?" he demands. "Say it." The hand he still has on my ass digs deeper into the flesh there, and I feel like I'm losing my mind from how much I want him in this moment.

"Please, fuck me," I manage to get out. "Please fuck my ass."

I've never begged anyone seriously like this in my life before these guys, and I can't even feel ashamed of it right now. Not when I'm so keyed up and on edge and desperate for him to give me what I know we both want.

"Good girl," he repeats, and something about hearing him say that just makes my heart beat faster.

And then he's finally sliding into me. His cock is so big and thick that it's almost painful as he breaches my ass. He worked me open, but not even three fingers were enough to fully prepare me for how it feels to have him working his way inside my back hole.

By the time his hips are flush with my ass, his cock buried to the hilt inside me, I'm sweaty and breathless, muttering choked, incoherent words as sensation overwhelms me.

It's like I can feel him everywhere, and the burn of the stretch is all encompassing.

My fingers are still working at my clit, and I can feel how close I am to falling apart already, but Gage grabs my wrists before I can get too much closer. He gathers them both up at the small of my back, pinning my arms there so he can control my movements.

I'm strong, but when I twist my wrists to test Gage's grip, there's no give. He's stronger, and clearly determined to keep me where I am.

That just makes my pussy throb even more. He feels so fucking good, balls deep in my ass, but my pussy feels empty. I have a second to wish I was full there, too, but Gage doesn't give me much time to think about it. He warms me up a little with shallow, slow thrusts, getting me used to the feeling of him fucking my ass. Then he draws himself out and slams back in, taking my breath away with the force of it.

His fingers are bruisingly tight on my wrists, and he works himself hard and fast into me, fucking me with an almost brutal pace.

I can't do anything but take it, pinned down and impaled on his cock, caught between his body and the bed. There's nowhere else I'd rather be in this moment, and I try to catch my breath, try to find some equilibrium, but there isn't any. Not when he's fucking me so rough and hard that the bed shakes beneath us.

The room is filled with the sounds of our bodies slapping together when we meet in the middle, along with Gage's grunts and my moans and whines of pleasure.

"Please, please, please," I chant, although I don't even know what I'm begging for at this point. More of this. More of *something*.

It's all I can focus on, all I can think about. My head is empty of everything except the press of Gage's cock and the way it makes me feel like I'm breaking apart, but in the best way possible.

"Don't stop," I gasp out. "Please. Fuck. Don't stop."

"I'll never fucking stop," he growls back, slamming into me hard enough that I forget how to breathe for a full second. "Not until I'm done with you."

His body bows over mine, and I can feel his labored breath on the back of my neck, feel the sweat on his body as it mingles with mine. The bed creaks and groans under us, and I arch under Gage, trying to get him as deep as I possibly can.

I lose track of time, caught in an endless loop of pain-edged pleasure. After a while, Gage's thrusts get erratic, and I can tell he's getting close. Just the thought of him filling my ass up with his cum is enough to have me moaning all over again, and I can only imagine what I sound like.

My pussy throbs with need, and as if Gage can read my mind—or maybe read my body—he hauls me up, pulling me upright until we're both

kneeling, my back pressed flush to his chest.

He wraps an arm around me, keeping me in place, while his other hand finds the wet mess of my pussy. And oh, fuck yes. That's what I've been wanting. That's the piece that was missing.

There's no resistance when he puts his fingers in me, and I take him in eagerly, crying out when he starts fucking my pussy with his fingers while he keeps taking my ass.

"Oh, god," I gasp out, shaking against him. "Oh fuck. Gage—"

He groans and bites down on my shoulder, and I can feel it when he loses it, coming in my ass and filling me up.

He doesn't stop thrusting with his cock or his fingers, and I'm right there with him.

I shatter into a thousand pieces, shaking and writhing and nearly screaming his name as my orgasm breaks over me.

RIVER

MY HEART BEATS a furious rhythm in my chest as Gage's cock gives one last pulse inside me. I can feel the sweat cooling on my skin, and my body is pleasantly sore. As soon as he pulls out of me, we collapse on the bed, lying close to each other, and I listen as his breathing gradually slows down and returns to normal.

I'm not used to this. Sticking around after sex, lying side by side with the other person while they come down with me. But I don't hate it.

"You were right," I murmur, breaking the silence after a bit. "The demons aren't gone just because I killed Ivan and crossed off the last name. But... I don't know how to conquer my demons. How to banish them."

"I don't either," Gage admits. "My dad died years ago. Basically drank himself to death. But knowing he's not walking the earth anymore doesn't always keep the demons from haunting me."

"What happened?" I ask, wondering if he'll tell me.

He's quiet for a few seconds, and I stay still and silent, giving him a chance to decide whether or not to answer.

After another moment, he sighs and speaks again.

"My old man was a drunk. He beat the shit out of me and my mom all the time. Whenever he was mad. Whenever he was out of booze. Whenever he fucking felt like it, basically. He'd scream and yell, call us all kinds of shit. He made sure we knew we were nothing to him, and he treated us just like that. I hated him so fucking much, but I was pretty close with my mom. I... loved her a lot."

"Did he kill her?"

Gage shakes his head. “She died of an overdose when I was ten, and things just... got worse after that. Meredith used to let me come stay with her, when things were really bad at home, but even that wasn’t enough once Mom died. I ran away not long after. Tried to keep in touch with Meredith when I could, and I started taking care of her when I was stronger and in a position to do so.”

That explains a lot about what I saw when we were at her place. “I could tell you two were pretty close.”

“She was the only one looking out for me, pretty much,” Gage explains. “I felt like I owed it to her to be there for her. And I just wanted to. Even after all this time, I wish I’d been the one to kill my dad. I wish I’d gotten to stand over him and make him feel as weak and small and worthless as he always made me feel. I wish it had been me, and not just his shitty liver that did him in in the end. But I know that even if I had gotten what I wanted, I’d still have the demons. Killing him wouldn’t have erased what he did to me. It wouldn’t turn back time and make it all better. That’s not how it works. The demons aren’t easy to get rid of.”

I roll over so I can push up onto one elbow and look down at him. His face isn’t as closed off as I would have expected. He looks... tired, but open, and I lean down and kiss him.

Gage kisses me back, reaching for me so he can pull me down against him. Neither of us is great with words, but the kiss says more than we ever could or would say out loud. I hum into it, and he swipes his tongue against the seam of my lips, coaxing me to part them so he can press his tongue inside my mouth.

We kiss like that for a while, hot and slow and so deep that it feels like I could drown in it, until we need to breathe and finally break apart.

“Well.” I bite my bottom lip, tasting Gage on my skin. “So much for that deal we made, I guess.”

He snorts. “It’s definitely too late for that now.”

It looks like he wants to say something else, but instead, he just reaches out and tucks a lock of my sex-tangled silver hair behind my ear. I lean into his touch a little, shutting down the part of my mind that says this is too intimate, too *comfortable*. I feel a bit like a cat as I nuzzle against his hand, and he catches my chin and tugs my face closer to his for another kiss.

As our lips meet, my stomach gives a loud, rolling grumble. Gage chuckles, his mouth curving into a smile against mine.

“Hungry?”

“Yeah, I guess I am.”

“Come on. Let’s get you something to eat.”

He slaps my ass lightly, then rolls out of bed and throws his clothes back on. I haven’t felt hungry since the gala, not really, so it’s nice to actually want to eat again. I get dressed too, and we head downstairs to find something for dinner.

Ash and Priest are down there in the kitchen, and they both look up when we enter. Ash grins that shit eating grin of his, leaning one elbow on the kitchen table and fluttering his eyelashes at us.

“I heard the most *interesting* sounds coming from upstairs,” he teases. “Sounded like someone was dying, so it must have been good.”

Gage just rolls his eyes and gives Ash the finger. I glance at Priest, but if he has any feelings about what Ash is implying, it’s impossible to tell. His face is as hard to read as it always is, and he keeps eating like nothing out of the ordinary is happening around him.

I cross to the fridge and take out some leftovers, popping them in the microwave because I don’t have the energy to cook something fresh. As Gage starts putting together a sandwich, the front door opens, letting Knox in.

“How did it go?” Gage asks, glancing over at the massive, tattooed man when he comes in.

Knox opens his mouth like he’s going to answer his brother, but then he spots me and narrows his eyes. His nostrils flare, like he can smell the sex on me, and honestly, he probably can. Knox has a fucking sixth sense for shit like this. Violence and lust and sex. All the messy stuff. Plus, I’m sure I still look freshly fucked.

There’s a look on his face like he’s annoyed he missed out, and I roll my eyes at him. “What?”

Instead of answering either Gage’s question or mine, he comes over to me and licks some of the blood off my face from where Gage smeared it.

It’s not the first time he’s done something like this, and I have a vivid memory of being chained up in their basement, what feels like ages ago now. But this time, it’s different. This time, there’s a definite sexual edge to it, and Knox grabs my jaw hard, keeping me in place as he drags his tongue over my skin. I shiver and swallow hard past the sudden lump in my throat, suddenly fixated on the hot, rough feeling of his tongue on my face.

Gage rolls his eyes and sighs, shaking his head at the display. “Knox,” he says firmly, trying to get his friend’s attention.

“What?” Knox says back, not letting me go at first.

“What did you find out?”

That seems to shake the big man from whatever impulse grabbed him in the first place, and he shoots me a grin before letting me go and stepping back so he can give Gage his attention. “Julian wasn’t lying. He had a deal going before Ivan died. It would’ve been real stupid of him to lay the body out like that if he wanted it to go through.”

Gage nods, taking that information in along with the rest of us.

“Dammit,” I mutter, glaring at the microwave as it beeps at me, reminding me that my food is done. “That puts us right back at square one then.”

“Your idea is still good,” Priest comments, speaking up for the first time since we came into the kitchen. “I don’t think any of us were expecting the answer to be the first name on the list that we looked into. It’ll take more digging than that.”

He has a point, but I was hoping shit would be easy for once. “Yeah, I guess.”

“We’ll keep going down the list,” Gage tells me seriously, catching my gaze. “And we’ll investigate anyone who seems promising.”

“Alright,” I agree. There’s nothing else to do, really.

But it still doesn’t seem good enough.

RIVER

OUR INVESTIGATION CONTINUES over the next few days, crawling at what feels like a snail's pace.

There are a lot of names on the list, and there could be any number of reasons why one of them would have put Ivan's body out like that. Gage has contacts he can talk to, people who can fetch info for him on the people we're trying to scope out, but we still have to be careful about it.

They're all powerful in one way or another, and although there are some people the Kings of Chaos can find reasons to meet with like they did with the Diamond Devils and Julian Maduro, that's not an option for most of them.

After having that moment with Gage after our visit to Julian's gym, I feel a bit better. Less crazy for being haunted by my demons at least. Hearing that someone like him still goes through the same shit I'm going through helped a lot. My demons aren't dead, and I'm starting to see that they probably never will be... but I can finally accept that Hannah *is*.

I didn't see her at the gala. It was just my mind playing tricks on me, like it did at Julian's gym. Fresh off killing Ivan, the last name on my list, of *course* I thought I saw her. I wanted to see her. I wanted her to be back because it was over.

But I know that wasn't what happened, and I can work on moving past it.

At least... that part of it.

Now that I'm not thinking about my sister all the time and imagining that I see her everywhere, my mind has started to be consumed with thoughts of Julian. I can't stop replaying our visit with him over and over in

my head, recalling the way he looked so much like his dad, even down to that stupid, smug expression. It dredged up all those memories of my time being held captive, almost like I could feel the phantom hands on me all over again even though it's been so long.

I can't stop thinking about him, wondering what his life is like. Wondering if he's just as bad as his piece of shit dad.

Before, I didn't know anything about him, and that was by design. I didn't want anything to do with anyone who was close to one of the men responsible for the worst shit in my life. Now that I know where his business is, though, I feel a constant itch in my head that makes me want to go there and make sure he's not a monster like his dad.

So I give in to it.

It's better than sitting around doing nothing, waiting for a lead to fall into my lap. I reason that maybe he really was lying, and Knox just missed something when he was hunting for info. Maybe it's worth it to tail him and find out.

I know that's pretty fucking flimsy, actually. I'm just doing it because I feel like I'm going to jump out of my own skin if I don't do *something*. If I don't let myself have a focus for the helpless rage that still clogs up my veins sometimes.

So I start following him around, and I don't tell the guys about it. It feels almost... good to be doing it. To have a target again. I spent so many years always having a target to follow and learn about, so it feels familiar and comforting to have one again.

I keep my distance from him, never letting him see me, but I watch him, tracking his movements. Part of me is trying to find out if he's as sick as Lorenzo was—if he's keeping some poor girl captive too, just like his fucking father did.

If he is, he's covering it up well. He goes to the boxing ring, goes out for fancy lunches with people in suits who look like they're armed. Goes to clubs and spas and hotels, making deals or relaxing or whatever.

I see his sister pretty often while I follow him around. She's usually there when he does business, clearly a part of the inner workings of their organization. They're close, obviously, and they run the business together, working like a well-oiled machine. Julian always looks smug, like he's better than everyone else, but there's something different when he talks to Natalie. Like he actually respects her or something.

Every day in the week following our meeting with him, I go out and tail Julian a bit, and the guys go to track down other leads. They've sort of spread out the search among themselves, each of them pursuing various leads and then reporting back. Every evening, we sit in the kitchen and talk about what we've found.

Or what we *haven't* found, which is more often the case than not.

I can taste their frustration in the air when we have those talks. We all thought we'd be making more progress by now.

I'm supposed to be following possible leads the same as they are, and I do follow them when I get one, but I also keep tabs on Julian, making sure nothing gets past me.

Almost two weeks after our visit to Julian's gym, I'm alone at the house again, doing some research on his boxing ring. It seems like it's a legit business—but then, so does Sin and Salvation from the outside, and I know the guys are using it as a front for their other dealings. Julian's probably doing the same thing, so I want to try to find out what kind of shit he's up to.

I'm in the middle of my research when someone knocks on the door. Dog starts going crazy like he does whenever someone he doesn't know comes to the house, and I sigh and shut down the computer, getting up to go see who's at the door.

"Calm down, we can all hear you," I mutter to the mutt, and then groan internally when I see Agent Carter, that FBI agent who came to the house after the gala, standing outside looking impatient.

I take a breath and paste on my best fake smile before I open the door.

"Agent Carter," I say. "I wasn't expecting to see you here again."

He raises an eyebrow. "Wasn't expecting it or were hoping you wouldn't?"

I let him in and close the door without answering that question.

"How's the investigation going?" I keep my voice casual and even. It's probably not a good thing that he's back here, after he questioned us and didn't get what he wanted. It makes me nervous that he came back, and I wonder what the fuck he wants this time. But it's not like I've never lied before. I've made acting like I'm innocent into an artform over the years, so I can do it again for this man.

"It's going," he tells me, and there's enough finality in his voice to tell me he doesn't really want to talk about it.

“Do you have any leads or anything?” I ask him.

“That would be classified.”

It’s a shut-down, plain and simple. It also begs the question, why the fuck did he come here if he doesn’t want to talk about the investigation?

His eyes are on me, and I keep my face neutral and impassive, not giving him anything. “I am glad I caught you here alone again,” he says after a beat of silence.

“Why is that?”

“I’m not sure what your real involvement with these men is, or your reason for being here. But if you need help...” He draws that out like he’s waiting for me to fill the silence with something, but I just blink at him. He shakes his head and continues. “If you need help, and you’d be willing to help me, then we could come to some kind of arrangement.”

“An arrangement,” I repeat, not putting any inflection on the words.

Carter nods. “Yes. I don’t believe these men are on the up and up, and I don’t think you really want to be caught up with them in whatever game they’re running.”

It’s hard not to laugh at that, or tell him to go fuck himself, but I keep the neutral smile on my face. “Agent Carter, I promise you I’m here because I want to be. Whatever you think about what’s going on with me and these men, I was honest with you the last time. I’m here of my own free will, and I’ll *stay* here of my own free will. So I don’t need your help. There’s nothing else I can do for you, anyway.”

Outside, I’m all pleasant and at ease, but inside my head, I’m telling him to fuck off and picturing myself slamming the door in his face after I kick him out. I don’t like his assumption that he could get me to turn on the guys, like I’m the weak link in this group, the one most likely to betray them. Maybe that would’ve been true once, but it’s not now, and his implication raises my hackles.

Carter looks disappointed. I’m not quite sure what he thought was going to happen. That I’d start singing like a bird about all the terrible things the guys have done and rush into his arms, begging him to protect me?

I don’t know what he sees in me that would make him think I need his help, but better to shut that idea down right now.

“Alright,” he says, relenting when it’s clear he’s not getting anything else out of me. “I just... wanted to extend the offer. You can reach me

anytime if you get any new information or remember anything that you think would help.”

He hands me his card, and I take it. I even manage not to rip it to shreds and throw the pieces in his face. So, points for me.

“Thanks,” I tell him. “I’ll be sure to do that.”

Carter nods and heads for the door, and I don’t relax until he’s gone.

I give a little sigh and drop his card on the table, mentally debating whether to dig out my lighter and burn it as a symbolic gesture.

But before I can indulge my pyromaniac leanings, strong arms wrap around me from behind, and someone’s nose skims over my neck. Without even turning around to look, I know it’s Knox. There’s just something about the way he touches me that immediately stands out as him.

“Did you sneak into your own house?” I ask him, not pulling away. “Because I know you weren’t here before.”

He snorts with amusement, the sound low and gruff. “I saw his car and snuck in the back while you were talking to him. I heard what you said.”

“Which part?”

“The part about you being here because you want to be. I like that, little fox. You’re ours now, and you basically just confirmed it.”

I roll my eyes, but there’s no heat in it. “That’s not exactly how it happened. I just had to tell him something to make him leave.”

“Right,” Knox murmurs. Rather than calling out my fairly obvious lie, he kisses my neck and keeps me in his grasp, rocking against me.

His dick is getting hard just from having me so close, and I can’t help the little rise of heat in my chest from that. Knox is so reactionary. He responds to stimuli more genuinely and immediately than any of the other guys, so of course this has him hard. Just the two of us being close has him getting off on his own possessiveness.

There was definitely a time when that would have pissed me off. It wasn’t even that long ago. Just a week or two ago, I probably would have wanted to cuss him out and tell him to leave me alone because I don’t belong to him or any of the guys.

But now, it doesn’t feel like a noose tightening around my neck to hear it. Now it makes my heart speed up as I think about fucking Ash in this kitchen, and Gage bending me over my bed, and Priest’s watchful stare, and Knox and his... everything.

I turn around in his arms and meet his dark eyes, seeing the heat that I feel in my body echoed in his gaze. He looks hungry, and he drags his hands down my body, going right to my ass and holding on tight.

There's a little growl in his voice when he speaks again, and I shiver at the sound and the way it vibrates through me.

"You like it," he says. "Being ours. You fight it because that's what you do, who you are. You're a fighter. But you still like it. It gets you right here."

He moves one hand between my legs, gripping at my pussy through my jeans. My breath catches, and I rock forward, unable to hold back from seeking more.

Once again, he's not wrong. I don't even bother to deny it.

Instead, I just yank him down into a heated kiss.

He drags my body closer to his and wedges his thick, muscled thigh between my legs. My clit grinds against his leg, and my back arches as I hump his thigh shamelessly. Knox chuckles against my lips, reaching down to palm my ass and help me grind against him as I chase the orgasm I suddenly want more than anything in the world.

RIVER

ANOTHER FEW DAYS GO BY, and we're still working our way through the guest list from the gala, although we're still coming up empty most of the time.

Well, the guys are coming up empty, and I'm... still tailing Julian.

It's become a habit, and not a healthy one. I can admit that to myself. It's something like a crutch to ease my inner turmoil and keep me from feeling so damn lost. Like if I don't have someone to track and hunt down, I'll have no purpose. No reason for going on.

I realize during all of this that I never really planned for what would happen after I crossed the last name off my list. That goal was all that was driving me, pushing me forward, and I never really took the time to think about life afterward. If I'm completely honest, I can also admit that maybe I just didn't think there would *be* much of a life afterward.

I was totally okay with burning myself out to make sure it got done, even if that meant there wasn't anything left of me in the aftermath. Even if I died in the attempt, as long as I took the last fucker standing with me.

But it's done, and there *is* something left, and when I think about stopping what I'm doing, I get that jangly anxious feeling in my chest that not even cutting can fix.

So I'm still tailing Julian, watching his comings and goings, his routines becoming my own.

I'm ashamed of how stupid it makes me, though. This inability to let go and move on. I haven't told any of the guys what I'm doing. Not even Knox and Gage, who might understand, although for different reasons. Things between us have been weirdly good lately, which is strange but feels

comfortable in its own way. Going back to the house when I'm done following Julian around feels right, and I don't want to ruin that.

Today, I'm in my car behind him, following him to wherever it is he's going. Usually he's doing business, going to various locations and staying for a while before heading off. His sister is often there too, and I swear to god, that woman is like a mannequin come to life. I think I've only seen her make two facial expressions in the entire time I've been following her brother.

This time she's not with him, though, and he's going someplace I've never seen him go before. That catches my interest. Maybe this isn't about his legit business, but something having to do with his illegal dealings. I'm not sure exactly what those are, and none of my digging has unearthed answers yet.

Most days, I hang back, watching him from a distance, but I follow a bit more aggressively now, not wanting to let him slip out of my sight.

I hang back enough to not be seen, but I don't let him get too far away either.

His car heads down a winding side street in a dilapidated part of town and then stops in front of a building I don't recognize. The place looks deserted, but I'm on alert. There are plenty of shadows where things could be happening. It's one of those pockets of Detroit that's run-down from old businesses moving out and nothing coming in to replace them yet.

A perfect place for covert deals and trades to be made without anyone being the wiser.

Hunkering down in my seat, I watch Julian emerge from his car. He walks to the end of the road and stops, glancing both ways before turning the corner and striding down the cross street.

Fuck.

I briefly debate starting my car back up and following him that way, but now that he's out of his vehicle, it would be harder to stay inconspicuous in my own.

I wonder if he's meeting someone here or picking something up. Or maybe scoping the place out to see if it'll work for some purpose he has that I don't know about. It could be anything, and curiosity tugs at me like a magnetic pull. Slipping out of my car and closing the door quietly, I cross the street to put a bit more distance between us and then start slowly following the route Julian took.

When I reach the corner he turned at, I glance down the street surreptitiously. Julian is up ahead, his back to me and far enough away that I don't think he'll sense my presence. Sticking close to the buildings on one side of the street, I start tailing him.

But before I make it more than five steps, a body slams into mine.

Fuck.

Adrenaline surges through me, and I realize immediately that this isn't some unrelated attack. Julian must have figured out I was following him. Smarter than his dad then, because Lorenzo never knew up until the point when I was killing him.

The man who attacked me has me wrapped in a bear hug, and as I fight against his hold, another man joins him, both of them trying to drag me away from the street. It's pure instinct to fight back. I thrash in their hold, kicking and clawing at their hands until they let me go. I manage to scramble away, but they're on me again a second later.

"No," I snarl, the sound wild and furious, like a trapped animal. "No!"

I'm not going down without a fight. I never fucking do.

My limbs strain even harder against the hold my captors have on me, and I manage to headbutt one guy in the face. He curses thickly, but his friend punches me hard in the kidney in retaliation, forcing a pained grunt from my lips.

"Get her under control."

A cool voice cuts through the grunts and muffled curses as I try to fight off my attackers, and I realize Julian is standing close by.

He knew he was being followed. I'm sure of it now. He lured me into a trap, leading me to a desolate part of town so his goons could jump me. My chest heaves with my heavy breathing, and my heart feels like it's about to explode out of my chest. I give it everything I have, trying to force my way free of their hold, but they have the advantage of surprise, and there are too many of them.

A sharp needle stings at my neck, and although I have no idea what the fuck they're injecting me with, I feel the effects of it immediately. The world wavers around me, shimmering like a mirage.

"Take her to the house," Julian orders.

It's the last thing I hear.

G A G E

“WELL, THAT WAS A BUST,” Ash says, leaning back in the passenger seat of my car. He has one foot kicked up onto the dash, acting like he owns the place while he flips a quarter over and over again in his hands.

My fingers tighten on the steering wheel. The urge to lash out is strong, but I take a deep breath and let it out slowly instead.

It’s not Ash’s fault that shit isn’t working out.

He’s out there looking for answers the same as the rest of us, and I know his flippant attitude is just his way of dealing with things not working out the way we all wanted them to.

It doesn’t mean he doesn’t care.

“A waste of time,” I agree finally, pulling into the driveway of our house.

“Not totally,” Ash counters. “One more name to cross off the list.”

He means well, and that’s a plus, but there’s no comfort in it. We’ve been crossing names off the guest list for well over a week now, and we don’t have anything to show for it. Knowing everyone who *doesn’t* have anything to do with Ivan’s body being put on display like a prized piece of meat isn’t exactly helpful when we want to know who’s behind it and what they want.

I’m agitated, and I can feel it dancing under my skin. It makes me antsy, the rage that usually simmers in me much closer to the surface than I like.

River has been the same way lately. I’ve been able to feel it in her when we talk and in the way she stalks around the house, like she’s looking for something she can’t find.

As much as I would have hated to admit it when we first met, we're pretty similar. And I recognize enough of myself in her to know that even though she might have come down from the ledge, she's still not in a good place.

Ivan's death is still fresh, all things considered, and the blow of finding out that killing him doesn't make the demons go away is still fairly new for her. Even though she's not as keyed up as she was when I found her cutting into her leg, she's still got that haunted look on her face more often than not.

I've offered to track down her leads with her, to give her someone to talk to—to make sure she's not dealing with it alone. But she always turns me down.

We're all grinding hard on this, trying to figure it out before it blows up in our faces, and I want answers.

I want to make sure this isn't going to fuck up everything my brothers and I have worked for all these years, but I also want answers for River.

I want to be able to present them to her on a silver platter. Along with a few heads if need be. To take that look off her face and make her feel better. I want to beat back her demons with my bare hands if I have to. Deep down, I know that's not even close to being how this shit works, but it doesn't stop me from wanting it.

"Hey." Ash's voice catches my attention. He flips the coin in the air and then snatches it up before sliding it back into his pocket. "We'll figure it out."

It's easy to forget that Ash is just as good at reading people as the rest of us. He's been a part of our brotherhood for long enough that he sees us the way we see him, and he can probably tell that I'm unsettled and not happy.

"Yeah," I reply. "We will. We have to. There's no other choice."

"Lots of other choices," he says with a shrug. "Just none we're willing to accept. That part matters."

I nod at him and he flashes me a grin before popping his door open and getting out of the car. I follow and we head inside the house.

The unsettled feeling doesn't go away, and all I really want to do is go find River and bury my face in her hair.

I want to binge on her scent, both the slightly fruity scent of whatever she uses in her hair, and her natural scent. Sharp and soft at the same time,

and ridiculously addicting. Because that's what it is. I'm becoming addicted to her, and I can't deny it any longer. I don't really want to.

She's let me see so much of her, and I've shown her more than I've ever shown anyone who isn't one of the three other men I trust with my life. That can't be undone, and even if it could be, I don't think I'd want to.

She's a part of this. One of us.

That fact is even more apparent when her dog comes running from the kitchen to greet us when we finally get back home, barking joyfully. There was a time when I would have wanted to kick it away from me, pissed off that he's even in the house to begin with, but now it's just a part of having River here, and we're all used to it.

Ash grins and bends down to pet the dog, rubbing behind his big brown ears, which gets him a look of total adoration.

"There you are, King Tut," he says. "Did you miss us? Aww, I bet you did."

"King Tut?" I ask him.

He shrugs. "Ask Knox. I figure it's some nerd shit or something, but I heard him call the mutt that this morning when he refused to eat an old hot dog. Like he's too good for it, when we've all seen him licking his own ass." He grins down at the dog, still scratching behind his ears. "Don't you, boy? Don't you lick your own ass?"

The dog's tail wags so hard that it thumps against the floor, and even though he can't understand that Ash is mocking him, he's in heaven from the attention, clearly.

I leave them to it, walking into the kitchen. It's quiet, making my footsteps seem loud as I enter. Knox is sitting at the table, shoveling food into his mouth and staring at something on his phone.

"How'd it go?" he asks, not looking up at me.

I shake my head. "Dead end. Another name to mark off the list. Where's River?"

"Out," he answers around a mouthful of pasta.

Fuck.

"Out where?"

Knox shrugs. "Didn't ask. She said she'd be back later. Probably following up on a lead or something."

I blow a breath out through my nose and then shake off the disappointment that rises in me. Whatever. She has her own life, and she's

trying to get to the bottom of this too.

I cross to the fridge and rummage around until I find a bottle of water and some fruit, and then take them into the library. It helps to keep myself busy, so I mark the name Ash and I went to follow up on off the list that's tacked to the wall now, then sit in one of the chairs with a book.

It's one of the ones that *doesn't* have its pages stuck together from River's little tantrum, and it feels like it was months ago that she did that. Like it happened with someone else altogether.

I guess my feelings on her have changed so much over time that I don't even have any simmering resentment over that anymore.

Now I just wish she was here.

I read a little, making some notes in the margins, and then when that gets old, I pull out my tablet and start going over some numbers for the club.

It's all shit that needs to get done, stuff that's a part of my usual routine, but I know that part of me is just waiting for River to get back. To get home.

The window in the library faces the driveway, and every time a car goes by down the road I wait to see if it's going to turn into the driveway. They never do, and it puts me on edge.

It's getting later now, the light going golden and slanted as the afternoon changes to evening, and worry starts to eat at me.

Where the fuck is she?

It gets later and later, and eventually, I get up and walk back to the rest of the house. Priest and Ash are in the living room, watching something on TV, and Knox comes up from the basement almost like he was summoned.

They all take a look at my face, and then Ash frowns.

"River's not back yet."

"We would have heard her car," Priest says. "The thing rumbles like it runs on diesel."

"She should have been back by now," I say, pacing a little.

"Unless maybe her lead was really good?" Knox throws in. We all look at him and he shrugs. "It was just a thought."

And it's not impossible that she did get a good lead and decided to track it down to a source or some proof, but even then, it's dangerous for her to be doing it on her own. She would have checked in. We're past the point

where she has to be out there alone, and we've all been making a point to check in with each other.

The dog comes to the living room door, whining for attention, and I realize it's because it's time for his evening feeding. River never misses that. She rants and complains about the dog all the time, but she still takes care of him.

Something twists in my gut as I pull my phone out of my pocket and call her cell. We all have her number by now, since we've been coordinating our investigation and I wanted a way to keep in touch. The fingers of my free hand tap against my thigh as it rings, and when it goes to voicemail, I hang up and try again.

Same thing.

No answer.

"Something happened to her," I say, my voice tight. I don't know how I know that with such deep certainty, but I do. "She'd be back by now otherwise."

It's as if my saying it out loud confirms what we've all been thinking, and fear ripples through all of us. I can feel it. I can see it in my brothers' faces and their body language—even Priest, who's usually harder to read than that.

"Okay, so we'll go after her," Ash says. I can tell he's trying to keep calm, to be the voice of reason or something. It's not usually his role, but I guess when it comes to River, it's what he feels like he has to do.

She's changed all of us in one way or another, made us different versions of the people we were before she came into our lives. It's hard to know if it's for better or worse, but right this second, it doesn't really matter.

We just have to find her.

We have to get her back.

"What name was she going after today?" Priest asks.

I open my mouth but then realize I don't know. She never said. I glance at Knox, who shrugs and shakes his head. Ash comes up blank too.

"She was in the middle somewhere, I think," I say. "Fuck. I'm not sure."

"Great. That narrows it down exactly fuck-all." Knox curses. "We can't just roam the streets looking for her. We need to narrow it down more than that."

“We could try to track her car,” Priest says suddenly. “We know she left here in that, so if we can get a ping on it from traffic cameras or security cameras, we can at least figure out what she drove past and when.”

I nod. It still seems like too fucking little, but it’s all we have. Knox is right that roaming the streets just shouting River’s name isn’t going to accomplish shit. And we’ve done business with a hacker before who might be able to access the footage we need.

“I’ll call Tommy,” I say grimly, punching in a new number on my phone.

RIVER

MY HEAD THROBS as I come back to consciousness.

My body aches like I was in a fight, and I feel a little like I was run over by a truck from how heavy my chest is. It takes a second for everything that happened to wash over me, but when it does, it hits me in a rush. Vivid memories of following Julian and then getting jumped by his men crowd my mind.

I fought them, but it wasn't enough.

They took me.

I wrench my eyes open and look around frantically, fear running through me as I realize that I'm chained up in a basement somewhere.

It would almost be funny how often this keeps happening to me, if it wasn't so fucking terrifying.

This is worse than when the guys had me down in their basement, though. Then, I had no idea who they were, and it was just the situation that had me on edge. None of it was related to my past, and I was pretty sure I was going to be able to get out of it, even if I had to kill one or more of them to do it.

Now, I'm locked in a basement by the son of the man who actually held me captive when I was a teenager. Chained up by someone who looks enough like him that if he came down right now, it would be hard to tell the difference. And I have no idea what he wants with me. Probably to punish me for following him, but there are so many ways to do that. I don't know what kind of person he is. I don't know what he'll do, and I hate that.

It's like the two instances are layered over each other, my captivity from years ago and my captivity now, this basement blending with the one I was

held in back when I was so young and helpless.

The chains feel the same, weighty and impossible to yank free from the wall. I'm different now, not the young, scared girl I was back then, but it's harder to remember that fact when I'm in the same position. When I don't know what's going to happen, and I feel like I've been beaten to hell. I'm more aware than ever of how breakable human bodies are, how easy it is to snuff the life out of one, and it makes me feel fragile and helpless.

Hannah isn't here this time.

It's just me chained up down here, but too much of this feels the same as before.

I drag in shallow gulps of air, practically hyperventilating, spiraling into a panic attack faster than I have in years. My breaths come out short and fast, and I can feel my heartbeat in my throat.

No. No. I have to get out of here. I can't be here.

No matter how hard I try to shove it down, wild anxiety rises in my chest, making my body feel hot and cold all at the same time.

It feels like I'm going to drown in it. Like it's filling my lungs and making it impossible to breathe.

I yank against the chains, trying to do whatever I can to get free. My arms are held up at an angle, stretched out on either side, and it's hard to get leverage, but that doesn't stop me from trying. I feel something pull in one arm as I thrash in the chains, but that doesn't stop me either.

I don't care how hurt I get in the process, I just have to get out of here.

My voice sounds raw to my own ears, and there's an almost involuntary chant of, "No. No. No. No, no, no, no," spilling from my lips, ragged and desperate as I struggle.

I try the same trick I used to get out of the chains back at the guys' house, trying to pull my hands free, but these shackles are too tight. Too well made. All I do is scrape up my wrists even more, and the blood that gathers isn't enough to help work them out of the restraints.

"No," I moan, clenching my hands into fists. "No, no, no."

My cheeks are wet with tears, and I take deep, shuddering gasps, trying to keep myself from passing out again. If I pass out here, who knows what Julian will do to me?

I have to be able to fight back.

I have to be able to hold my own.

I can't let him do this, whatever *this* is.

I have to—

The sound of footsteps on the stairs catches my attention, and I stop moving. My pulse thunders in my chest, in my neck, in my head. I tense up, my jaw tight enough that my teeth grind together painfully.

I'm expecting it to be Julian, coming down to make his demands or taunt me or just flat out kill me. I expect to see that smug look on his face while he gloats over the fact that he figured out I was following him and managed to set me up.

Maybe he knows I killed his father. Maybe this will be his revenge.

But when the person opens the door and steps into the basement room, my heart stops.

It's not Julian.

It's Hannah.

Everything seems to freeze in place, like time has stopped, and all I can do is stare at her. For a second, I can't believe my eyes. I blink, expecting the ghost of my sister to vanish, or for it to be someone else instead. For my eyes to have been playing tricks on me the way they have so many times before.

But no matter how much I blink and stare and blink and stare, it's still Hannah. I'd know her face anywhere. Know those eyes.

She's older, just like I am, and dressed in nicer clothes than I've seen her wear before, but still recognizable.

Hannah is alive.

Seeing her standing there, seeing her face, just brings back even more memories. They wash over me like a fucking tsunami, and I'm thrown back into the last time I saw her. How I watched her be beaten and abused so badly that she died. How I was held down and *made* to watch, begging her to get back up when she fell, and feeling something break inside me when she didn't. I remember all those times I tried to protect her. Tried to keep them interested in me so they'd leave her alone. I remember listening to her cry at night, listening to those assholes laugh about how weak she was. I remember failing her, and leaving that hellhole alone, knowing I'd never see my sister again.

I start struggling all over again, and I don't know if I'm trying to get away from the memories or get to Hannah, but I can't be still. I'm wild, like a caged animal, trying to break free however I can. My wrists throb as they get cut up even more by the shackles, but I don't care.

There's too much pain and rage and shock, and I need to be out of these chains.

Hannah rushes over to me, hands held out like she wants to touch me but isn't sure she should. "River," she hisses, and even just hearing her voice is like a shock to the system. How many times has she said my name like that? Begging me to be careful, to calm down. To help her.

A sob forces its way out of my throat, and I yank harder on the chains, this time sure I want to get to her.

"No," she says firmly. "You have to calm down. You have to be quiet. You're going to hurt yourself."

I open my mouth, but no words come out. Just a sound like a wounded animal, desperate and full of pain.

It's my sister. My fucking sister is right there in front of me. She's Hannah in all the ways that matter. Her face, her eyes, her voice. The last time I saw her, she was thin and frail, but now she looks healthier. Like she's been eating and taking care of herself.

But there's still something in the way she holds herself while she's trying to get me to be quiet. Something battered and haunted about her, as if the scars she bears on the inside are so deep that they manifest in her outward appearance as well.

She opens her mouth to speak again, then snaps it shut, her gaze jerking toward the door as a quiet sound filters down from the stairway.

But once again, it's not Julian coming down the steps.

Instead, a child steps into the doorway. A little boy with sleepy eyes and a look of confusion on his face.

"Mommy?" he asks, voice soft and tired.

Hannah stiffens and steps back from me, turning to look over her shoulder. "Go back to bed, sweetheart," she says to him.

My eyes go wide, and that gets me to stop struggling faster than anything else could have. This new shock overrides everything, even the appearance of Hannah after all this time. I go still and rigid, staring at my sister's back as she looks down at the kid.

Her kid.

RIVER

IT FEELS like there's a heavy weight on my chest as I watch Hannah turn and walk to the little boy, who's hovering in the doorway that leads to the stairs out of the basement. She kneels down to look him in the eye, brushing hair back from his face. It's the same sandy blonde as hers, as our father's, and it hurts even more to see it.

He looks up at her and reaches for her shirt, getting a handful of it like he wants to hold on to her like a lifeline.

I know the feeling.

He can't be more than three or four years old, and realizing that puts a bad taste in my mouth—even more than there was already.

"You're supposed to be in bed," Hannah says to him, her voice soft and steady.

The kid mumbles something that sounds like "had a bad dream," and Hannah pulls him closer. She whispers something in his ear, too low for me to catch, and he clings to her.

His eyes are still sleepy and wary, and she blocks his view of me with her body. Finally, the kid nods, and Hannah kisses his forehead and then sends him toddling away.

She stays crouched down for a long second with her back still facing me, like she's gathering herself. Then finally stands up and turns back toward me. I can see pain and shame in her eyes, like she doesn't know how to face me.

When she reaches up to brush that same sandy hair out of her face, I notice the ring on her finger, glimmering in the scant light.

It's like a kick in the stomach when I realize she must be married to Julian.

"Hannah," I breathe, not sure what to say. Julian? After everything his father put us through? Why him? Why would she, if she's been alive this whole time?

There are so many questions swirling in my head, threatening to drag me under again and drown me in that same fierce panic from before. It feels like my heart is breaking, and I'm still numb with the shock of everything I've just learned. When I woke up here, I didn't expect any of this.

Trying to wrestle my mind back under control, I pick a single question, probably the most important one of the bunch, and manage to choke it out.

"How?"

Hannah turns her face away, and I watch as she drags in a deep breath. She looks down at the concrete floor for a second and then finally back up at me. Her eyes are haunted, and now that the kid is gone—her kid, I keep reminding myself—she has that hunched-in-on-herself posture all over again. Like she's expecting to be hit or screamed at or something.

It fits with the way she looked when I last saw her, but that's about the only thing that does.

"I... didn't die that day. When we were captive."

That much is obvious, but I don't say so. I just keep watching her, silently urging her to explain. Part of me is afraid that if I look away she'll disappear, as if she's some hallucination brought on because Julian's thug hit me in the head too hard.

She takes another deep breath. "I didn't die. Lorenzo managed to get a doctor to look at me, and they kept me from giving in to my injuries. They just never told you or Dad that I was still alive."

I curl my fingers into fists at the thought of that. All this time. All this time my sister was alive, and no one fucking told me.

"It took a long time for me to get my strength back. I was pretty messed up. Broken bones, a bad concussion. They had to do a lot to keep me alive. In that time, they took you back to Dad, but they kept me captive for longer."

"Why?" There's another question I manage, even though I'm honestly not sure I want to know the answer.

Hannah glances up at my face and then away again. "Lorenzo said... he said I owed him since he saved my life. For the expense of the doctor and

all the treatments and pain killers and whatever else. He had a whole list, but I don't really remember. I just wanted to go home and be done with all of it, but then Julian showed up—"

Her voice falters at that, and I reach out like I can touch her, comfort her somehow. But the chains bring me up short, rattling while the shackles dig into my bloody wrists. Frustration bubbles in my gut that even this close, I can't do anything to help her.

"What the fuck did he want?" I ask her.

"Me," Hannah says, and her voice sounds almost hollow. "Lorenzo had all these demands. He needed Julian to have an heir, to carry on the family name. He'd been pressuring him for a while, and... and I was right there. And I owed him, so. So that was that."

"So Julian... married you." The words feel like ashes in my mouth, bitter and terrible. I can't even believe what I'm hearing, even though the proof of it is right in front of me.

Hannah just nods, and then looks down at the floor again.

Even now that I have an explanation, there are so many questions I want to ask. My mind reels with the heaviness of it. My sister alive. Her being married to Julian. Relief and horror and anger war inside me, spiraling out of control like a storm. I don't know which one to settle on, they're all such strong emotions.

Before I can pick a way to feel or ask any of the million questions in my head, the basement door opens again, and this time it is Julian who comes down.

His footsteps are heavy on the stairs, and he walks into the room with a patronizing glare. The smug look is gone, and he looks at Hannah—at his wife—like she's no more than an annoyance to him.

It makes me want to back hand him across the face, but chained to the wall and still in pretty deep shit, there's not much I can do.

"You're not supposed to be down here," he says to Hannah, eyes flicking over her.

His tone is even, and he doesn't make a move to hit her or even get too close, but Hannah seems to shrink away from him all the same.

"I just—" she starts to say, and then cuts herself off, wrapping her arms around herself in something like a hug.

"I don't care," Julian snaps. "You know better. She's my problem to deal with, and it doesn't concern you."

Every word seems to make her shrink even more, until she's practically cowering away from him. Seeing her like this, cowed and docile, makes my heart hurt. I remember when she was bright and vibrant, when there was nothing better than the sound of her laughter, or watching her climb a tree just because she could.

She was never as reckless as I was—and am—but she wasn't afraid. She wasn't meek.

Whatever Julian has put her through, whatever Lorenzo did to her when I thought she was dead, it's turned Hannah into someone I barely recognize.

"What are you going to do to her?" Hannah asks. Her eyes dart to me and then away, back to Julian.

He smiles at her, but there's no warmth in it. It's just a cold, dead smile, like she's a stupid kid or something. "It'll be okay," he says. "I know she's your sister. I recognized the resemblance between you when she came to see me with the Kings of Chaos."

Fuck.

I could kick myself for going to his fucking fight ring with them, even though there was no way for me to have known that he would piece it together. Until today, I had no idea that Julian even knew who Hannah and I were.

"I would've been happy to leave her alone," he says, putting on a look of remorse that I don't buy for a fucking second. "But then she insisted on following me. So I had to do something. She's too nosy for her own good, your sister."

Hannah looks at me again, and there's almost a hint of the look she used to give me when we were younger and she'd find me doing something dumb. Starting fights with people bigger than me, getting into scrapes, the kind of things I should've known better than to do.

It aches to see it, and I want nothing more than to wring Julian's fucking neck and drag Hannah away from here. The guys would welcome her, probably, if I asked them to. They'd keep her safe.

Hannah would like Dog, and she'd be away from all this shit.

But it's nothing more than a fucking fantasy, since I'm chained to the wall and Julian is between me and the exit.

"You won't hurt her?" Hannah asks, straightening up a bit to look her husband in the eye.

Julian frowns, seeming annoyed by the question. “Of course I won’t hurt her. I’m just going to make sure she knows that following people is rude and unwise. We’ll have a chat about it, and she’ll be fine. Come back upstairs with me now. I’ll deal with her later.”

He puts a hand on her shoulder, and Hannah doesn’t flinch away. She doesn’t lean into him either, just stands there, looking like a fucking statue.

I can read the hesitation in her posture, see her resisting his order. Fear washes through me in a cold rush. I don’t know as much about Julian as I knew about his father, but I know him well enough to guess that it won’t go well for Hannah if she tries to protect me in this moment. If she insists on staying down here or refuses to go with Julian, I don’t know what he’ll do to her.

I can’t let her get hurt on my account.

“It’s alright, Hannah,” I say, speaking quickly. “You can go. Please.”

I don’t bother to hide the desperation in my voice on that last word, allowing some of it to seep through in my tone. Hannah’s gaze flicks between me and Julian, worry filling her familiar blue eyes.

I’m not sure if she believes his promise or not. Honestly, I’m not sure *I* believe it. I wouldn’t put it past him to kill anyone he needs to in the name of “business,” but I can’t tell if he considers me someone who falls into that category. I can’t tell if his word means anything, especially considering the dismissive way he treats Hannah.

“It’ll be okay,” I add, as if saying the words enough times will make them true.

She chews her lip, hesitating long enough that I can feel Julian start to get impatient. His fingers twitch lightly, and my stomach sours, bile rising up my throat. If he hits Hannah right now, while I’m chained to the wall and unable to help her, I don’t know what I’ll do.

“Okay,” she says finally. “Let’s go.”

But despite her agreement, she lingers right where she is until Julian physically ushers her up the stairs, one hand hovering at the small of her back.

I want to call out to her, to keep her from leaving me, but I keep my lips pressed firmly together. If I piss Julian off right now, there’s no telling what he might do to her, and I’m in no position to help her. I refuse to be responsible for Hannah suffering any more than she probably already has.

They both disappear up the stairs, and the door swings shut after them, closing and then locking for good measure with a click that echoes through the dank basement.

As soon as they're gone, I start trying to get free again. The weight on my chest is still there, still threatening to choke me, and it's harder than ever to breathe. I try one more time to work my hands out of the shackles, but I just end up scraping my wrists even more raw than they already were.

My head swims from the rapid breathing and the remnants of whatever Julian's goons injected me with when I tried to fight them off. Everything I've learned in the last fifteen minutes crowds my brain, making my thoughts disjointed and chaotic. I can feel my pulse in my temples, thudding heavily, as if my head is a ticking bomb waiting to explode.

My vision goes blurry around the edges, and even though I try to hold on to consciousness, it slips away like a shadow.

RIVER

I HAVE no idea how many hours have gone by since Julian and my sister left the basement, just that it's probably still the same day Julian abducted me. Or night. Whatever. There aren't any windows in this basement, and I drop in and out of an exhausted haze as the remainder of the drugs I was injected with work their way through my system.

Sometimes I don't remember where I am when I come to, and then I look around and it all comes back to me in a flare of anxiety and shock and anger. Sometimes that's enough to drag me back under and make everything go dark again.

I'm slumped in the chains, exhaustion pulling at me and making all my limbs feel heavier than they are. If it wasn't for the chains, I'd probably already be in a heap on the cold concrete floor. I can't get free. My body aches from trying. I can feel blood drying on my wrists and tears drying on my face from how hard I tried to get loose.

Julian will come back down at some point. I'm sure of it, although I still have no idea what he plans to do with me.

He promised Hannah he wouldn't hurt me, but if he's anything like his father, that vow won't mean shit.

I spare a thought to hope he doesn't make Hannah watch if he does decide to kill me. I don't want that for her. Watching her die, or thinking that I did, has consumed me for the last several years of my life, and I want her to be free of that.

Thinking about Hannah gives me a little burst of energy, and I summon it up as best I can to go back to trying to get free. It's harder now that I'm so

worn out, but I don't want to give up. I refuse to just give in without some kind of a fight.

Knox was right. I'm a fighter. It's who I am, down to the very core of my being.

I think I might be starting to make a little progress on the shackle holding my left wrist, but before I can get too far, the basement door opens again. I look up so sharply that my head spins, and my stomach twists itself into knots as Julian comes into the room.

He has a gun in his hand, and as the door closes behind him, he trains it on me. His grip is steady, and his aim has the barrel pointed straight at my chest.

Fuck. I guess that answers the question about whether he plans to kill me.

I take a deep, shuddering breath, expecting this to be it. He's going to fire at any second, stealing my life with a single bullet. I almost want to close my eyes, but I refuse to give him the fucking satisfaction of seeing me cower, so I stare directly at the barrel of the gun instead.

The seconds seem to stretch out forever, but he doesn't do anything. His finger doesn't move on the trigger. My heart pounds so loud I'm sure he can hear it. I'm sure he can taste my fear in the air, but he still does nothing.

Then he moves toward me. Instinctively, I flinch away. He doesn't say anything, just starts unchaining me from the wall.

My arms fall down, heavy and sore from being held up like that and how hard I was struggling to get away. I don't know what's happening here. Is he *not* going to kill me?

Julian steps back, still keeping the gun aimed at me. "Move," he says, jerking his head toward the stairs.

Dread pools in my stomach, because moving a captive to a new location rarely ends well for them. Maybe he's planning to take me somewhere else and murder me there so he won't have to deal with getting my body out of his house later.

I think about trying to fight him off and make a run for it, but I decide to wait. Acting too fucking rashly was what got me into the situation in the first place, so I need to be smarter than that now. My limbs are still prickling and half asleep from being chained up, so I should wait until I'm steadier on my feet. If he drives me somewhere, maybe it'll just be the two of us. Maybe he'll get cocky and underestimate me like so many men have

done before, and I can use that to my advantage, finding an opening in his defenses.

Rather than trying to hide how exhausted and beat to fuck I am, I lean into it, shuffling my feet and hunching over a little as Julian ushers me toward the stairway with his gun still aimed at me. If he thinks I'm about to collapse, that will be better for me when the time comes to fight him off.

I hear him behind me as I make my way up the stairs, and when I glance surreptitiously over my shoulder, I see that although he's sticking close, he's put enough distance between us that I couldn't reach him if I were to try fighting back right now.

Definitely smarter than his dad. Maybe Lorenzo's death taught him a few important lessons about keeping his guard up.

Hoping I can lull him into letting his guard down, I allow my head to droop even more as we reach the top of the stairs and emerge in a hallway.

"That way. Go."

Julian gestures down the hall, and I start walking in the direction he indicated, glancing around to try to get the lay of the land a little bit.

"In there."

Still speaking in short, blunt commands, Julian indicates a room at the end of the corridor. I can't tell if it leads to the entryway or a garage or what, but I'm assuming he's taking me to his car.

But I'm wrong. As I round the corner, I find myself stepping into a small living room. A couple of Julian's guards are posted against the walls, and in the middle of the room are...

Gage, Ash, Priest, and Knox.

They're standing in a tight group, all of them hard-faced and tense looking.

My heart crashes against my ribs at the sight of them, my whole body lurching as if I've been hit with an electric shock.

Once, they were nothing to me. Just four assholes who were stopping me from getting the shit done I needed to get done. People who held me captive too, who I wanted to get away from as soon as I could. But everything is different now.

A kind of raw relief floods me at the sight of them, and I feel my eyes prickle with tears, as if I'm about to break down into sobs just because I'm so fucking glad they're here.

Julian shoves me roughly toward the men, and I stumble a little, my body still waking up with that pins and needles feeling from being in one place for so long. My captor's gun is still drawn, still aimed at me, but I feel better being away from him and closer to the guys.

"You should control your woman better," he says, drawing the words out with his usual smug demeanor. Like he couldn't care less, but is leveling the threat anyway. There's a cold edge to it, though, breaking through that calm tone. "If I catch her interfering with my business again, I won't just give her a warning. I'll kill her on sight. Are we clear?"

He says it like he could be talking about anything, but I know he means it. I have a moment to wonder how the guys convinced him not to kill me *this* time, but then I see a half open bag of cash sitting on the table nearby.

"Are we clear?" Julian asks again, putting a little more force into the question this time. "Your money is as good as anyone else's to me, but there's not a high enough price to make me let her get away with this shit twice."

That answers that question, then. They paid him off to let me go. And judging from how big that sack of cash is, it wasn't a small amount.

Gage and Ash reach out and put their hands on me, pulling me closer to the huddle of the four of them. Just their touch makes me relax, and even though this situation is tense as fuck, and we're still not out of the woods yet, having them nearby makes me feel so much better.

"Yes. It's clear," Gage says, and his voice is just as cold and even harder than Julian's.

Knox is looking around the room like a restrained predator. A lion in a room full of prey, barely being held back by a stronger hand. He wants to rip some heads off, and it's only the possibility that we wouldn't make it out of it alive that's holding him back, I bet. That, or Gage telling him not to do anything stupid. He looks like he wants to anyway.

"Good," Julian says, matching Gage's intensity. He doesn't move toward our little group, doesn't move at all, but there's something about the shift in his attitude that seems to make him take up more space all of a sudden. "I don't want to start trouble with you. The Kings of Chaos are respected in Detroit, and you do good business. I don't want a war. But you'd better not start trouble with me. I'm willing to let this go... this time. But if it happens again, I won't be."

Gage's green eyes burn with hatred as he looks at Julian and inclines his head. The same hate and anger radiates from the other men too. Even Priest seems like he's one wrong move away from exploding in someone's face.

"Fine," Gage says. "Then it's done."

Julian nods. "It's done." He glances to one of his thugs off to the side. "Show them the door."

The guy steps forward, jerking his gun toward what must be the front hallway. We fall in line, all the guys closing in around me, trying to keep me safe.

As we head for the door, I glance around, and my heart stutters when I catch sight of Hannah. There's a staircase in the front room that leads to the upper part of the house, and she's at the very top, peering down at our little procession.

Her eyes are wide and sad, and she has her arms wrapped around herself again, like she needs a hug desperately.

Even after everything Julian just said, I want to go to her. I want to pull her into my arms and take her with us. I want to rescue her from this shit somehow and help her. I'm frozen in place, looking up at her, and Ash grabs my arm, dragging me forward. His face is grim, his fingers tight on my wrist.

There's no other choice but to leave, and I hate it.

I fucking *hate* it.

We get out of the house without being shot and head for the car the guys arrived in. I slide into the middle of the back seat as usual, with Knox and Ash on either side of me. Gage starts the car, and we pull away from the large house. Once we're a good distance away, I finally let myself take a deep, shuddering breath, relief crashing over me. It's mixed with too many other emotions to name, both good and bad, and they clog up my chest until it feels like there's no room left for my internal organs.

My body aches from head to toe. I've got bruises from the fight with Julian's goons, along with a lump on my temple from where one of them hit me to knock me out. My wrists are fucked up from struggling, and my arms are sore at the sockets from when I tried to wrench them free. On top of that, my head is a full on fucking mess.

Everything I learned today is still swirling around up there, and the memories of being held by Lorenzo and Ivan and the rest of their fucking friends are still too close to the surface.

I want to go back for Hannah more than anything. I want to tell the guys to turn around, tell them I need them to help me get her back. I don't trust Julian as far as I could fucking throw him, and even though she's been with him for this long and he hasn't killed her, that doesn't mean he's treating her well.

I can't get the memory of her hunched posture and frantic eyes out of my head. He's not doing right by her, and she's afraid of him. My sister is alive and scared, trapped in a marriage with the son of a man who almost murdered her.

If we go back to the house, Julian will have us killed on sight, just like he promised. Hannah's last hope, the last person who will fight for her, will be gone.

But I need to do *something*.

The guys are quiet as we head back to the house. Gage's hands are white-knuckled on the steering wheel, like he's barely holding himself back. Knox keeps cracking his knuckles next to me, glaring out the window like he also wants to tell Gage to turn around and head back, even if it would be suicide to start that fight with Julian right now. Ash is tense and sullen, and he keeps reaching over to touch me with one hand while he flips a coin over and over again in his other hand, like he needs something to keep his fingers busy.

Honestly, I'm grateful for his hand on my leg, my arm, my hair. It keeps me grounded. Keeps me from losing myself to the memories and the shock and desperation that I feel.

I can't see Priest's face where he sits in the front passenger seat, but I can tell he's pissed off. His body is tense, muscles so tight they must be screaming. Every so often, he clenches and unclenches his hand, and when I look closely as we pass under a street light, I can tell his fingers are shaking.

That's definitely unusual for him, and he must be really pissed off to be showing it this much.

His agitation only seems to grow as we cross into the guys' neighborhood, driving down the winding road that leads to their house. As soon as we pull into the driveway and Gage kills the engine, Priest is out of the car.

I half expect him to stalk toward the house and go inside to calm himself down, but instead, he wrenches open Ash's door and jerks his head

at him to get out.

Ash does, and if he thinks Priest is acting weird, he doesn't say so. He just gets out of the way.

Priest's eyes burn as he grabs my arm and drags me across the back seat and out of the car, and I'm too stunned to resist.

RIVER

I'M STILL TOO DAZED to do anything to fight back when Priest drags me out of the car. And too *surprised*, to be honest. Priest is never the one who's like this. Knox, sure. Even Gage and Ash can give in to their anger and act rashly from time to time, but not Priest. He keeps himself on such a tight leash all the time, and he's not the one who loses control.

But right now, that doesn't seem to matter.

It's like a switch was flipped in his head. Like he's possessed by something angry and insistent and isn't trying to fight it.

Fury radiates from him as he drags me into the house and slams the door closed before any of the other guys can even get in.

He practically throws me against the nearest wall, looming over me with wild eyes. His chest heaves from how hard he's breathing, and I've never seen this much anger and emotion in him.

"Do you have any idea how fucking *stupid* that was?" he growls, his voice rough. He's inches from my face, staring at me like he can see through me. "What the hell were you thinking?"

I open my mouth, but nothing comes out. I'm too surprised at this sudden attitude and too tired to summon up any excuses. Given how pissed he is, I don't think he'd accept them anyway.

"Are you trying to get yourself killed?" he demands when I don't answer.

"No," I manage, the word coming out rasped and barely audible. My throat is dry from being held in that basement for however long, and I swallow past the lump in it to try to get some moisture.

“Then *what?*” Priest bites out. “You ran off to follow that asshole without telling anyone where the fuck you were going. Are you trying to make it so we can’t protect you?”

He’s practically foaming at the mouth with rage, and I shake my head, not sure what to say or what to do to make him calm down. It’s obvious me going missing affected him, and he’s giving in to the feelings like I’ve never seen before.

When I don’t have an answer for him, Priest makes a noise of frustration, deep and guttural. He grabs my arm again, and by now, the other guys have come into the house as well. Still, none of them stop him as he drags me up the stairs, though. They just watch and let it happen.

I let it happen too. My heart is pounding in my chest again, and I feel like I’ve been running back-to-back marathons, but I don’t resist when he drags me up to his room and slams the door behind us.

The heavy thud echoes through the room, and I stay where he leaves me, eyes wide as I watch him cross to his dresser.

He rummages through a drawer for a few seconds and then turns around with a handful of neckties. He still seems possessed and out of his mind, like he’s a completely different person.

“Get on the bed,” he snaps, and I scramble to do so, some primal part of my brain responding to the command in his voice. I barely make it to the center of his bed before he’s on me.

His hands are rough as he shoves me down onto my back and grabs my arms, stretching them out to either corner of the bed.

They ache from the rough treatment, but I don’t cry out. I don’t even flinch as Priest uses his ties to bind me to the headboard. The material is soft, at least, but he ties them tight around my wrists and then around the bedposts, keeping me secured in place.

“I’m *not* letting you go,” he snarls. “I’m not letting them take you. Not going to let anyone fucking hurt you.” He ties the last knot with an almost vicious tug and then yanks on it to make sure it’s not going to come undone. “I’ll keep you locked away if I have to, but I’m not losing you.”

He’s barely making sense, babbling in a way that makes me uncertain if he’s talking to me or just putting the words out there into the universe. It’s low and muttered, like a mantra, and I realize that something about this whole mess triggered him hard. It must have dredged up an old wound, old

loss and pain. He's gone to a very dark, tortured, heartbroken place, and it's taking over his usual calm.

I get it.

I *recognize* it.

Because my head is fucked up too.

Seeing my sister, thinking I was going to die at Julian's hand... it's all so fucking much, and it's left me shaken and messed up. Every time I think about Julian's lie to Hannah, the way he told her it would all be okay, knowing he was going to kill me, I want to scream. I think about what my sister must have gone through, how she was alone for all these years, and I want to break something. It's too much, on top of everything else that was already fucking me up, and I have no idea how to beat back the demons roaring through my head.

So I don't fight Priest. I let him tie me down, let him get on top of me with those burning ice-blue eyes that barely seem like his. A part of me thinks I need this as much as he clearly does, somehow. To feel something other than the loss and fear and anger that I've been dealing with for the last few hours. Hell, for the last few years.

I need his pain to mix and meld with mine. I need to feel his feverish drive to keep me safe, to let it ground me and remind me that there are people in this world now who want to help me. Something I've never had before.

The fact that his protectiveness is violent and almost unhinged doesn't matter. It still gives me something I need. Still feeds the part of me that's been craving it for so long, whether I realized it or not.

I drag in a shuddering breath and look up at him. His eyes are on fire, and his hands are rough as he touches me. He drags them down my face and my shoulders, like he's trying to make sure I'm really here and all in one piece.

"Take it out on me," I tell him, the words coming out before I can even really think about them. "Fuck it out on me, Priest. Let it go. Fuck me. If not with your cock, then with something else."

PRIEST

MY CHEST HEAVES as I stare down at River.

I'm spiraling out of control, and it's not a feeling I'm familiar with.

My head is pounding, thoughts swirling with the reminder that I could have lost her tonight. I could have never seen her again.

It's what drove me to tie her down to the bed. Because I *need* her to be safe. I need her to be where I can keep an eye on her.

Thinking she was gone, outside of my ability to protect her, hit that raw, gaping wound left in my chest from Jade's death. The one that's never really healed. Scabbed over, maybe... but then River showed up, and turned it into something else.

We were all fucked up when we realized she was gone and we had no idea where she was. Waiting while Tommy tried to track down her car felt like torture. The beast inside my head that I've worked so damn hard to keep back and keep in check was impossible to hold back.

It's impossible now.

It's in control, driving me to touch her, to hold her and keep her here. To make sure she knows she's not getting away from me. Even if someone wants to take her, they'll have to go through me to get to her, and it won't be fucking pretty.

Fuck it out on me.

Her words hit me like punches to the gut. My cock twitches in my pants, getting a little hard at the thought of taking this anger and rage out on her body, pouring it into her and then seeing if it's enough to make her fall apart.

I want that. I want her to lose it for me. I want her to know that she belongs here, and no one is going to change that. Not even *her* with her reckless, stupid actions.

I want to own her in this moment. She's splayed out on the bed, so perfect and beautiful. Even with her hair a mess and blood and bruises showing the ordeal she went through, she's still a fucking vision.

She's not Jade, and for so long it fucked me up that I felt something for her. But I do. I can't deny that I do. I wouldn't be breaking all my damn rules for her if I didn't.

She's not Jade; she's *River*, and she's gotten under my skin.

Those dark blue eyes of hers stare up at me, and there's no fear in them. She's not scared of me. She never has been. Not when I tried to make it clear I'd kill her if she stepped out of line, and not now.

But I can see that she's fucked up too. Pain and anger and loss swirl in the dark depths of her eyes. It's like she's begging me to do it, to make her feel anything else than what she's feeling right now.

She's turned on, too. Her nipples are hard through the thin fabric of her shirt, peaked while her breath starts to come faster. She squirms against her bonds, like she's trying to get closer to me, trying to get me to follow through on what she asked.

My pulse is pounding, the blood in my body beating hot and fast, and finally... I give in to it. Lunging forward, I cover her body with my own, pinning her down beneath me.

She gasps, and I kiss her hard and fast. Like I want to devour her.

I bite at her lips, then plunge my tongue into her mouth and map out every inch of it like I want to lay a claim there. My hands move down her body, groping and grabbing, touching her everywhere.

I'm not careful, and I'm not concerned with her being sore or tired. It's just a primal need to touch her, rough and wild.

River reacts so fucking beautifully to it, too. She arches against me, struggling against the ties that hold her. Her body quivers under mine, and I trail my mouth from hers down to her neck, leaving a biting line of harsh kisses to her shoulder, ripping away her shirt so I have access to her skin.

The shirt shreds easily under my hands, and I rip the whole thing off and follow it with her bra, exposing her body to me. She's tattooed and scarred and so fucking gorgeous.

Her tits are right there, nipples hard little nubs, giving away how much she likes this. I fall on those too, kissing my way down her chest and taking one into my mouth while I pinch and tug at the pierced one.

“Priest,” River moans, her body shaking. “Fuck.”

I pinch her nipple harder, and she nearly screams with the pain and pleasure of it. The sound goes straight to my head and to my cock, and my own body throbs with the urgent need to keep going.

Her pants are in my way, so I yank them off her, dragging them down her legs with her underwear and then tossing them down to the floor. River makes a soft noise, and when she doesn’t immediately spread her legs, I wrench them open with both hands, spreading her wide.

Her eyes are just as wide, and she looks at me like she’s not sure what I’m going to do next. But she doesn’t tell me to stop. Doesn’t try to fight me. So I keep going.

I rub her clit, pleased to find she’s already wet for me. Her body responds, gushing more wetness, and she twists in the restraints, bucking up like she wants more. Her chest heaves as she whines, trying to grind against my hand.

I shove her back down to the bed and keep her there with one hand flat on her stomach. I can feel her straining against it, but I’m stronger than she is, and I keep her down. With my free hand, I work two fingers into her pussy, sinking them right into that wet heat.

“*Priest!*” She moans my name again, and just the sound of it goes right to my fucking head.

I press my fingers even deeper into her, thrusting them a few times, but it’s just not enough. It doesn’t satisfy anything in me. I need to fuck her more, deeper. Harder. My eyes dart around the room, looking for something to fill that need. After a second of searching, my gaze lands on the sharpening rod I use for keeping my knife blades honed, sitting on my desk. The rod itself is a thin metal cylinder, but the handle is long and smooth and thick enough that I know she’ll feel it. I grab it up immediately, something savage lighting in my chest as my fingers wrap around the polished handle.

Perfect.

River looks at me with those beautiful, wide eyes as I return to the bed, and any thoughts I might have had about taking this slow and gentle vanish in a heartbeat. Kneeling between her legs, I spread her open and shove the handle into her. Her body takes it so well, like it was made for this, and the

sight of the handle disappearing into her wet pussy is fucking intoxicating. I can't look away.

She cries out when I drag it out slowly, trying to arch up again, but I keep her in place and work the smooth handle deeper into her pussy all over again.

"No," I growl, my voice a rough burn. "You're going to stay put, and you're going to fucking take it."

She asked for it, after all. She wanted me to fuck this aggression out on her, so that's what I'm going to do. I'm going to keep going until all these feelings are worked out of me. Until there's some kind of satisfaction, even if it's not a physical one.

"Do you understand?" I ask her.

She nods eagerly, and I set a harder pace.

"I want to hear it," I say, my voice coming out sharp and intense. "Tell me you understand."

"Yes," she gasps. "Fuck. I understand. Oh my god."

She can't stay still, her body twisting and writhing. The ties dig into her skin as she jerks her wrists against them, but the knots don't give. She's not going anywhere until I'm done with her.

The handle of the sharpening rod works for what it is, in place of my cock. It fills her enough that I know she can feel it, and I'm not gentle with it at all. I slam it into her again and again, working it as deep as I can.

My cock pulses in my pants, a torrent of emotions roaring through me as I watch her take it. All that anger is still there, all that possessive need to claim her and make sure she knows where she belongs. It still rides me, but it's not enough to make my cock hard enough to fuck her with.

Not the way I want to.

"Oh my god," River moans. She closes her eyes, and I thrust the handle in deep and hard, fucking her almost punishingly with it.

"Look at me," I snarl. "Open your fucking eyes."

She does, snapping them open immediately. They're hazy with need, lust finally overshadowing some of the pain that was there before.

"Good," I tell her. "Don't look away."

As if to make sure she obeys my command, I reach forward and grab a handful of her hair, lifting her head so she can look down her own body and see what I'm doing to her. So she can watch the smooth thickness of the handle sink into her pussy over and over again.

She lets out a sobbing moan, and I can tell she's close. Her pussy clenches around the intrusion, and it gets harder to pump it into her.

But I still don't stop.

"Please," she gasps out. "*Please*, oh my fucking—"

"That's it," I grunt. "Come for me. Come right now."

Maybe it's the order or the fact that I push that handle even deeper inside her as I speak, but she does as I say, convulsing and moaning and falling apart as she comes hard.

She's fucking beautiful like this. Sweaty and helpless and losing it because I want her to. Because she wanted me to do this.

Watching her come undone, I feel my own body start to respond. A mixture of good and bad emotions swirl inside me, all of them intense. There's the lust and the desire for her, mingling with the fear and anger that came from thinking I was going to lose her. It's like they're battling to see which one will come out on top, and dragging me along for the ride.

I reach down and palm myself through my jeans, pressing into my hand. My cock throbs just from that touch, and I suck in a breath through gritted teeth. River watches, still following my order to not look away. She looks hungry for it, like she's desperate to see me lose myself, and I pull my cock out.

I want to give her what she wants.

What we both want.

The need beats down on me, as fierce and insistent as a hurricane. I stroke myself, jerking off with quick strokes, as I stare down at River's body on display for me—her tits, her stomach, her thighs. I imagine myself painting that body with ropes of my cum, splattering my release all over her like another way of laying claim and making sure she knows she's mine and she belongs here with me.

It's so close...

I can almost taste it.

I can feel heat burning in my belly, feel the way it licks at my balls, tantalizingly close but not quite there yet. I jerk my cock faster and harder, taking a break only to gather some of River's wetness on the palm of my hand and use that to slick the slide.

But I can't quite get there. The monsters in my soul that have tortured me for so long are still haunting me, making it impossible to hit the peak I'm so fucking desperate for.

My cock starts to soften a bit on my hand, and the orgasm that was so close starts receding bit by bit, leaving me cold as the searing heat fades away.

“Fuck,” I groan, my voice hoarse and choked.

I release my tight grip on my cock and collapse on top of River, burying my face in her neck, breathing her in.

Maybe I can’t fucking claim her yet.

But I still won’t let her go.

RIVER

WE LIE STILL for a little while, Priest's large frame slumped over mine.

I feel a bit like my body has been put through a fucking meat grinder, but it's *good*, in a way. It feels better than the hopeless despair that threatened to drown me earlier.

Plus, I feel closer to Priest than I ever have before. Like more barriers have come down between us. I've seen him at his most raw, just like he's seen me. Neither of us are running screaming for the hills, so that's probably a good sign.

My wrists ache where they're tied, and I have to clear my throat a few times to get my voice to work after all of that.

"Will you untie me?" I manage to ask him.

Priest sucks in a breath and sits up, his fingers going immediately to the knots that hold me in place so he can release them.

I can see guilt in his eyes, his emotions still clearly on display. "I'm sorry," he says, his voice raw. "I shouldn't have—"

He looks horrified with himself as he frees me, and I give a little sigh of relief when my arms come down and I can move them again.

"It's okay," I murmur back. "I know you needed that. I needed it too, in a way. I needed whatever you gave me."

His eyes are heavy with so many things buried in their depths, and he lifts my wrists one by one, kissing the bruised, battered skin. It's such a contrast from the rough and raw way he was handling me before, and I tug him back down to the bed so he can lie down with me.

"What... what was that?" I ask him after a bit.

One of his hands is tangled up in my hair, and the other is at my hip, touching my skin idly. I have a hand fisted in the fabric of the shirt he still has on somehow, and it feels comfortable and right to lie there, tangled up in each other.

Priest drags in a deep breath, but he doesn't ask me to elaborate. He knows what I'm asking, and I wait to see if he'll answer.

"Tonight was... too close to home," he says finally. "I thought I was going to lose you, the way I lost her. By not being there when she needed me."

My chest tightens as I piece together what he's talking about. Someone he lost. The one whose loss left him the way he is now, broken and damaged. He's never outright told me it was a woman, but I'm certain it was. He mentioned her that day in the piano room when I tried to get a rise out of him by sitting on the piano and touching myself while he tried to play.

"What happened to her?" I whisper.

It takes him another few seconds to get the words out. "Jade was the first and only girl I ever loved. She was... kind and smart. Funny. She loved animals. She wanted to be a vet one day, and she was saving up to be able to go to school for it. She was from a shitty part of Detroit and had a bad family. The usual shit, you know. Her dad was on drugs and owed money to more people than probably even he knew. But Jade never let it break her. She never let it get her down. She always had a smile on her face when I saw her, and she was always optimistic for the future."

There's a pang of jealousy in my chest, just from hearing the way he talks about her, but I push it down, letting him finish his story.

"It was my fault in the end. Jade would never have hurt anyone, but I got her killed. I crossed a local gang and got in over my head. They beat the shit out of me, and when that wasn't enough... they killed her in front of me to make sure I learned my lesson."

He sounds heartbroken when he says it, like he's still dealing with that loss every single day, and I feel like I finally understand more about why Priest is the way he is. He loved that woman so completely, and she was taken from him because of a mistake he made.

Being forced to watch someone die, someone you wanted to protect with your whole self? It fucks a person up. I know that from experience. So

even if there is jealousy in me because of Jade and how close they were, I also feel protective of Priest and sad for him.

It has to hurt like a motherfucker, and I understand closing yourself off from emotions after experiencing something like that. I'm also pissed off at the world and all the horrible people in it. All the people who use their status and strength to fuck with people who don't deserve it. All the Ivans and Lorenzos of the world who make shit harder for people who are just trying to survive.

That anger laps at the raw edges of the wounds that opened up again in my own heart today. It would be so easy to let myself spiral back into rage and hurt, letting it overtake me like a storm.

But I'm tired of everything being about vengeance and hate and fury. I want to channel everything I'm feeling into something better. Into making Priest feel good for once.

I lick my lips and wiggle out from under him, pushing at his shoulder until he rolls over onto his back.

"What are you doing?" he asks, his voice soft and a little shaky.

"Just wait," I tell him.

His cock is still out from when he was jerking off a minute ago, and I wrap my hand around it, feeling the heat of his body and the velvety skin of his soft dick.

His eyes are on me as I lick my way up the underside of his cock and then close my mouth over the head, sucking at it lightly, letting my spit run down his shaft to make it slippery when I start working him with my hand too.

"River—" Priest chokes out. For a second, I think he's going to tell me to stop. That there's no point or something like that. But he doesn't. He just says my name and then clenches one hand in the sheets, like he needs to hold on to something.

So I keep going, taking him deeper into my mouth. It's always a strange and hot experience, to feel someone's dick getting gradually harder in your mouth, and I feel a little thrill of triumph when it happens.

I take it slow, working my way down to the base of Priest's cock, taking him all the way into the opening of my throat. It's easy to do when he's only half hard, and I savor that, humming around him as I suck my way back up and then lick around his smooth crown.

His cock gets harder for a bit, but then starts to fall again, going limp and flaccid the minute I'm not actively sucking him off. That doesn't deter me, though. I keep sucking, keep working him with my hand, my mouth, my tongue. I tease his balls with one hand, cupping them and working them in time with the bobbing of my head.

Priest moans for me, trembling under my attention.

I can tell this isn't easy for him, and every time he starts to go soft again, there's a quiet groan.

"You don't have to keep doing this," he murmurs. "It's not—fuck, I don't think it's going to happen."

I lift my head enough that I can meet his gaze, taking in the harsh beauty of his face. He's always been so fucking handsome, but different from the other guys. None of them are as model pretty as Ash, and Knox and Gage both have their own things that make them hot, but Priest stands out. His looks are more striking than anything, angular and jagged, like he could cut you as soon as you look at him.

There's a vulnerability in his blue eyes when he looks at me, and I give him a little smile, hoping it's reassuring.

"It's okay," I tell him again, my voice a bit husky. "I like it. I want to."

"Fuck," he groans, and I can tell it's not with defeat.

That's all I need to hear.

Maybe he *is* broken just like I am, and maybe neither one of us will ever be fixed. I can't erase his past or flip some switch to make him better. But I'm determined to make him feel *good*.

I tug his pants and boxers all the way off, then pull his shirt over his head, baring him completely to my greedy gaze. I drag my fingers down his chest and abs, scraping lightly with my fingernails and making him shudder. Then I take him back in my mouth, working my way back down to hold him in my throat. I swallow around him a few times and then pull off, wet strings of saliva connecting my mouth to his dick.

Priest's eyes flash with heat, and his cock starts to fill again. I take it even slower this time, patience in every movement as I kiss and lick at his head for long moments before working my way down again.

I lick his shaft and then go lower to tongue at his balls, feeling them heavy and hot against my tongue.

His cock keeps filling, growing and getting harder, and I can tell from Priest's harsh breathing that he's getting closer to the edge.

I take him back into my mouth, humming around him, working him a little faster now. The sounds of my sucking echo in his room, and he groans, settling a hand in my hair for a second.

There's tension in his body, like a thread pulled tighter and tighter, getting ready to snap.

"River," he groans, and I love the way he makes my name sound when he says it like that. "I'm—fuck. I'm close. Fuck."

He sounds wrecked and almost broken just from that, and I keep it up, not giving the pleasure a chance to recede. His balls draw up, and I know he's right there, right on that ledge of falling apart completely.

Before I can take him over the edge, though, his fingers go tight in my hair. He pulls me off his cock and pushes me back, switching our positions so he's on top.

He's like a man possessed again, riding that pleasure and the connection between us. This time, it's all desire driving him, and there's none of the tortured fury in his eyes from earlier. Just the need to get off.

I think he might go for my pussy, but he doesn't. Instead, he grabs my tits, squeezing them together. His cock nestles between them, hot and hard, and he strokes himself against my body, using it for his own pleasure.

I like that, so I let him know by moaning for him, wetting my lips and angling my head so I can lick the tip of his cock every time it gets close enough.

His cock drags against my skin again and again, and Priest fucks my tits like a wild man, desperate and forceful. He doesn't stop, gasping for breath, alternating between moans and harsh curses as he gets even closer.

"Please," I pant, even though I'm not the one trembling on the verge of an orgasm. "Please. I want you to come for me. Please. I want to feel it."

"Fuck," he grunts back, and it almost sounds like a sob from how desperate he is. "Fuck, River. I'm—goddammit."

"Come on. Come on, Priest."

He inhales deeply, body quivering as he keeps thrusting, working his hips like he couldn't stop if he wanted to.

And then, there's that moment of release.

I can see it when it happens, like a flash of lightning. It hits him hard, and he goes rigid for a second, overcome by the force of it. There's a wet splash against my chest and neck, and he comes all over me, spilling his release in a rush.

His eyes are wide, his chest heaving, and it looks like he's not even sure what just happened. He stays still for a few long moments, as if he needs to come down from it, and I reach up and stroke his arm, trying to keep him grounded. He seems shaky and dazed, and I feel the same way.

That was intense, emotionally as much as anything, and after everything else, it's just another layer to the exhaustion that's been pulling at me.

Finally, he moves and rolls over to the side, staring up at the ceiling.

"Are you okay?" I ask him.

He nods.

"Can you say something?"

"That was..." Priest trails off, shaking his head.

It makes sense that he's at a loss for words, I guess. And he doesn't seem upset, so I let it drop for now, not forcing him to talk it out or whatever.

He pulls me into his arms a second later, and I go willingly. There's sweat and cum all over both of us, but neither of us can be bothered to clean up right now. I couldn't give less of a fuck about that if I tried.

The bed is comfortable, and Priest's arms feel too good around me. I feel safe. After the day I've had, the pain and the torrent of emotions, just feeling cared for is enough to finally let me give in and pass out in his embrace.

Judging from the way his breathing evens out above my head, he's not far behind.

RIVER

IT'S morning when I begin to wake up again. Even before I open my eyes, I can sense the light in the room, and I've never been more relieved to wake up in a bed and not chained to a wall.

Priest is still holding me, spooning me from behind. His hold has loosened somewhat through the night, but his body curves against mine, and I can feel the soft huff of his breath against the back of my neck.

Slowly, I blink my eyes open. Then my eyebrows scrunch together. Priest and I fell asleep alone in the bed, but we didn't stay that way, clearly. Ash is in bed with us now, cuddled up against me so that I'm sandwiched between the two of them.

He smiles even though his eyes are still closed, clearly awake.

"You're going to hell for sure now," he murmurs softly. "Since you fucked a priest and all. But maybe next time, I'll join you."

That makes me laugh quietly. I smile at Ash as he opens his eyes, but as our gazes meet, the corners of my lips wobble.

Maybe it's the fact that my mind has finally had time to emerge from the shock of yesterday's events. Maybe it's the feeling of being encased between these two men and all the emotions that brings up. Or maybe it's just because I'm fucking human, and I've tried to deny that fact for too damn long.

But lying here in bed with them, it all washes over me—everything that happened. Being abducted by Julian, finding out Hannah is alive and married to him with a kid. Hearing about how she was kept longer than I was and forced into something that's clearly fucked up and not good for her.

And then having to walk out of that house, grateful to be alive but leaving my sister behind once again.

It's just too fucking much, and I finally give in to the sorrow that's been eating at me and let myself cry.

Ash holds me while I sob into his chest, pulling me close and stroking his hand through my hair.

"It's okay," he whispers. "You're here. We've got you."

Honestly, I don't know if that makes it better or worse. I know they've got me; I know I'm safe. But Hannah isn't. And if they hadn't found me and paid Julian off with what was probably an ungodly amount of money, I'd be dead right now.

Priest shifts behind me, woken up by the sound of my sobs, but he doesn't say anything. He just presses himself in closer and holds me too, offering his silent support.

I let it all out, crying until I feel like I'm empty and all dried up. I don't know how long it takes. Every time I think I'm done, I get hit with a new wave of grief, and more tears well up in my eyes and trickle down. There's just so much. So much built up inside of me. I haven't let myself cry in a long time. But being kidnapped by Julian unlocked it all, and now it's taking control of me. It won't let me up until I let it out, and there's no holding back.

Neither of the men move until I stop shaking in their arms. They hold me close like they'd do it all day if they had to.

After a while, I drag in a shuddering breath and then another one. And then one more for good measure. Then I draw back enough that they can see I'm okay.

Well. Okay-ish, I guess.

Okay enough that my body isn't shaking from sobs anymore, so I'll take it.

It feels strangely good to be held by them like this. It's reassuring and not panic inducing, the way shows of affection would've once been. I don't feel worse for having been vulnerable around them, for letting them see this side of me.

I feel *better*.

That's never really happened before, and it's proof that I'm coming to trust them.

Ash reaches up and tucks my tangled silver hair behind my ear, then kisses me softly on the mouth. It's warm and tender, like he's doing it for no other reason than to comfort me. It makes my heart race a little, but not with dread and worry. It's just because I like kissing him.

He looks down at me as we separate, and I finally remember that I'm still naked in the bed after everything that happened with Priest last night.

"You're a mess," Ash teases with a grin, his lips curving up on one side. "All crusty."

I roll my eyes at him. "Doesn't seem to be stopping you from getting handsy."

"Oh, I haven't even started getting handsy yet," he shoots back, and proves that by sliding his hands down my back to my ass. He gropes it shamelessly and then yelps right in my ear, pulling his hands back.

"Rude, Priest," he says, and I look over my shoulder to see Priest lying there with an innocent expression on his face.

"You were in my space," the blond man counters and then throws back the sheets so he can get out of bed. He's also still naked, and I watch him shamelessly, taken in like I always am by how good he looks. He's tall and muscular, his frame lean and chiseled and marked with a few scars just like mine is. Just like the other Kings' bodies are. We all wear our scars both on the inside and the outside.

Ash and I follow him out of the bed, and my body only protests the movement a little, which is good. Ash is in a pair of boxers and a t-shirt, but he strips down like it's nothing, joining me and Priest in being naked.

Priest looks just as sticky and crusty as I feel, and by some unspoken agreement, we all make our way to his attached bathroom, where he turns on the shower. It doesn't seem like either of the men really mind being naked around each other, both of them stepping into the shower after me.

The water is hot and the spray is strong. I sigh with satisfaction as it hits my sore body, cascading over me. All the dried blood and cum from the hell of a day yesterday starts to swirl down the drain, and I feel so much better for it.

Ash reaches over my head for the bottle of body wash Priest keeps in his shower caddy and starts soaping up a washcloth. He lathers it, but instead of starting to wash himself, he reaches for me.

He takes one of my arms and draws the cloth over it, starting from my shoulder and working his way down. It feels good, being taken care of like

this, and my eyelids flutter closed as Ash washes me up, taking care with my bruised and battered wrists.

“What the fuck did he do to you?” he mutters, but it sounds loud in the closed off space of the shower.

“Julian or Priest?” I ask.

Priest snorts behind me, but there’s still some remorse there. I can tell in the way he starts gently untangling my hair, letting the water soak into the silver strands.

“Julian,” Ash clarifies. “Although if you want to tell me what you and Priest got up to last night, I won’t turn down a hot story.”

I open my eyes in time to see him waggling his eyebrows suggestively, and without his glasses in the shower, it’s so much easier to see all the gold flecks in his amber eyes.

“You’ll live without the details,” Priest says, deadpan.

“How do you know?” Ash fires back. “Maybe I can’t survive without them.”

Priest just rolls his eyes and dips his head to lick a line of water from my other shoulder up to my ear.

I shiver at the way that feels, humming my contentment under my breath. In the shower, being washed up by two hot, naked men is a pretty good place to be, even after everything that came before it.

Ash moves to wash my chest, fondling my tits with his bare hands after he passes the wash cloth to Priest over my shoulder. His hands feel good, brushing over my nipples, cupping my breasts and squeezing them a little, and I moan softly, leaning up onto my toes to kiss him.

He smiles against my mouth and drags me in a little closer, kissing me back.

They’re slow, lazy morning kisses, but they spread warmth through me all the same. In this close space, with both of them touching me, washing me clean and chasing away the bad feelings and nightmares that have been stalking me for what feels like ages, I feel... protected.

It’s nice.

I grab the body wash from the little built in shelf Ash left it on and start washing him back, lathering up my hands and running them over his chest and down his torso. His muscles shift and flex when I touch them, and he makes a noise of approval low in his throat.

Eventually, one of them spins me around, and I end up facing Priest instead. I search his face, trying to see if he feels better than he did last night, and he looks right back at me like he knows what I'm doing.

His usual mask is sort of back in place, but it's not as severe as it usually is. Either that or I can see past it more easily now—like he'll never be able to truly hide from me again, now that I've seen him without it.

Ash runs his hands over my body from behind, spreading the soapy suds around as he makes sure I'm squeaky clean. I reach for Priest, going to lather him up too, and he leans down and kisses me deeply.

That simple gesture answers all my questions, in a way. I know yesterday was a lot for him and that he probably wasn't expecting to be confronted with so much emotion all at once. But he seems okay.

He pulls back and looks at me, a little smile pulling at his lips, and then nods once.

I smile back and pull him down for another kiss.

The hot water rains down over us, sending the suds swirling round the drain. Ash puts his mouth on my neck, licking the water away and pressing kisses there, and I shiver against him. He presses in closer to me, tucking himself against my back firmly enough that I can feel his cock, half hard and slippery against my ass.

But he doesn't press for more. He doesn't try to do anything other than kiss me, and I lean into it, reaching up for Priest to pull him down into another kiss too.

Priest's cock is still mostly soft, but his hands roam over my body all the same. He kisses my neck from the other side and then chases a bead of water down to my tits, licking it away.

It's heated and sensual and *easy*, and we stay like that for a while, just cleaning each other up and touching and kissing as we want to.

Eventually, we step out into the steam filled bathroom. Priest wraps a towel around me and rubs me down, drying me off. Ash dries himself off, and then the two of us leave Priest's room so we can get dressed.

I really never thought I'd be so glad to be back here, but after thinking I was going to die in Julian's basement, it's so fucking nice to be here. To be home.

My room is just like I left it, with a few clothes thrown on the floor and my nail polish bottles lined up on the nightstand, and I hunt for some clean clothes to throw on.

I look down at the marks on my wrists as I dress, remembering what Ash asked me in the shower. All the dried blood is gone, and now there is just a ring of bruises and patches of raw skin. The marks are from where Julian had me chained up, and my struggles to get away, but they're also from when Priest tied me up.

Like so much of my life, the good and the bad, the pain and the pleasure all seem to blend until they're barely distinguishable from each other.

There's no denying my life is fucked up. That *I'm* fucked up.

But with these men, I don't feel as fucked up as I used to. Or at least, I don't feel so out of place with it. They have just as many demons as I do, just as many regrets and barely scabbed-over wounds, and they understand me on a level I would never have expected anyone to.

It makes me feel less damaged and more like I could belong.

It's not a bad feeling.

Maybe what I said to Priest that day was true—that broken things don't need to be fixed.

Maybe they just need to find *other* broken things, so that together, they can make a whole.

ASH

I THROW on some clothes quickly, jamming my glasses back onto my face as I think about River. My thoughts always seem to go to her these days.

Listening to the ragged sound of her sobs as she cried in my arms just about broke my heart. I've never seen her so vulnerable, and judging from the look on Priest's face when I glanced at him over her head, I wasn't the only one who would've done anything in that moment to ease her pain. I would've brought her the heads of every single one of her enemies on a platter if I could've—and usually, “romantic” gestures like that are Knox's territory.

She seemed to feel better afterward, though, so I'm glad she let herself have that moment. It says a lot that she let us stay with her and offer whatever comfort we could instead of pushing us away, too. Maybe she's finally starting to see what this is, what it could be.

And then, in the shower...

Holy shit.

God, I wanted to fuck her. Feeling her body all slippery and warm and wet. I know she knew I was hard against her, and it would have been so easy to press inside of her body and take her right there. I wanted to push Priest a little, too. To keep urging him back to the land of the living after he's been basically encased in ice for so long.

Watching me fuck River in that shower would have brought some life back to him. Maybe he would have even been tempted to join in.

But I didn't want to wreck things by pushing for too much too soon.

Honestly, it all feels a little fragile, like a flower trying to grow in the desert, and I'm determined to protect it. If that means I have to curb some

of the things I want and take things slow, then I'll do that, because I want this to work. Because I believe this *can* work, and I'm not going to be the one who fucks it up by being impatient and forcing shit that people aren't ready for.

I was patient when it came to fucking River in the first place. I can be patient now.

I leave my room, intending to head down to the kitchen and find some breakfast. River is in the hallway ahead of me, heading for the stairs herself. I catch up to her and stop her, wrapping my arms around her from behind.

For just a second, she goes tense, and then she melts against me, leaning back with a little sigh. I fucking love that. I love how she gives in, how she's starting to accept the feelings between us.

No one has ever been able to get Priest to open up—not since Jade—but of course River did. We've all tried and failed, and ended up just accepting that he was never going to be the same again after losing the woman he loved, but River came in and made him feel shit again.

She's just what he needed.

What all of us needed.

I lean in and kiss her neck, liking the fact that she smells like me, her skin scented with the same body wash that we all used in Priest's shower. I kiss my way up to her ear and nip at it lightly, making her shiver against me.

"You know something, killer?" I murmur, my mouth still right there at her ear. "I'm really fucking glad you came into our lives."

She turns and looks up at me, her eyes full of unspoken things. I can read her better now, though, and I think I know how she's feeling.

I reach into my pocket and pull out the little knife that I usually keep on me. I flick it open with a little flourish, and then draw the blade down my palm, cutting it in a shallow line that bleeds sluggishly.

"Hold out your hand," I tell her.

River looks from my hand to my face, scowling skeptically. She obviously knows what I'm going to do, but she holds her hand out anyway.

I cut her palm quickly, with that same shallow line, and then grip her hand in mine. With our blood mingling together, I kiss her, trying to put all my hope and feeling into it.

It's not a deep kiss, but it's loaded with meaning anyway. When our lips separate, I rest my forehead against hers, my mouth tugging into a smile.

“Nobody is walking away from this now,” I tell her, then kiss her again.

Then, just because I can, I slap her ass.

What can I say? It’s a great ass.

River rolls her eyes, but there’s a bit of a spark in those dark blue depths now. More of that haunted dullness from before has faded, and I’m glad to see it.

I grin at her, she smiles back, and then we continue down the stairs to the kitchen.

Gage and Knox are already there, and Priest comes down a few minutes later, dry and dressed and more put together than he was before.

We move around each other like we always do, making coffee and foraging for breakfast, finding places to sit or lean in the kitchen. It’s always been the place where we have our meetings and discussions when we’re at home. Mostly because Knox always wants to be eating something and it was just easier than waiting for him to cook, but also because it feels kind of like the heart of the house.

We all have our own spaces, where we like to be when we want to be alone or need to get shit done, but this is a place where we come together, and River has worked herself into it almost seamlessly.

She side-steps Knox and fills up the dog’s bowl before going to make her own coffee.

We all know we have things to discuss, but it waits until we’re settled with our breakfasts, and then Gage speaks up.

“I think we have to consider that Julian might actually be behind the Ivan St. James thing,” he says.

I look at River, watching her to see if she’s going to be upset talking about the fucker who abducted her, but she’s just drinking her coffee and looking at Gage, eyes narrowed.

“His alibi from before still checks out though,” Knox says around a mouthful of toast with eggs heaped on top.

“True. We don’t have confirmation of anything, but this new development changes things somewhat. It would make sense if he was trying to smoke River out. If he knew she was the one who killed Ivan.”

Priest sets his cup down and shakes his head. “It could be, but it doesn’t quite add up. It doesn’t seem likely that these two things are that related.”

“Does he know you killed his dad?” Knox asks River.

She shakes her head. “I don’t think so, or he would’ve killed me outright and not even bothered capturing me. Given how fucked up that family is, I have no idea if he loved his father, but losing Lorenzo fucked their business pretty bad.”

“So it’s more likely that he didn’t have anything to do with Ivan’s body and only picked up River because she was following him. Like he said,” Priest puts in. “And if he’s had her sister this whole time, then he clearly would have known who she was. He probably doesn’t even know that she was involved in either death—his father’s or Ivan’s.”

“Shit. Everything being weirdly connected like this isn’t making it any easier,” I say, propping my chin on my hand.

Gage shrugs. “That’s how it works. The higher you climb in the criminal underworld, the more shit gets tangled up together. Ivan and Lorenzo were both big players in Detroit, and it just so happens they were both sick fucks who messed with River and her sister. It would be nice if that made everything else fit together too, but apparently not.”

“Unless Julian is just a really good liar,” I point out.

Knox shakes his head. “I don’t think he’d be that good. And like River said, if he knew she killed his dad, he probably would have taken her out on sight.”

River drums her fingernails on the table, and I glance over at her as Gage speaks again. I can see determination rising in her like steam building up in a pot of water left on high heat. She looks fierce as fuck and so damn gorgeous like this, but worry pokes at my chest. Last time, she tried to go after Julian alone, and we *just* got her back from him.

We can’t let her do that again.

RIVER

I STAY quiet for as long as I can, letting the guys talk it out. It's still important that we figure out who put Ivan's body on display at the gala and find out what they want and why they did it, but it's hard for me to focus on that when I know Hannah is still there with Julian.

Whether he's behind the stuff with Ivan's body or not, I have to do something to get Hannah back.

Even just sitting here talking about him is too much, and it makes me all the more aware that he could be doing anything to my sister right now, and I'm not there to protect her.

"I have to get Hannah out of there," I say all of a sudden, unable to hold the words back any longer.

"River—" Gage starts, but I cut him off.

"No. I know tailing him before was stupid. I know it was reckless. And maybe this is too. But I don't fucking care. I *have* to go back to that house. She's my fucking sister, and she's..." The tears I thought were all cried out of me earlier sting the backs of my eyes again, and I grit my teeth, forcing them down. "I have to get her out. I have to try. I'll take on Julian and every one of his goons if I have to."

All the guys tense up as I speak, clearly not liking that idea at all. They don't want me to go up against that man, especially since they just paid a truckload of cash to get me back from him, and I understand that. I do. But I don't have another choice.

I get up from the table, ready to stalk out of the house and do it myself if I have to, but Knox grabs me before I can even leave the kitchen.

“Not so fast, little fox,” he murmurs in my ear, holding me in a bear hug from behind. I struggle against him for a bit, but he’s built like a fucking tank, and I don’t make any progress at all.

He rests his chin on my head and holds me close.

“We have other options that aren’t just you storming in there and getting yourself killed,” Gage says.

“Like what?” I shoot back, my voice tight from pent-up frustration.

“We could always kill him,” Knox points out, because of course he does.

“Maybe,” Gage allows. “But if he’s *not* the one who put Ivan’s body up at the gala, killing him could be risky. It would draw more attention to ourselves.”

“He’s also pretty well protected,” Priest adds. “You saw how many guards he had last night. He’s got security, money, and resources. It would be a risk no matter what.”

“So what you’re saying is there aren’t any other options,” I say, irritated. “I’m not just going to sit here and let him keep her. You didn’t see her. You don’t know her. She’s never been like that. That... scared and meek. He’s treating her like shit, and I have to get her out.”

Knox’s arms hold me a little tighter as my rant dies out. I don’t know if it’s for comfort or because he’s thinks I’m going to try to break free and run for it. Either way, I’m clearly not going anywhere while he has a hold on me.

Gage sighs. “There is one thing we can still do,” he says. “Something that hopefully won’t involve anyone rushing off and getting hurt. We can negotiate with him. Our club could be an asset to him. We could let him do what the Diamond Devils wanted to do and smuggle shit through us. In exchange for Hannah.”

“Smart,” Priest says, nodding like it’s the most normal thing in the world.

Meanwhile, I’m shocked that Gage even suggested it.

“Really? You would do that? What do you get out of it?” I ask.

I glance around the kitchen, waiting for any of the guys to answer me. Gage and Priest share a look, doing that thing where they communicate what seems like entire sentences in complete silence. Then Gage turns back to me.

“We’ll get enough.”

That's not really an answer, but he says it with finality, as if that's all I need to know. None of the other Kings raise any objections or comment on the fact that it seems like a bad deal for the four of them. I can feel Knox nod, his chin still resting lightly on my head, and Ash picks up a knife from the table and flips it over in his hand, looking almost pleased.

"It's settled, then," Gage says. "We need to set up a meeting with Julian. The sooner the better."

Knox finally releases his hold on me, and I step out of his embrace, licking my suddenly dry lips. The last thing I want to do is deal with Julian again, but I know if I want my sister back, it has to be done.

We need to make a deal with the devil.

PRIEST

GAGE TAKES the lead as always. Not wasting any time, he sets something up with Julian, reaching out to ask for a meeting and saying we have a proposition for him.

“He seemed suspicious, but he agreed,” he tells us when he’s done.

That makes sense, considering everything that’s happened. But the last time we made a deal with him, just yesterday, he got a lot of money out of it, so it’s not surprising that he agreed in the long run.

There’s some time before we’re due to meet up with him, so everyone goes their separate ways to get some things done while we wait.

The dog—or Bullwinkle, as Knox has been calling him this morning—sniffs around me as I wash things in the kitchen. We have a dishwasher, but sometimes I prefer to just clean things up by hand. Knox never remembers to rinse his fucking dishes anyway, so it’s easier to just handle it myself. Keeps my head clear.

“What do you want?” I ask the dog, flicking water at his head.

He barks and snaps at the air as if he could bite the water out of it. It makes a little smile tug at my lips to see him acting carefree and joyful again. He was just as stressed as the rest of us when River didn’t come home, pacing the area in front of his bowl and looking to the door every time a car went by.

For a dog, he’s surprisingly sensitive to the shit that goes on in this house, and now that all his people are back together, he seems happy again.

I dry my hands off and lean down to pet him, scratching behind his ears. His brown fur was a little dull and matted when he first came to live with

us, but it's shinier and softer now—probably because he's sleeping indoors and eating real dog food rather than whatever he can get out of dumpsters.

"It's all fine," I tell him. "Everyone is back where they belong."

He licks at my hand and then goes to curl up under the kitchen table.

When the dishes are done and drying in the rack, I find myself wandering the house aimlessly. I feel a bit... agitated. Not in a bad way, not in the way that makes me feel like I need to hit something or lock everything down tight to get myself under control.

But it feels like all my nerve endings were turned off before, keeping things muted and calm, and now all of a sudden I can feel again. Everything feels... extra. Louder, more vivid, more intense than usual. The dog barking, the sound of someone honking their horn down the street, all of it is turned up higher than normal in my head.

Even the lights in the house seem brighter somehow. It's not bad, I'm just much more aware of everything than I was before, and it's playing with my mind in a weird way.

I wander into the piano room and sit down at the bench, running one hand over the cool, polished wood. I start to play something, letting my fingers dance over the keys the way they always do.

It soothes me, like usual, but even this feels different now.

The music I'm playing hits me harder than usual, and I feel it more deeply than I ever have before. It's more than just my fingers on the keys now.

It feels like I can hear all the notes, like they all strike me in different ways. I guess this is what people mean when they say they get moved by music. It has depth to it. Emotion, in a way. Something I've been closed off to for so long I basically forgot what it was like to experience it.

I switch to a different song, something slower and more melodic, and that hits me just as hard. It's interesting, even while being very strange.

River comes in in the middle of the second song. She's quiet, but I still sense her the second she steps into the room. My skin tingles with the awareness of her presence, and I feel her moving behind me, walking closer to the piano and then coming around the side so she can climb up onto the top.

She sits on it like she's a queen on a throne, legs spread in front of me just like she did the last time we were both in here.

This time, I don't ignore her. Or I don't *pretend* to, at least. I couldn't do it last time either, but this time there's not even the pretense that I'm ignoring her.

"That's bad for the piano," I say mildly, running my fingers through a complicated little sequence.

"Do you want me to get down?" she asks.

I don't answer. Instead, I just lean forward and rest my head on her thigh, dropping a kiss there, below the little shorts she threw on before breakfast. Her skin is soft and smooth, and even though her thighs are littered with scars, she's so fucking beautiful.

She runs her fingers through my hair in soothing motions, and I let my own fingers go still on the keys, letting myself just feel her. She's always been so bright and strong on my radar, even when I didn't want her to be. Even when I hated her and would have rathered see her dead than in our lives.

But now it's so much bigger. It's like she's the sun, and I have to orbit around her, have to make sure she's safe. She still smells like my body wash from this morning's shower, but with her own scent under it, and I breathe her in.

Even though I can feel *her* so much more than usual too, it's soothing in a way. More comforting than jarring.

"Are you okay?" she murmurs.

I nod against her leg. "Everything feels different now, but it's not bad."

River hums and scratches at my scalp. "More intense?"

"Yes."

And of course she understands. She seems to understand so much, even things I would have said I wasn't sure I wanted her to understand. Now that she knows basically everything, it makes me want to open up to her more, which isn't something I'm used to.

"You know," I begin, speaking slowly as my mind forms the words. "My brothers have called me Priest for years, but it's not exactly an accurate nickname. I never took a vow of celibacy or anything. I wasn't purposefully trying to avoid sex. I just... didn't want anyone. I couldn't feel that. I didn't desire anyone. Until now."

I can hear and feel it when she inhales sharply at that. I kiss her thigh again and look up, meeting her dark blue eyes. I'm not sure what she sees in

my gaze, but I don't look away. I mean every word, and I want her to know that.

"What's your real name?" she asks quietly after a moment.

"Daire."

"Daire." She repeats it, and I feel something go tight in my body just from the way it sounds in her voice. No one has called me that since Jade. Not really. It sounds odd, but not bad. Like so much of this.

River slides down off the piano, careful not to bump the keys, which I appreciate. Straddling me on the bench, she settles herself in my lap, wrapping her arms around me. Her body is soft and yielding against mine, and I'm caught up in the way she smells, the way she feels. Everything.

I tip her face up to mine and lean down to kiss her, not insistent or heavy like last night, but soft and exploring. Trying to learn her, learn what makes her feel good.

She makes quiet noises into the kiss, sounds of contentment and desire, but she doesn't push for more either.

I can feel my body responding to her closeness and the weight of her in my lap. Just a stirring in my groin, a low throb of desire. I know that even though I managed to come last night, it's going to be a while before I can just get it up and keep it up on command. It'll probably be a process.

And at the moment, I'm fine with that. I'm not in a hurry to rush things, and it's nice to kiss River with no other goal but this.

She pulls away when she needs to breathe, resting her forehead against mine. Neither of us says anything for a long moment, just soaking up the scent and feel of each other.

Then River gets up and turns around on my lap, facing the piano.

"Will you teach me how to play something?" she asks.

It's a surprising question. I wouldn't have thought she was the type to care about playing music, but I guess the same thing could be said about me.

She leans back against me, and I tuck a tiny smile against her hair.

"Okay," I tell her. "Put your hands on the keys."

She does, resting her fingers on the keys in approximately the position she saw mine in before. Her fingers are long and delicate, elegant in an odd way. Chipped nail polish and all.

I adjust them a bit closer together, then put mine on the keys as well, weaving them between hers. I tap out a few notes in a short melody, simple

and quick.

“You try now,” I murmur to her.

She does pretty well, matching what I played and then turning her head to look at me.

“Good. Now this one.”

I add a bit more to it, weaving the notes together.

This one is a bit harder for her to mimic, and she stumbles over the last three notes. I readjust her hand and help her through it again, until she has it down.

“Now the two parts together.”

We go through the sequence again and again, until she can do it without me guiding her. I smile at that, letting the sound of the simple tune wash over me. It’s a little haunting, but mostly just bittersweet, a minor chord that resolves on an uplifting high note.

River plays the melody, and I add to it, building it into a song.

Our song.

KNOX

JULIAN INSISTED on a public place for our meeting tonight, which Gage agreed to easily. It makes me kind of antsy because it's hard to take action with a bunch of random people around, but I guess the point is that we shouldn't need to. It's neutral territory for all of us.

"I suggested meeting at the club at first," Gage says. "But he shot that down immediately. And I didn't even entertain the idea of meeting on his turf. This will be better."

We drive to a restaurant in the city proper and park the car. The place isn't too packed at this hour, since it's well after the dinner rush, but there are a lot of cars in the lot, and if we didn't already have a reservation—under Julian's name, the fucking control freak—there would definitely be a wait.

Usually, I'd be thrilled about meeting at a joint like this. It smells good inside, and as we're being shown to the table, a waiter walks by with a plate of steak and potatoes that makes my stomach growl and my mouth water.

But I'm mostly focused on this meeting and what we came here to do. Even as we're walking in, we surround River, keeping her in the middle of our little group. Part of me really hopes there's a reason to cause a ruckus tonight, but that's nothing new. I've gotten a few chances to scratch the itch that makes me want to cause pain and fuck shit up over the last few days, since we've been hunting down answers as to who put Ivan's body on display at the gala. There have been times when that's involved getting people to talk the fun way. But I still feel that urge under my skin. I'm still gunning for a fight, practically begging someone to fuck with us. None of

the little dust-ups I've been in recently have been enough to feed the monster inside me.

If the wait staff think the way we roll in is weird, they don't say anything, and the hostess shows us to the table where Julian and his sister Natalie are already sitting.

Just seeing that smug fucker sitting there makes me want to punch him right in the goddamn face. I keep thinking about how River looked when we got her back. The bruise on her face, the blood on her wrists. And that haunted, almost broken look she was wearing.

I don't know what he said to her while he had her locked up, but it was probably bullshit, and it fucked with her head. I want him to pay for that. I want him to know he can't get away with hurting her.

I'd take him on right now, in the middle of this fucking restaurant, but I won't risk letting River get hurt. Plus, if I punch him out, he might take it out on Hannah. River loves her sister, so that means my protection extends to her now too. What River cares about, I care about.

So that keeps me from going off—barely. I clench my hands into fists as we reach the table, then have to work a little extra hard to unclench them. The table is tucked into a corner of the restaurant, and it's a big round one. Julian and Natalie are sitting next to each other on one side, so the rest of us fill in the other side of the circle.

For once, Julian isn't wearing that smug look on his face. There's none of that oily smoothness from before. Now he looks like he's on edge, and I like that. He should be.

He's obviously distrustful of us, and there's tension between our two groups. We don't like each other, and it's clear as goddamn day.

His sister sits rigidly beside him, looking a lot like I imagine it would if someone took a mannequin and tried to pass it off as a real person. Her pointed chin is lifted into the air a little, her face impassive. She's cold and ice-queen like, as if she has better things to do than be here and wants us all to know it by ignoring us.

"Um," the waitress says as she comes over. She glances between all of us, like she's not sure she should be there. "Can I get your drink orders?"

None of us are here to eat. The food might be the best in the city, but we wouldn't really taste it. The location is just to serve a purpose.

Julian still has to be a flashy bitch about it as he orders wine for himself and his sister. The rest of us all stick to water, and the waitress hurries off

like she can't wait to get away from the thick tension that hovers over our table.

Can't blame her for that. The hostility is pretty noticeable.

There aren't any pleasantries between us and Julian. He leans forward, hands folded on the white tablecloth, and we all wait for Gage to take the lead.

It's his role, and I'm happy to let him have it. Gage is the one who makes the strategic choices and negotiates shit. He's got all the smooth words and the ways to talk people down and get the results he wants. I'm the one who steps in when it's time to fuck shit up, and that's just how I like it.

It's what I'm good at.

We all have our strengths.

"You said you had a proposition," Julian says, sounding irritated and wary. "Well?"

Gage nods. "We do. We already negotiated for the return of River. But you have something else we want. We understand that there may be a steeper price this time, so we're prepared to let you use our club as a front as payment. You can smuggle through us. Guns, drugs, money. Whatever you need moved."

"And what do I have that you want?" Julian asks. His gaze lands on River for a split second, and then shifts back to Gage. Fucking asshole. He *knows* what we want, or what River wants, at least. He just wants to make us say it.

"Hannah," Gage replies, keeping his tone even and not rising to Julian's bait.

Julian lifts an eyebrow. "Smuggling, huh? You don't make that offer to just anyone. From what I've heard you've got a long list of people who want to use your club for that purpose."

"Exactly. We're offering you the chance to skip the line."

He hums under his breath, thinking about it. He doesn't look at Natalie, and she doesn't say anything either, so it's clear who's in charge here.

Finally, Julian leans back in his chair. He lifts his chin before shaking his head. "No."

Gage immediately goes tense, and so do the rest of us.

Fuck.

I don't take my focus off Julian, but I see Ash put his hand on River's leg out of the corner of my eye, probably trying to keep her from flying into a rage in the restaurant. She looks pissed but doesn't speak.

Julian's eyes dart between the five of us, and even though it looks like he's outnumbered at the moment, I know it's just a front. There are probably a bunch of his goons either outside the restaurant or inside, pretending to be regular diners.

Hell, probably both.

Before things can escalate, Julian jumps in again. "I'm not saying I won't consider making a deal. I could be... persuaded to let Hannah go. I just want something bigger than what you're offering."

Goddammit. It's the biggest thing we have, and we all know that. We can't give him anything else.

"Do you have a suggestion?" Gage asks, voice hard.

"I do. I want one of you to marry my sister." Julian looks around the table at the four of us as he speaks, his gaze flicking past River as he focuses on me and my brothers. "I want to connect our business interests by marriage."

The table goes silent at that. Even the ambient noise of the restaurant seems to die out a bit, although I know that's not really possible.

Holy fucking hell.

That's just about the last thing any of us expected him to say. I was all prepared to be pissed off at him for telling us he wanted to trade one sister for another or some shit, but instead he wants... this.

Natalie doesn't react at all, even though we're talking about her as if she's not even here. Her face is still icy and composed, but she doesn't look surprised or pissed off at her brother's statement. She clearly has no issue letting Julian speak for her and make this deal about her.

No one says a word for what feels like forever.

It's a big ask. Way bigger than we were prepared for. But it would get us what we want. What River wants.

Fuck it.

"Sure," I say. "Why not?"

RIVER

I WHIP my head around to look at Knox as his voice cuts through the loaded silence.

Sure. Why not?

What the fuck?

As soon as Julian said no to the first proposal, my mind started turning, thinking of other ways I could get to my sister. Ways to sneak her out of Julian's house somehow and then get her somewhere else where she would be safe. She wouldn't be with me, but at least I'd know she wasn't being treated like shit. We tried it Gage's way, tried to negotiate and play nice and do it in a way that wouldn't get anybody hurt, and Julian said no.

It seemed like sitting at the table any longer was a waste of time, but apparently Julian wasn't done yet.

When he said he wanted one of the guys to marry Natalie, I expected an immediate no from everyone. I mean, it's a crazy thing to suggest. None of the guys like Julian, and Natalie may as well be a block of wood for all she's interacted or showed any personality since we walked in.

She doesn't even care that her brother is making deals for her that would saddle her with a husband who would probably hate her.

But Knox is willing to marry her? *Knox*, of all people? The guy who really only comes to these meetings to make a show of force and because he hopes he'll get to crack some skulls if things go south?

Again, what the fuck?

I can't believe it. And alongside my shock, something else burns in my chest. The thought of him being married to someone else makes jealousy

lick hot and insistent at my insides. I don't want to see him with Natalie or anyone else. But definitely not her.

I glance at the guys, trying to see what they make of what just happened. No one has outright said no yet, even after Knox's declaration.

Gage doesn't seem like he likes it at all. He's been handling this meeting smoothly so far, but now his brows are drawn down, and it's clear he's upset. His first offer was a good one, and already a pretty big concession for them, and Julian is raising the cost in a big way. Priest seems tense, the mask on his face back in place for the most part, but his hands are clenched under the table, I can tell. Ash just keeps looking back and forth between Knox and Natalie, like he's trying to gauge what the fuck is going on.

I don't blame him for that. I feel like I'm in the same goddamn boat.

Julian seems to relax a little after Knox says yes. The waitress darts in with our drinks, dropping off the wine for Julian and Natalie and then setting down our waters. When no one stops her to give food orders, she hurries away again.

Natalie takes a sip of her wine, and my mouth is dry, but I don't take a drink of my water. I'm not sure I could get it down, my throat is so fucking tight.

"The reason I married Hannah was because I needed an heir," Julian explains bluntly. "My father was pretty insistent about that. Carrying on the family line was more important to him than almost anything else. But by marrying her, I missed the chance to connect my family to another powerful family. Or group."

His gaze darts to me before skimming over the four Kings, and I can't even be mad that he's basically talking shit about my lineage or whatever. My dad proved pretty surely that we were nobodies and would never have any real power in Detroit.

"Now that my heir is secured, I want to correct the missed opportunity to expand our reach and opportunity in Detroit," Julian continues. "Through Natalie's marriage."

Natalie looks at Knox, and the disdain on her face is harsh and impossible to mistake for anything else. It makes me want to leap across the table and punch her.

Knox doesn't seem to give a fuck, though.

He shares a look with Gage, and something seems to pass between them. It's full of intent and silent communication, as if they can read each other without words. I can tell this wasn't something the guys discussed ahead of time. And why would they have? It's a hell of a curve ball.

I expect Gage to say no. To say it's too high of a price, and that the last thing he wants is to tie his family to Julian's.

But he doesn't object. He just leans forward a little, resting his elbows on the table and steepling his hands.

"Why us?" he asks.

"Well, as you said," Julian replies, that smug tone creeping back into his voice. "I have something you want. And all things considered, it's not a bad deal for either of us. The Maduro family is powerful. We've built ourselves back up stronger than ever after the death of my father. And while you four aren't a family in the... traditional sense, you have your own power in this city. You've carved out a name for yourselves. There are worse things than being tied to that."

Gage seems to consider that. Julian sounds sincere enough, not like he's blowing smoke up their asses, but simply laying out his reasoning. It's obvious Gage still doesn't like it, but he seems resigned.

"Alright," he says after a beat. "We can discuss it."

That sparks something in Julian, making a sort of greedy hunger blaze in his eyes. I can tell he didn't think we would agree, and he seems pleased and surprised that they did.

"Alright," he repeats.

From there, it gets hammered out like a business deal. Gage takes the lead, even though Knox is the one doing the marrying, but the big man seems fine with that, sipping his water and letting Gage do the talking.

"If your guy marries Natalie—" Julian begins.

"Knox," Gage interrupts. "His name is Knox."

Natalie's lip curls, but Julian nods. "If Knox marries Natalie, then I'll release Hannah from our marriage. I'll divorce her so she'll be free to do what she wants. She can go with you or move to fucking Canada for all I care. It'll be done between us."

"And you won't try to take her back," Gage adds.

"I won't try to take her back. But our son Cody will stay with me."

Something jolts through me when he says that, because I'd almost forgotten about the kid. The son Hannah had with Julian.

I don't think any of the others ever saw him, and they all look to me when Julian lays down that condition, as if they want me to make the call there.

My heart pounds in my chest as I consider it.

I think about what the Maduro men have done. First Lorenzo and now Julian. Kidnapping women, young girls, and making them do their bidding. Using them like bargaining chips and ways to get what they want. Using their bodies and breaking their spirits. Hannah and I have been through hell because of them, and they're all awful. Men who haven't been told no enough in their lives and don't know how to handle it when they can't get what they want from someone.

So they *take* it. They take and take and take and leave people broken and used in the aftermath.

And now there's another one. A little one who hasn't done anything to anyone yet, but he's got that blood in him. He's one of them, and as much as he's Hannah's son, there's no telling how he might turn out.

Honestly, I don't even know if I could look at him without thinking about the line he comes from. His father and his grandfather and who the fuck knows how far back down the line. All of them were probably the same. Doing what they wanted and facing no consequences for it.

Well. Lorenzo got his in the end, and I hope one day Julian can face the same fate. It's what he deserves. As for Cody...

I swallow hard, shoving down the sick feeling that twists in my stomach.

For so long, all I wanted was vengeance for Hannah. And now that I know she's alive, all I want is to get her back. I did whatever it took when I was on a quest for revenge, and I'll do whatever it takes now.

Even this.

"Fine," I say, nodding. "You can keep him. As long as you let Hannah go."

RIVER

JULIAN NODS, satisfied.

“Good. Then we have a deal.” He holds his hand out over the table, and Gage shakes it, still looking pretty grim. “I want to move on this quickly, and I assume you do too,” Julian adds.

“Yes,” Gage says in a tight voice. “We don’t want to draw it out any more than we have to.”

I hate how business-like Julian is. And even though I want my sister back, want her free of his clutches, I hate how he’s willing to trade her away as if she’s just some object.

It’s not like it would be better if he was possessive of her and wasn’t willing to bargain for *anything* in exchange for letting her go, but this just shows how little he cares. She’s nothing to him. Not a wife, not even a person. She’s just an asset to him, and now that she’s already had his kid, she can do whatever and he doesn’t even care.

“We’ll set a date for the wedding,” Julian says. “Usually, we like these things to be big affairs, you understand. Old family traditions, and everyone will want to be there to see Natalie get married. You can invite whoever you want from your side, so that it’s fair.”

Gage nods, his expression never changing. “Fine.”

“Excellent. You know, I didn’t expect this would go so smoothly,” Julian says. “But this way, we all get something we want.”

His eyes find mine when he says that, and there’s a look on his face like he knows this is all more for *me* than it is for the guys. Anger flashes through me, and I shift in my seat, agitated. I’m still confused about why Knox and Gage agreed to this, I’m pissed at Julian for suggesting it in the

first place, and I'm pissed at Natalie for sitting there, acting like she's somehow above it all.

I want to get out of here before I say something I'll only regret if it leads to someone getting hurt. Which it probably will.

Gage can either sense that, or he has the same idea I do, because he gets up and puts some money on the table. It's way too much, considering we only had water and most of the glasses are untouched, but I guess it's more about the gesture than anything else. And hopefully Julian will tip the poor waitress who had to deal with this table.

He probably won't. Because he's a piece of shit.

When Gage gets up, we all follow him. The guys close in around me again, like they want to make sure Julian's not going to suddenly decide to lash out at me or shoot me in the back or something, but I have a feeling it's partly to hold me back from going off on him, too.

My heart is still racing, pounding hard against my ribs, and my thoughts are whirling from everything that just happened.

We get out of the restaurant and into the parking lot before I whip around to look at Knox, finally giving in to that incredulous agitation inside me.

"What the fuck?" I demand. "Just... why? How? What?"

I don't even have the right words for what I'm trying to say to him. Everything is scattered and disjointed, but it all comes down to the disbelief that he'd agree to something like that.

"It's not a big deal," he says, shrugging a shoulder.

"Not a big—" I cut myself off, staring at him. "Not a big deal? Are you fucking kidding me? You just agreed to a marriage! With someone who looked at you like you were trash!"

"Maybe we shouldn't do this in the parking lot," Ash says, putting a hand on the small of my back.

It takes a bit of effort not to yank away from him, but I huff out a breath and let him guide me with everyone else back to the car.

We get in, and I turn to keep staring at Knox.

"What?" he asks, dragging a hand through his shaggy black hair. "It's fine, River. Marriage is a bullshit construct anyway. It's just a piece of paper at the end of the day, and it doesn't mean anything. She doesn't give a shit about me, and I don't give a shit about her. And this goes both ways. Marrying that frigid bitch will put me close to Julian. Give us a chance to

fuck with the Maduro business and all. Maybe a chance to take them down from the inside. It's not the end of the world. It's more like an opportunity."

He grins, and it's the unhinged smile that means he already has plans for how he wants to hurt someone. Probably Julian in this case, which I'm all for, but everything else about this just sounds bad to me.

"You'd better be right," Gage mutters, starting the car. "Because this gives Julian the chance to do the same to us, you know. We're staking our empire, our *future*, on this. He's dangerous, and people don't try to marry other powerful people without expecting to get something out of it."

That wipes the grin from Knox's face, and he looks a bit more serious for a moment. "I know," he says. "But I had to do it."

He looks up and meets Gage's eyes in the rearview mirror.

It's another version of the look they shared in the restaurant, some kind of understanding passing between them, and it just upsets me more.

Because it's bullshit. It's all bullshit. They're risking so much. Putting it all on the line and getting basically nothing out of it.

For *me*.

Because I want my sister back and pretty much every other option puts me in danger. They're willing to go so fucking far for me, and it's just...

A lot.

It's so much, and it's hitting me hard.

Gage was upset at first, grim and resigned, but now he seems to be in planning mode. "We'll have to lock some things down," he says. "I don't know how much Julian and Natalie expect to be a part of our business, but there are some things they're going to have to be in the dark about. I don't want to give them any openings or opportunities we don't have to."

"Can I be the ring bearer in the wedding?" Ash asks. "I've always wanted to be in a wedding."

"Yeah, sure," Knox throws back, sounding amused. "But only if you carry the little pillow. Maybe put a bow in your hair."

"Done and done."

"Can we focus, please?" Gage asks, cutting into their joking. "This is actually serious, hard as that might be to believe."

Apparently, it's not. Apparently, it's all fine because it's just a piece of paper and it doesn't matter in the long run. Apparently, risking Julian fucking Maduro having access to their business and being able to ruin them if he wants to badly enough is just something we can all shrug about.

I'm freaking out on the inside, tuning out most of their conversation about logistics and whatever. My emotions are rising, and there's no shoving them back down. It's just too much all at once. I can see a million ways this could go wrong. A million ways for it to be my fault when it all falls apart and someone gets hurt.

I feel like I'm spiraling out of control, trying to hold it together but doing a pretty shitty job of it.

The more I try to not think about what's happening, the more I end up thinking about it. I keep replaying everything from the meeting over and over in my mind. Giving Julian Maduro access to their business was already such a big thing. That was *already* them going out of their way for me in a way I never have expected them to.

Then Julian said no.

He rejected their initial offer because he wanted something bigger. Something that was worth more. Which is fucking garbage, because I'm pretty damn sure the guys treat their club a hell of a lot better than Julian treats my sister. But still. He wanted more.

And if I'm being honest with myself, I didn't really think Julian was going to agree in the first place. There's too much of his dad in him. Too much of that sick, twisted need to be better than everyone else, to hold on to things and people when they don't want to be held on to. To take and wreck and ruin.

Even going there to try to negotiate with him in the first place was giving away a lot about how important Hannah is to me. So it makes sense that he wanted to up the ante for it. Because even if Hannah doesn't mean shit to him, she means something to me. And clearly, that matters to the guys, for whatever reason.

Julian didn't need a reason, though.

He just needed to know it mattered.

I picture him sitting there, knowing he held all the fucking cards, staring down the five of us with just his sister at his side. At the very least, I can say he's got balls to ask for something so big. I wonder if he expected them to say yes, or if he thought we would walk away.

If I didn't think they'd say yes, then there's probably no way he would have expected them to, right? He's not so wise or all-knowing that he sees something there that I don't. He probably just couldn't let the opportunity pass by. He's probably been looking for someone to marry his terrible,

frigid sister for a while now, and the guys just happened to hand him the opening he needed.

Or something.

I don't know.

I feel like I don't know anything anymore. Everything went so fucking differently from how I was expecting it to. I'm not used to being that caught off-guard by shit like this, and it's making it even harder to swallow everything that happened.

I wouldn't have blamed the guys for saying no. For saying that this was a bridge too far and Julian was asking for too much. I was sitting there, already coming up with a new plan, and I would have managed to do it. To figure *something* out. Nothing stops me when I want something badly enough, and right now, there's nothing I want more than having Hannah safe. I would have marched right back to Julian's house and faced him, his sister, and any of his goons that were around if I had to.

But I won't have to do that.

Because the Kings of Chaos said yes.

I just don't understand it.

They said yes. Knox said yes, and Gage backed him up, and none of the others jumped in to say that they were both out of their fucking minds.

I don't get how normal they're all acting. How they're treating it like there was no other choice.

Because of course there was. For *them*, there were plenty of other choices. They could have countered with something else, and even if Julian had turned that down too, they could have said that they tried and that would have been good enough. Hell, they could have just fucking walked away. Said it was too much and it wasn't worth all that. Wasn't worth such an unequal trade in their eyes. I would have understood. I wouldn't have blown up at them. Hannah is worth everything to me, but I'm not the one who will be giving something up with this stupid plan of Julian's.

I'll do whatever it takes to get my sister back. I've always known there's no limit to what I'll do for her, and this isn't any different. The guys, though... they could walk away at any time.

It's not their fight. Not their family. There's nothing in it for them, other than having to look over their shoulders and be on their guards when it comes to how close Julian and his shit will be to theirs.

Gage almost killed me for shooting that man outside the club, what feels like a lifetime ago now. That's how much he cares about keeping his little family safe. I wasn't there that night to fuck with him or their business or his brothers, but he didn't know that and wasn't willing to take the chance. He told me then that he doesn't allow anything to put them in danger.

So what is he doing now?

Why is this any different? Sure, Knox can handle himself if he needs to, against Natalie, and probably against Julian if it comes to that, but it would be a shit show from start to finish. Marriage is huge. It puts them in so much closer proximity to each other and their businesses.

Why? Why are they doing this?

That's the question that swirls around and around in my head every time I think about how Knox just shrugged and said sure, why the fuck not, I'll marry Natalie goddamn Maduro.

Why, why, why, *why*?

The more I think about it, the harder it is to come to terms with it. My heart is racing, my breathing is heavy, and I feel like I'm drowning in all the questions.

And finally, it's just too much.

"Stop the car," I rasp, cutting into whatever Priest was saying. I don't even know.

I don't even really care.

"River—"

"Stop the car!"

Gage slows the car to a halt, pulling off to the shoulder on a quiet stretch of road. There's a cemetery on one side of us and several abandoned buildings on the other side of the street. I don't even wait for him to put the car in park. As soon as we're not moving anymore, I shove the door open and practically hurl myself out of the vehicle. I walk away from it with long strides, pacing the pavement.

My chest hurts, and I can barely get a deep breath in. It's all shallow little gulps of air, not enough to be useful at all. It makes me lightheaded, the world spinning around me. I can tell I'm spiraling into a panic attack, but that doesn't do me a lot of fucking good when I'm caught up in it like this.

I can taste my own heartbeat, feel it pounding in my head, and I just keep pacing the same few feet of pavement, walking one way and then

turning to walk the other way like I want to wear a hole in the pavement.

Because they care.

They care so much about me. They're willing to put all this on the line. To risk their business, their livelihoods, their position within the bigger structure of the city and the people who run it from the shadows.

For me.

No questions asked.

Not one of them stood up and said no to Julian. Not one of them said it wasn't worth it to save my sister, who's just some woman they've never even met. They didn't come back with another offer or put limits on the marriage or anything. They just *agreed*.

I'm so stuck on that.

It means I really am one of them. It's the same level of devotion they'd give to each other if they needed it, and they're extending it to me just... just like that.

It's so much that it overwhelms me. It rises up and threatens to drown me. Before, I could shrug it off or try to pretend it wasn't happening, but there's no way to deny this.

This is a fucking declaration in bold ass letters.

I'm freaking out, and I don't know how to stop. I feel like it's pressing down on me, cutting off my air, making it hard to do anything other than think about how all of this wasn't supposed to happen and I don't even really know *when* it happened.

I clutch at my face, at my hair, trying to get a deep breath in, trying to combat the lightheaded feeling that threatens to send me to my knees at the edge of the road.

And then there are hands on me.

Warm, strong hands on my shoulders. Pulling my hands away from my face.

"River. River, listen to me."

I try to follow that voice, but I can't even make out which one of the guys it is. I close my eyes tightly and shake my head. It's a deep voice, but that could be any of them.

"You're okay," someone else says, and I think that's... Ash? Maybe?
"We've got you. You're okay."

"Try to breathe for us, alright? Just one good, deep breath, River."

That's definitely Priest.

I try, but it's not a good or deep breath, and I nearly choke halfway through it.

"Again," he says. "Come on. Breathe with me."

He takes my hand and puts it on his chest, letting me feel it expand when he takes a deep breath himself.

I try again, mimicking what he does, and finally, I feel like I'm getting enough air. Like I'm not just hyperventilating. I do it again, and some of the fog in my head clears a little.

"Good girl."

That's Gage. His voice is soft but sure.

I manage to open my eyes and look up at him, and his features swim into view. He's still a little blurry, but I can see him, see the look of concern on his face as he looks me over.

Priest steps aside, allowing Gage to take his place, and the tall, broad-shouldered man swipes his thumbs across my cheeks just like he did when we were in my room that time. When he reminded me that I'm a warrior and not ruined.

I want to lean into him, to find some comfort in the way he touches me, the way they all cluster around as if they're trying to hold me together... but the voice in my head that's always warned me against this is loud.

It's a struggle between the way I've always been, all the things that have kept me safe and in one piece up until now, and the growing warmth in my chest for these men. The part of me that finds them comforting and safe and familiar wants to go with it, but the part of me that believes people are always selfish and shitty really doesn't.

That battle is just as overwhelming as everything else, and I jerk away from Gage and from the rest of them too, trying to keep my distance. Physically *and* emotionally.

I'm so used to keeping people at arm's length. It's second nature for me at this point. I've never even stopped to think about it. I've always been willing to lie, steal, or do whatever it takes to make sure I never end up in a position of being helpless again.

But along the way with these men, something changed. Something shifted.

Unfamiliar emotions rise up inside me, and I glare up at Gage, breathing hard.

“Why are you doing this?” I demand. My voice comes out sharp, cracking through the night air like a whip. It’s accusatory and harsh, and Gage lifts an eyebrow at me like he doesn’t know what I’m talking about.

I ball my hands up into fists at my side and stare him down. “Why the fuck would you help me like this?” I glance around at the others, including them in the question because they’re all complicit. “Why are you doing any of this?”

Gage’s face hardens. He gives me a look, his green eyes narrowed and brimming with the beginnings of anger. “You really don’t know the answer to that? Are you serious, River? Do you not understand what this is?”

“No!” I yell back. “I don’t. This isn’t what any of this was supposed to be! This was supposed to be a business arrangement. We were supposed to be *nothing* to each other.”

His face goes even harder at those last words, and I realize it’s been a long time since I’ve seen him look at me this way. Other people, sure. But something really has shifted between us, clearly, and that’s terrifying.

Gage strides forward and grips my chin in a rough hold, jerking my head up so I’m looking right at him.

“Am I nothing to you?” he asks in a hard voice. “Because you’re not nothing to me.”

My heart is racing a mile a minute. He stares down at me heavily, waiting for an answer, and when I don’t give it, he tightens his grip, not letting me look away or hide from this for a second.

“Am I nothing to you?” he repeats.

My throat tightens. There’s a surge of emotions rising in my chest, threatening to choke me if I let it.

It used to be so easy to say no. To tell people they were nothing to me. Hannah was the only one who meant something, and she was dead, so who was left to matter?

But now...

Now, I can’t lie to myself. Gage does mean something to me. I’m terrified to give it a name, to identify it with words, but he’s become a part of my life. A part of *me*. I spent so long pissed at him and fighting against him, just like I’m doing now. But I need that. I need him to be there for me to fight against. Someone who’ll push back against me when I’m being unreasonable and push me to fight back harder against my demons.

Someone as stubborn and hardheaded as I am.

He's been that. He's been that since the moment he walked into my life when the two of us faced off in that alley—him demanding to know why I murdered a guy, and me telling him to go fuck himself.

It set the tone for things between us. But somehow it shifted, so that even when we're struggling against each other, it's usually for a reason. So that we can come to a better outcome together.

I look up at him, taking in his face. The hard lines of his expression, the scar on his lip that I still don't know how he got. The bright green of his eyes that not even the darkness of the night can dull.

Finally, I shake my head the tiny bit I can with his grip so tight.

"No," I whisper, barely audible, but there. "You're not nothing."

His face stays hard when I say it, but something flashes in his eyes. Keeping his grip on my chin, keeping me grounded with the force of it, he turns my head to face Knox.

"Is Knox nothing to you?" he asks.

I swallow hard and stare at Knox next. This massive, tattooed man. I think about how I watched him torture that guy from the Diamond Devils. I think about that slightly feral grin that I've come to know and love, and the way he licked blood off my face when I first met him.

I think about how he's willing to marry his enemy's sister for me.

I've never had to hold back with him. He's the one whose crazy can match mine. The one who understands why sometimes I crave pain just as much as pleasure and gives me plenty of both, no questions asked.

I think about the word 'mine' in our blood on my chest.

I whisper my answer again. "No. He's not nothing."

Gage drags my gaze to Priest next. "What about him? Does he mean nothing to you?"

Priest's eyes burn as he watches me, and I swear I feel it all the way down to my soul.

I think of everything we've shared. How he's let me see his jagged, broken edges, and he's seen mine too. I know the pain he's experienced, and it feels like I carry a piece of it in my own heart now. I would kill anyone who tried to hurt him, who tried to use his pain against him. And I know he'd do the same for me.

The encounter we had after they got me back from Julian is still fresh in my mind. The way he was wild with anger and panic and fear, so

determined to make sure I was okay and make sure I knew he wasn't going to let anyone take me.

I remember the look on his face when he finally came, the release of it and how he held me afterward.

There's so much control in him, but somehow, I make him lose it. I make him *let go* of it.

I swallow hard, and the words come a little easier this time. "He means... something to me," I say softly.

My gaze is locked with Priest's, and so much passes between us as I speak. I can tell he feels some kind of way about what's happening, that I mean something to him, too. There aren't words for what it is, not right now, but it's there and we both know it.

But of course, Gage isn't done.

He makes me face Ash next.

Heat and desire burn in Ash's eyes behind his glasses, but I can see past that to a hint of pain and lingering closed-off-ness in his face as the men all wait for my answer. It brings back memories to that time after the gala, after I tried to hurt him and push him away.

I think past that, though. To that first night when I fought him on the stairs of their basement, trying to get away, to get back to my life and my mission, while he teased and flirted with me.

I think about how Ash was the one who kept Gage from killing me, how he talked everyone down and got them all to agree to the deal that started everything.

He said he didn't fuck me all those times because he wanted it to mean something. Because I meant something to him.

I can see that there's a tiny part of him now that's waiting for me to hurt him again. Waiting for me to shove them all away.

And that's the thing that finally pushes me over the edge. My stomach dips with the realization that for the first time since I had my innocence stolen as a teenager, I don't want to push someone away. I don't want to push *any* of them away.

"He means something to me," I say, louder this time. "He does. You all do."

"Good." Gage bites out the word, and I nearly shiver from how deep his voice is. "Because it's too late for us. Do you understand that? You're right

that this was supposed to be nothing, but you're fucking kidding yourself if you think that's all it is now."

All of the Kings converge on me as he speaks. I tilt my head to look up at him, and the emotion I see in his eyes is as intense as an open flame.

I can feel the truth of his words, and I know it should scare me. It *does* scare me, to be honest. It's still so much more than I've ever faced before. So much more than I've ever felt before, and nothing in my life has ever prepared me for anything like this. I'm used to fighting and keeping my distance, not giving in and getting close. It's so... big. So new.

But instead of running from the danger of them and my feelings for them, instead of fighting like I always do, this time I do the opposite.

I throw myself into it.

Acting on pure impulse, I rise up onto my toes and smash my lips against Gage's in a hard kiss. It's grounding, the feel of his mouth against mine, and I pour myself into it, focusing on all the small details.

That scar on his lip, the grit of his stubble against my face, the way his hands drop down to my waist to hold me close to him. It's all so good and becoming so familiar as time goes by. I could probably kiss each one of these men in the dark and know who I was kissing, just from the way their mouths feel on mine and how they touch me.

My breathing starts to grow short again, but it's from the kiss this time and not from panic. Gage growls softly as our lips separate, then passes me off to the side. Knox is there waiting, and he pulls me closer to him, ready to lean in and continue the kiss where Gage left off.

His mouth is firm and sure, and he kisses like hunger personified. Like he wants to devour me with every pass of his lips and tongue. He bites down on my lower lip, hard enough that I taste the coppery tang of blood, but that just makes it better. He licks the cut to soothe it, to get the taste of my blood in his mouth, and then presses his tongue inside my mouth to lay his claim there. It's so Knox, and I clutch at his shoulders, leaning in, eager for more.

But then he's passing me to Ash, who grins against my mouth with that charming smile he's always wearing. The hint of pain is gone, and now he's all eagerness and sensuality. He gives a teasing nip at my lips, and laughs when I moan into the kiss. His hands roam up and down my back for a bit, and then Priest is there, drawing me into a kiss with him as well.

His is just as hard as Knox's was, and I can tell he's losing himself in the pleasure of this moment too, chasing it into my mouth with his tongue as he lays his own claim.

My head is spinning, but in a good way. We're still on the side of the road, hidden in shadow for the moment, but anyone could drive by and see us if they tried hard enough. Luckily, I'm pretty sure no one has come by since we stopped.

The guys keep kissing me, keep touching me. They pass me back and forth and sandwich me between their firm, broad bodies. There are lips on mine, on my neck, and there are hands everywhere—in my hair, down my back, on my shoulders. I'm losing track of which lips and hands belong to which man, and in the grand scheme of things, I guess it doesn't really matter.

They're tethering me to them, keeping me from freaking out and spiraling off into a panic again, making sure I have something else to focus on. Something that feels *good* and lights that spark of heat in my body.

Something that matters, the way we all do to each other.

RIVER

THE KINGS KEEP KISSING and touching me, and as they do, I stop trying to hold anything back. Instead of fearing the connection I have with them, I lean into it, riding out my desire and letting it build higher and higher.

Knox and Priest are on either side of me, sandwiching me in.

The differences in their bodies as they press against me are obvious, and I love the contrast between them.

Knox is tall and broad, like a wall of tattoos and muscle. Even if I wanted to get away from him, I wouldn't be able to. Not with him pressed so close. His mouth is busy on my neck, kissing up to my ear where he drags his tongue along the shell of it, making me shiver hard against him.

Priest is at my front, leaner and a bit shorter than Knox, but no less strong. I can feel how focused he is on this. On me. The tether of his control is loose, and he's giving in to what he wants. He tips my chin up with his fingers, looking down into my eyes. The shadows from the road and the scant light cast a beautiful contrast over his face. Half of it is hidden in darkness, leaving only a peek of a sharp cheekbone and his unyielding stare.

"Do you want this?" he asks, his voice low and husky. I can hear the desire in his tone, and I know *he* wants it. "Do you want us?"

I nod eagerly, the agreement coming easier and easier every time they make me give it. I do want it. It feels like the only way to overcome my panic about my feelings for these men is to throw myself into those feelings and just let it happen.

At this point, I couldn't hide it if I tried.

And I'm definitely not hiding what this is doing to me. Not when I'm rocking back against Knox, grinding against him, feeling him getting hard in his pants and moaning at the way that feels against my ass. I reach down and drag my palm over Priest's cock, trying to get him hard, too.

I want them all so much. No. *Want* isn't even a strong enough word anymore. It's a need. Plain and simple. Something that goes past desire into something deeper, something that grows bigger and bigger inside me until it blocks out everything else.

I want to feel their hands on me. I want them to fuck me, right here on the side of the road. I don't even care about what could happen or who could see.

All I care about is getting more of them.

"Please," I gasp out, pressing back harder against Knox, who grabs my hips and grinds into me even more. "Fuck. *Please*. I want it. Please, I want you."

I'm not even bothered about all the begging spilling from my lips in this moment. How can I be, when it's getting me one step closer to having them? All of them.

Knox growls into my ear, biting down hard on my neck. Hard enough that I jerk against him. He seems wildly turned on, grinding into me and reaching up to palm at my tits.

When I look to Gage, he's wearing that determined expression of his. It's different from the way he usually looks somehow, but still it's clear that he means for this to happen.

Ash is looking at me like I'm the sexiest thing he's ever seen, and that sends heat flashing through my body—because I'm pretty damn sure he's never looked at anyone else like this before, and I really fucking like that.

I glance up at Priest last, and his expression hits me right in the chest. His eyes are more expressive than I've ever seen them, dark with lust and reflecting my own need right back to me.

He moves away, and I want to reach out and pull him back, yank him down and kiss him. Something.

Then Knox's hands are gone too, and I whimper in disappointment.

But it doesn't last for long.

Gage is there a second later. He lifts me up and carries me over to the car, depositing me on the hood. I can feel the heat from the engine soaking into my body through my clothes.

He unzips my pants and then pushes his hand inside. I already know what he's going to find. I'm slippery and wet for them, and when his fingers graze my clit, I arch up and moan louder, the sound echoing a bit down the empty stretch of road.

Gage grins, and pushes his fingers deeper, stealing my breath.

He works those fingers against me, thrusting them in slow and deep, making sure I can feel every part of it.

That hard look is gone from his face, and the only intensity in his eyes now is the heat of his desire. Now that he's heard what he needed to hear, all he's focused on is this between us, and he works me up so good, until I'm nearly melting against him, just from him fucking me with his fingers.

Then the rest of them are there too.

Ash leans across so he can turn my face to his and capture my mouth in a hot kiss. Our lips and tongues brush and tangle, and he hums with pleasure, reaching up to thread fingers through my hair.

Another set of hands, Knox's again, push my shirt and bra up, exposing my tits to the night air and all of them. He gropes and paws at them roughly, which just makes me even wetter on Gage's fingers.

I'm caught between them, squirming, moaning into the kiss with Ash. It's hard to know where to look for more, or who to arch up against, and my head spins with the pleasure of it all.

Knox pinches one of my nipples hard enough that I cry out and have to pull back from the kiss to catch my breath. He's smirking when I catch his eye because of course he is.

"You're so fucking wet," Gage groans, catching my attention again. He pulls his fingers free, and my pussy pulses, not happy about being empty all of a sudden.

"More," I moan. "I need—"

Gage lifts his fingers to his lips and licks my arousal from each digit. I can't look away from that clever tongue, the way it caresses each finger until it's clean.

"We know what you need, baby girl," he assures me in a rough voice, taking a step back.

Priest takes Gage's place in front of me, and he wastes no time working his hand into my pants as well.

He grabs a handful of my hair and makes me look at him, holding eye contact while he thrusts his fingers deep into my pussy. It's not as rough as

when he was fucking me with the handle of whatever tool that was last night, but it's almost as intense.

"Do you like this?" he murmurs. It's quiet, but I can hear it, even over the pounding of my own heart. "Do you like being used like this?"

"Yes," I gasp out. Because I do. There's no denying that. I'm spread open and dripping for him, for all of them, and my body can't seem to get enough of it.

Priest works me up good, until my hips are lifting to meet each deep thrust of his fingers inside me. He leans in even closer, a look of fierce concentration on his face that's devastatingly attractive, even without trying to be.

"You're *ours*," he tells me, and it sounds like a promise and a command all at once. "You're ours, and we're yours."

"Yes," I moan, rocking against him harder. "Fuck. Yes, Priest. *Please*."

Before I can even get close to coming, though, he pulls back and steps aside.

Once again, I groan out loud, looking around to see which of them is going to come in and replace him.

It's Knox, and as soon as he reaches me, he starts dragging my pants and panties off. I spare a brief, split-second thought that I'm going to need those back before we head home, but I barely have the space to think, let alone voice that thought.

Knox grabs my ankles and pulls me farther down the hood of the car, so I'm right where he wants me. He grins, and when I look down, I see that his cock is already out.

It's big and thick, and there's already precum beading at the head. His dick piercing catches the light from the streetlight a ways away, and it holds my attention for a bit.

At least until he lines his shaft up with my core and pushes himself inside to the hilt.

I nearly scream at that. He's so big that he fills me to the brim, and even though Priest and Gage worked me up with their fingers, I can still feel the stretch as my body works to accommodate Knox's size.

He grins, like he knows he's a lot to take, and then draws himself out slowly, letting me feel every single inch of him.

I tip my head back, focusing on remembering how to breathe as I stare up at the sky. It's an overcast night, no moon or stars visible through the

thick, gray clouds.

In the distance, there's a rumble of thunder, low and rolling. A breeze picks up, rustling the trees on either side of the road and lifting my hair from my neck and shoulders for just a moment. It feels nice on my heated skin, but it only steals my focus for a second.

Because how could I pay attention to anything else when Knox is balls deep inside me, fucking me like he can't get enough of it? He keeps his hold on my legs, using them like leverage as he fucks me hard enough to rock the car back and forth.

All I can do is take it, and that's all I really want to do.

I moan brokenly, digging my fingers into his wrists, like I need to hold on for dear life.

"Look at that," Knox says, breathless. He looks down at where our bodies are joined together, and I look down too, watching his cock slam in and out of me. "It's like you're made for it. Like you were made to take me like this. Fuck, I love that."

I let out a little sobbing moan, staring down at his cock as it impales me.

Every time it pulls out, it's shiny with my arousal, and I feel myself getting closer and closer to the edge, just from the sight alone.

I go tight around Knox, and he curses under his breath, losing the rhythm of his strokes as he gets closer to tipping over himself.

A drop of wetness hits the top of my head, and it takes me a second to realize it's raining. That doesn't slow Knox down, and he comes with a low roar, filling me up with his cum. He drapes his upper body over mine and puts his mouth on my neck, sucking hard enough to leave a hickey, then pulls out and steps to one side.

Gage moves back between my legs, and his cock is also out and hard. He doesn't waste any time, just slams into me, grabbing my ass to pull me all the way to him, until there's barely any space between our bodies. I'm so open from taking Knox that there's no resistance. He slides right in, picking up where his friend left off.

"Good girl," he pants, leaning over me. "Just like that."

I nod as if he asked me a question or something, but it's just a knee jerk reaction. It feels incredible, and just the praise and having him inside me is enough to push me right over the edge of bliss into an earth shattering orgasm. I muffle the scream in Gage's shoulder, biting down a little, which makes him hiss and slam into me harder.

There's no time to recover because he doesn't stop. My pussy is sensitive, and it's just this side of too much, but I want more. I want all of them before the night is over. My body seems like it knows that too, and the sensation edges on pain but just turns into pleasure. I dig my nails into Gage's arms, holding on to him while he keeps moving inside me.

He's as deep as he can be, and it's like I can feel him all the way through my body, taking me apart, even while I'm still shuddering through that first orgasm.

My head lolls to one side, and my breath catches as I see Priest standing there, his cock out and in his hand. His eyes are intent as he watches, not looking away for a second. He jerks off, and from the way his lips are parted and his hand is practically flying over his cock, I know he's close to coming.

Just from watching us all together like this.

I fucking love that.

"Shit," Gage curses, heated and low. "You're so fucking wet. So tight. You feel so goddamn good."

He's working me up all over again as he chases his own pleasure, and when he finally comes inside me, it's with a low groan and one last deep thrust. He explodes inside me with a rush of heat, and the feeling of it just ratchets my arousal up even more.

He breathes hard, recovering himself, and I reach up and tug him down closer so I can kiss him. I can still taste myself on his tongue from when he licked his fingers clean, and the flavor of it goes right to my head.

"Baby girl," he murmurs, his mouth moving against my lips, "I think you've ruined me."

I kiss him harder just to prove that he's fucking right about that. And when we finally break apart and he steps back, I reach for Priest next, pulling him in closer.

"River," he pants. "I need—"

Thunder rumbles, loud and insistent, and it cuts off whatever Priest was going to say.

I don't know if he was going to say 'help' after that or what, but it's what I give him. I wrap my hand around his, which is still around his cock. His hips jerk forward, like he's seeking out more friction, and that's exactly what I plan to give him. The heat coming off his body is incredible, and I

can practically taste how close he is. I start moving our hands together, and his breath catches.

“*Fuck*,” Priest groans. “That feels...” He trails off and then switches the position of our hands so mine is on his cock and his is on my hand, and we stroke together.

Just seeing him like this makes heat flare in my belly, and even though we haven’t really fucked yet, every step we take closer to it is just as good. Just as hot. One day we’ll get there, and if it’s as incredible as this feels, then there’s a good chance it’ll fucking kill me.

I stroke my hand up and down his shaft, holding his gaze while I do it. I’ll never get tired of making Priest feel good. A thrill of happiness and desire runs through me as I twist my hand and rub my thumb over the head of his cock, smearing the drop of precum there before sliding back down.

“Close,” he gasps out, and we work our hands faster and faster until he comes with a warm, wet splash on my lower belly.

We stay like that for a second, our hands wrapped around his softening cock. Heat burns in his eyes as he untangles his fingers from mine and gathers some of the cum from my belly, then smears it into my pussy. It’s a possessive, almost caveman-like gesture—not like he wants to have a claim instead of the other guys, but like he’s leaving his mark with theirs.

I grin at him, my heart full and overwhelmed, making me feel almost giddy.

Ash steps up last, and it’s starting to rain harder. Lightning flashes in the sky behind him when he comes to stand between my spread legs, lighting up the scene for a fraction of a second.

It makes me feel so fucking alive to see it, like that lightning is singing in my veins. The rumble of thunder isn’t far behind, and I reach up to push wet hair out of my face so I can see Ash clearly.

He’s staring back at me, looking just as hungry as the others. “I need you too,” I murmur to him, low enough that it’s for his ears alone. “I want more with you. It was always going to be more between us.”

Ash grins at me, and it’s a little possessive and a little sweet at the same time. I can tell what it means to him that I said that. Especially since he seemed worried before that I was just going to walk away and say none of it mattered at all.

Of all of them, he’s the one who seems the most in touch with his feelings about this kind of shit. The one who seems to have a romantic side.

He slides his hand into my wet hair, pulling me in so he can kiss me deeply. At the same time, he lines his cock up with my pussy and pushes inside.

He fills me up, and I gasp from the pleasure of it. I'm so sensitive from coming already, from taking the others, but it's not too much. And even if it was, I don't think I'd care. I want him that badly.

"You're so beautiful like this," Ash murmurs when he pulls back from the kiss. He sets an easy pace, fucking me in deep, measured strokes.

"What, soaking wet?" I pant breathlessly, arching up against him.

He laughs and presses even deeper into me. "Something like that."

The others are still around us, their hands still roaming. They caress my hair and down my arms and shoulders, over my tits. I'm so aware of all of them, so on edge and attuned to every touch. I think about how Gage prompted me to say they all matter, and it feels even more true now.

My body responds to everything they do, and *all* of it is significant. I can pick out who's touching me just from how they do it, and I realize I've attuned to them so much. I know them, and they know me.

When I first started messing around with each of them after I moved into the house, there was that spark of exploration, of learning what they liked and what they could do to me. But now there's a comforting familiarity to the way they touch me, and it doesn't take anything away from the experience. If anything, it just makes it even easier for them to rile me up and make me fall apart.

Rain beats down on us, pattering on the hood of the car while Ash fucks me. With another crack of thunder, the storm picks up even more, water coming down in sheets so thick that probably no one would be able to make out what we were doing even if they did see us on the side of the road like this.

It just adds to the atmosphere, blanketing us in a curtain, like it's our own little world. Just the five of us and the passion between us building over and over again.

It feels like it's cleansing something away. Washing away a part of myself that I no longer need. A version of myself that I don't have to be anymore.

All the walls and the sharp edges that I've held on to for so long are crumbling away. They've protected me before, but there's no need for them

now. Not when I can give myself over to these men and trust that they'll keep me safe.

That they'll protect me with everything they have.

I matter to them, and it's too late to try to untangle what we have together. I don't even think I'd want to even if I could. We're a unit. They already were one before I came along, and now I'm a part of it. A part of this unbreakable group who would fight and die and kill for each other.

So I give myself to them, reveling in the hands on me and the way Ash's cock feels as it slides in and out of my swollen core.

"I could do this every fucking night," Ash mutters, his voice almost reverent. "Just bury myself in you. Or watch you get fucked by the others and jerk myself off to the sight of it. Anything. Just as long as it's you and us."

My pussy throbs as the pleasure grows, and I don't have the breath to say anything right now, but I clench around his shaft, squeezing him tighter in response.

Since I'm still so sensitive from before, it doesn't take long at all before I'm tipping over into an orgasm, coming one more time for Ash. I tip my head back and moan his name, the sound almost lost in the rumble of thunder that follows.

He's not far behind, clutching at me as he pumps himself into my body, just as helpless to resist as I was.

ASH

MY COCK PULSES one more time, like it's still trying to give River more even though it's fucking empty. I'm still buried inside her, and honestly, I could stay here forever. She's warm and wet, and it feels fucking amazing to be this close to her.

She's splayed out on the hood of the car, soaked and limp. A few rain-darkened strands of hair cling to her face, plastered to her skin.

She's fucking beautiful.

I grind against her a little, not ready to stop yet, and she moans for me, her eyes flashing as she meets mine.

"I can't," she whimpers, half laughing and half sobbing. "Fuck, I can't come again. Give me a break, you savage."

With a chuckle, I pull out and help her sit up.

I lean in and kiss her, tasting rain water on her lips. When I draw back, the others step in for their own kisses, taking their turns and then moving to the side so someone else can kiss her too.

River looks so thoroughly fucked that for once, none of her usual snark or walls are up at all. Even her fear and pain seem to have faded away.

It's just her and us and nothing else. No pretenses, no lies. Just skin on skin and the rain falling around us.

It feels like something big just shifted. I'd never really admit I'm a romantic, especially after all the shit I've been through in my life and all the shit I've seen, but I am.

I still watch sappy movies, and I always held out hope that maybe one day shit would actually happen like that.

And this, with River? This feels... real.

We've never really had women. Except for Priest, who loved Jade. Other than that, we've saved our devotion for each other. We've all had sex plenty—again, except for Priest these last few years—but it's never been serious. None of us have ever fallen in love or even bothered to introduce each other to the women we've been with.

Sure, the other Kings have all seen the ladies coming and going from my room in the past, but that's not the same as one of them being a part of this. A part of us.

It's new, and it's different, and it feels important. It feels like something we all probably would have fought against before. But now, no one is fighting.

Not even River, not anymore.

The rain is still coming down as we all get our clothes back on and fixed up, then get back in the car. We're all soaked through, and I know Gage will be cringing about all the water inside his car in the morning, but for now, none of us really care.

Nothing else matters but what we just did. Everything else can wait.

"Holy shit. I'm fucking starving," Knox says, leaning his head back on the head rest.

"When are you not?" Priest comments, but there's a teasing tone to his voice, something I haven't heard from him in a while.

"When I'm eating," Knox shoots back.

"We should pick up something on the way home," Gage puts in. "Since we didn't eat dinner or anything."

He doesn't mention the restaurant we all just left, and no one else brings it up. Instead, I pull out my phone and start looking for places on the way home.

"That Chinese place is pretty close," I tell them. "What do you think?"

Knox's stomach growls just from the mention of it, and then River's does too, making me laugh.

"That sounds good," she says. She's slumped in the back seat, her head tipped back against the head rest. "I haven't had good Chinese food in a while."

"Ash, put in an order," Gage says, already heading in the direction of the restaurant.

I'm usually the one who calls in orders for food for the four of us. Mainly because I know how to charm my way into free shit. The little old

Chinese lady who runs the place we're going to is no exception, and I flatter her and her food until she's giggling over the line.

"The usual?" I ask the guys, pulling the phone away from my face for a second.

They all nod, and then I look to River. She doesn't have a usual yet. Not with us, anyway, and this feels like the beginning of a tradition.

"Kung pao chicken. White rice. Crab rangoon," she says softly, and then flashes me a little smile.

I give her a thumbs up and then relay our massive order to the woman over the phone. She takes it down and reads it back to me.

"You're amazing," I tell her. "I don't know how you do it."

"Oh, stop," she says, giggling again. "Twenty minutes."

"We'll be there."

It takes less than twenty for us to get there, but the food is already ready when we walk in. And true to form, there are extra dumplings in the bag.

I thank her profusely, then dart back out into the rain and slide into the car. The smell of Chinese food fills the car as we finish the drive home, strong enough to overpower the scent of sex that still clings to all of us despite the rain.

We put on clean, dry clothes as soon as we get back, and then all end up in the living room instead of the kitchen. It's more comfortable, and we can all pack in on the couch and the loveseat, spreading the food out on the coffee table.

We open up all the containers, everybody trying bits from everybody else's orders.

I have a bite of River's chicken and cough a little at the spice.

She laughs at me and passes me a soda, patting me on the back.

"It's okay," she teases. "I like it hot."

"Yeah. I've figured that out about you." I wink at her before taking a long drink and then going back to my lemon chicken.

A few minutes later, Dog comes in to beg for food, his brown eyes big and his tongue hanging out.

"You'd think you never, ever get fed," Priest comments, shaking his head. "And Chinese food isn't for dogs. You have a whole bowl of kibble in there to eat."

The dog seems to think he's being offered the amazing opportunity to eat directly out of Priest's takeout container, and Priest rolls his eyes and

holds it up out of his reach.

Dog whines, looking around with a sad expression.

“Hey, Jason Momoa here was fed a delicious diet of takeout and trash for most of his life, so he’s used to it. He can handle it.” River tosses an egg roll at him, and he snaps it out of the air, munching it down faster than we can even track.

Once the food is mostly gone, Knox gets up and grabs a bottle of whiskey, popping it open and taking a swig right from the bottle. He settles in on the loveseat and passes the bottle to me.

I take a long drink, letting the warmth settle in my bones before handing it off to River.

It’s nice, just hanging out like this. Enjoying each other’s company. The guys and I used to do this all the time before we had so much shit to do, just hanging out together and shooting the shit.

We’ve never really gotten to do it with River before. There’s never been time.

It’s been one thing after another, so just hanging out, eating too much food and chasing it with good booze is nice. For once, we can let tomorrow’s worries be for tomorrow and just enjoy tonight.

After a while, I start telling embarrassing stories about the other guys, and they gladly return the favor and talk shit about me. It’s mostly just to make River laugh, since we all know each other’s embarrassing stories already.

And she does laugh. Her eyes are bright, and she almost chokes on some rice when Knox tells a story about me falling into a fountain.

“He thought he was so cool,” Knox says, cackling. “He did his fancy coin shit and tossed it in and then looked at this girl like ‘make a wish.’” He makes his voice a little higher, clearly trying to imitate me.

“I don’t sound like that,” I argue, rolling my eyes, but there’s a smile tugging at my lips.

“You definitely do,” Knox shoots back. “Oh wait, actually it should be more like ‘make a wish.’” He makes the voice breathier, like I was in the middle of reading a steamy novel or something when I said it.

Everyone laughs their asses off at that, and I throw a dumpling at him. It hits him in the shoulder and falls to the floor, and before he can grab it up and eat it, Dog has already lunged for it and has it in his mouth.

“Anyway,” Knox continues. “The girl is fucking starry-eyed over this shit. She looks like she’s about to cream her damn pants because Ash flipped a coin. Then he goes to put one foot up on the edge of the fountain for some reason. To show off his dick, I dunno. But then he slips and falls right the fuck in.”

River is dying laughing, and even Priest is grinning, so I laugh along with them, holding up my hands with my palms out.

“Look, I wasn’t always the smooth person I am now,” I say. “And let’s not act like I’m the only one who’s looked like an idiot in front of a woman before. Gage.”

River is practically bouncing in her seat, wanting more of these kinds of stories, clearly.

So we tell her. We trade stories about all kinds of dumb shit, making each other laugh. It’s a nice change from all the serious, life or death crap we’ve been dealing with lately, and it feels lighter in the house than it has in practically forever.

At one point, I pull out my cards and start doing tricks, just fucking around like I usually do while we talk. It feels good to flip them in my hands, to pick a card and shuffle and then have that card come back up later.

My throwing knives are on the coffee table at one end, and I grab one, flipping it in my hands while Gage tells a story of his own.

River watches me while I do it, and I can feel her eyes on me, taking it all in.

“I want to try,” she says when Gage finishes, nodding to the blades.

“Okay,” I tell her, jerking my chin at them. “Go ahead. Let’s see what you’ve got.”

She picks one up and balances it in her hand for a second, getting used to the heft of it. It’s lighter than the knives she’s used to, probably, but that doesn’t seem to be an issue for her.

She mimics the motion she’s seen me do before and throws the knife at the wall on the far side of the room, aiming so that the blade sticks into the plaster deep enough to keep it in place.

“Not bad.” I purse my lips appreciatively. “But I should have known you’d be good with your hands.”

I wink at her, and she snorts and grabs two more knives from the table. Her eyes narrow as she throws one, then the other. She tries to make a line

with the knives, ending up with something only a little wonky. It's really not that bad for a first try.

"You need something to aim for," Knox says, getting up from his seat. "So you can really practice."

"You want her to throw knives at you?" My brows shoot up, and Knox shrugs.

"She's got a steady hand. She'll be fine."

"It's not *her* I'm worried about."

He just grins and yanks the knives out of the wall, offering them back to River with a flourish before going to stand in front of it. It's like what River did for me back in the early days of her living with us, and we all watch, the room getting quiet.

River stands up and shifts her balance, getting her posture right before she throws. She does pretty well, actually, getting most of them in an outline outside his body, a little too far to be really impressive, but still good for her first time.

Except with the last one.

She overcorrects with the final knife, and it comes in too close to Knox's body, slicing his arm before embedding in the wall.

"Fuck!" Knox's eyes go wide as blood wells from the gash. Then he bursts out laughing.

RIVER

KNOX IS STILL LAUGHING, leaning back against the wall while his arm bleeds. He's clearly not bothered by the fact that I accidentally sliced his arm open, and even though I should probably feel guilty or worried, all I really feel is that same giddy sense of rightness that I felt when the Kings were fucking me on the hood of the car. Some part of me thought it might go away once we got that out of our systems, but it didn't. If anything, the feeling has only gotten stronger.

I get up and go over to him, reaching for his arm. "Let me see it."

He holds it out, and I check the wound. I didn't impale him or anything, but the gash is definitely deep enough to need stitches.

"Will he live?" Ash asks, clearly teasing.

"If this was enough to take him down, I'd be worried," I quip back. "It does need stitches, though. Hold that thought."

I head upstairs quickly to grab the first-aid kit from Knox's bathroom and then come back down. He's sitting on the couch now, still grinning like a loon. He's as crazy as ever, and clearly not mad at all. Whatever pain he's feeling has his eyes glazed over a bit, and he looks almost high off it.

"I'll stitch you up," I offer.

"Sure," Knox says, leaning forward to look at me. "But since you were the one who cut me, you have to stitch me up topless." He nods solemnly, even though there's a hungry smirk on his face. "Those are the rules."

I snort, but heat burns through my body at the same time. My pussy clenches at the thought of being topless in front of all of them like this, even though we all just fucked on the side of the road.

"Fine," I tell him. "You know I'm big on following rules."

“Me too,” he shoots back. “Well, the fun ones, anyway. Now take it off, little fox.”

With a smirk, I pull my shirt over my head and then discard my bra as well, tossing them both to the side. My nipples are both hard already, my body reacting to four sets of eyes focused on me.

And the guys aren’t even making an attempt to make it seem like they aren’t shamelessly staring. I can feel them looking, feel the hunger in their eyes as they devour the sight of me.

It settles over me like a blanket, and I swallow hard before going to sit on the coffee table in front of Knox so I can get to work.

I thread the needle quickly and pull his arm closer, cleaning up the blood with a gauzy pad soaked in alcohol first. Knox doesn’t even flinch. I wipe away the blood, and he reaches out with his good hand and starts fondling my tits, going right for the pierced one first.

“That’s not making this easier,” I mutter under my breath, but I don’t tell him to stop.

The others seem to think that’s permission for them to join in as well, and soon, there are hands all over me. They take turns groping my tits, squeezing one and then the other, pinching my nipples. Somehow, I manage to get a few stitches in Knox’s arm without fucking them up, but being groped like this makes it super hard to focus.

“I’m going to end up fucking up these stitches at this rate,” I tell them warningly, but Knox just laughs.

“Worth it,” he counters, cupping my breast in his hand.

“Yeah. What’s another scar to Knox?” Ash puts in. “He doesn’t mind. He’s got plenty already. And your tits are definitely worth it.”

I roll my eyes, about to make some comment in response to that—but then Ash kneels down and takes one of my nipples into his mouth, swirling his tongue around it before scraping it gently with his teeth. Whatever I was going to say turns into a moan as heat shoots through me.

Arousal pools in my belly and then sinks lower, making my pussy wet all over again. I try to focus on what I’m doing, but Ash’s mouth is insistent, and my hands are shaking by the time I tie off the thread and finish up with Knox’s arm.

It’s not my best work, but it’ll do, and he clearly has other priorities right now.

I let him go and pull back a little, breathing harder. Ash pulls off of my tit with a wet pop, and I shiver just from the sound of it. The cooler air in the room makes my nipple even harder, and the other one perks up to match.

Knox catches my gaze, his dark eyes blazing with hunger and that fucked up light that usually means he has a crazy idea in mind.

He pinches my un-pierced nipple hard and grins.

“You want one to match the other side?”

A spark shoots through me, electric and intense. There’s a rush of anticipation of the pain and pleasure that will come with that, and they mix so perfectly inside of me.

I nod, too breathless to speak.

“Fuck, yeah,” Knox groans. “Ash, go get me a ring. Bathroom drawer to the right of the sink.”

Ash’s eyes are just as dark and full of desire as Knox’s are, and he gets up and hustles out of the living room, taking the stairs two at a time.

Knox keeps squeezing my nipple, pinching it like he wants to keep it good and hard for what he plans to do. Ash comes back in no time, a small silver ring in his hand.

He passes it to Knox, and the others move in even closer. They’re still touching me wherever they can. I’ve never been afraid of pain, but there’s comfort in having them so close and having them grounding me. It keeps me in the moment and lets me focus on nothing but the anticipation.

Knox drags the needle over my breast, tracing the curve of it and then bringing the tip to my nipple. He teases me with the point of it, letting me feel how sharp it is for just a second.

I suck in a breath, and then he presses the needle through my flesh, piercing it.

I don’t yell this time, but I do buck forward a little bit. It hurts like a motherfucker, but right on the heels of that pain is pleasure, deep and dark and enticing.

I’m breathing hard, and my legs are spread, but I don’t remember spreading them. One of those involuntary things that comes from being so turned on, I guess.

Knox puts the ring in my nipple and then slides his fingers down into the sweat pants I put on when we got back to the house. I’m already so wet

that it's so easy for him to work two fingers into my pussy, and he thrusts them in deep, filling me up with them.

I moan, squirming on the table while he has his way with me. His fingers are so thick that having two in me is almost the size of a cock, and my pussy clenches around them, trying to drag them in deeper, trying to get more.

It feels too good not to. I want to feel him everywhere, and the throbbing from my newly pierced nipple matches the throbbing of my clit as I get more and more turned on.

Behind me, Gage wraps his hand around my throat. He tilts my head back, and I look up at him from upside down. He smirks, then leans down to kiss me, just adding to the sensation.

Priest and Ash join in as well. Ash works my pants off, giving them more access to my skin. He slides his hands down my thighs, spreading them even more for Knox, who adds a third finger to the mix.

That stretches me so much that I nearly scream from the way it feels. My body manages to accommodate it, and I can feel the pleasure building. It's like a tidal wave, getting closer and closer, and soon enough it sweeps me up.

"Shit. Oh, *shit*," I manage to moan as I fall headfirst into an orgasm, shaking from the intensity of it.

Knox grins, heated and fierce. "Look at you," he mutters, not letting up. He works all three of those fingers in a little deeper, and I keep trembling for him. "You love this, don't you? Your tight little cunt sucking my fingers in like you can't get enough of them."

"Fuck," I pant. "Knox..."

"Yeah, I know. I know how much you want it, little fox. Lucky for you, there are enough of us to keep you satisfied. All four of us could fuck you all together. We wouldn't even have to take turns. We could fuck every hole, touch you in every way."

"Oh god," I practically sob, just thinking about it. Because he's right. They could do that. One of them in my mouth, one in my ass, one in my pussy. Then I'd use my hand to stroke the fourth one. They could rotate, so each of them gets a turn in each hole.

My heart races from the thought, and it's like they can smell the uptick in my arousal, because they all jump in on it, playing out this little fantasy that's unfolding in our collective imaginations.

Gage tightens his hand around my throat, pulling my head back a little bit more, just enough to get my attention.

“Yeah, she’d like that,” he rumbles, his voice deep and rough. “We could keep you so full. There would always be a cock in you, and you’d still beg for more, wouldn’t you?”

I whimper at that, and Priest reaches up to tug at my nipple, teasing the mostly healed piercing. “I wonder how many times we could get you to come,” he murmurs. “Until you pass out? Until you can’t take anymore?”

“I wanna fuck your ass,” Knox says. “I bet it’s so fucking tight. Can you take me back there? Let me have my way with you?”

I nod eagerly. At this point, whatever they want, they can have. I’m desperate for their filthy words, moaning and rocking against Knox’s fingers.

Gage leans down so his mouth is right by my ear. “Should I tell him I’ve fucked your ass?” he whispers. “Should I tell him about how tight it was, and how you begged me for more and fell apart like a good girl?”

I whine at that, and he grins against the shell of my ear.

“You can have her ass,” Ash says. “I want her mouth. I want to cover that pretty face in my cum, so she knows who she belongs to. I want to see if she can take it all the way down her throat.”

My mouth waters at the prospect, and I open it almost automatically, like I’m begging for him to do what he’s describing.

Priest makes a noise in his throat. He reaches down between my legs, and I spread them wider, making room for his hand alongside Knox’s. There’s enough wetness leaking out of me that it’s not hard for him to gather some on his fingers. He presses them to my open mouth, pushing them inside until all I can taste is my own arousal. I suck on his fingers, just like I would if they were a cock, and Priest pushes them in even deeper until I nearly gag.

Knox rams his fingers into me hard, and that sends me spiraling into another sudden orgasm. My scream is muffled around Priest’s fingers, and my body shakes and spasms from the pleasure. But they still don’t stop.

They’re relentless, pushing me to the edge over and over again. I never get a chance to come down from the high or even catch my breath.

Priest pulls his fingers from my mouth, and Ash swoops in to kiss me. He gropes at my tits before kissing his way down to lick at my nipples and

take one in his mouth again. Gage threads his strong fingers through my hair, holding on tight, making sure I can't squirm away.

Like I'd even have the energy to try.

Each orgasm seems to roll into another one, and I moan weakly, already so close to being spent. My pussy is so sensitive, and every press of Knox's fingers sets off more aftershocks. I gasp and writhe, crumbling under the force of it all.

They push me again and again, making me come hard, a nonstop orgasm that never seems to end.

All the while, their words echo in my head. All the things they want to do to me. All the ways they want to have me and take me apart. I want to do those things, but by the time I can finally catch my breath, I can barely hold my head up and my eyelids are so heavy.

I slump back against Gage, my chest heaving. Knox finally pulls his fingers free, and my pussy clenches around nothing.

Even as exhausted as I am, I want more. I reach out, trying to touch one of them, *all* of them, but I lose momentum before I make contact. I'm so fucking worn out.

Ash laughs and smooths my hair back.

"We've got time, killer," he says. "I promise. I've had a lot of filthy fantasies about you, and I plan to recreate all of them in real life. But tonight, you need to sleep."

RIVER

I WAKE up the next morning in my own bed, my body sore but in that pleasant way that means the night before was a lot of fun. I yawn and stretch a little, enjoying that feeling, when it hits my sleepy brain that I'm not in bed alone.

I'm sandwiched between two warm, firm bodies, and I sit up a little to see who it is. Knox and Ash are asleep on either side of me. They both look peaceful and almost... soft in the morning light from the window. Ash's chocolate brown hair is a mess of bedhead, and Knox is curled around me like he wants to protect me even in his sleep. His lips are parted, and he snores softly, which is actually kind of cute, especially for someone so big and usually terrifying looking.

Since it's just those two in my bed, I'm guessing Priest and Gage must have gotten up already. That tracks with what I know about them. Early risers, not ones to lie around sleeping in when there's work to be done.

They're probably already working on plans or whatever, dealing with this new curveball that got thrown our way last night. I feel like I should join them, but first I give in to the call of the pillows and the warm bodies next to me and lie back down for a bit.

It's interesting to see any of the guys like this. We're all such guarded people, always keeping things close to the chest so no one can find out more than we want them to. But it's different now. So many of those walls came crashing down in the rain last night, and now I get little moments like this.

I never wanted them before. I never cared about shit like this. Soft mornings or watching someone sleep after we'd fucked each other's brains

out the night before. None of that was going to get me closer to my goals, so what was the point?

Now I have these men, and they care about my goals too. They care so much that they're willing to do things I'd never ask them to. I'm not used to being able to have things I want, especially without sacrificing something else first. But maybe, for once, I've done enough sacrificing, and now I get to have something good that doesn't come at a price.

Ash mumbles something in his sleep and scoots closer to me, like he's seeking out my warmth. I reach out like I'm going to smooth his hair back, but then stop halfway through the motion, my hand just hanging in the air for a bit before I pull it back.

It's a work in progress still, I guess. To be comfortable with these little gestures. I have no idea what I'm doing, really. Maybe one day, it'll all be easier. Maybe Ash is right, and there will be time.

I think about last night. It started off so badly, with so many terrifying feelings, so much fear. All of it was a lot to handle. But then it turned into something amazing. I can feel how hard they fucked me, how many times they made me come. Until my body was worn out and nearly wrung dry for them.

And I'm... happy.

It's weird.

I can't really believe all of this is happening. From death threats and not trusting each other, and the pact Gage and I made that we were going to keep out of each other's lives, to this—whatever this is.

Something warm and real. And unexpected. But I'm done trying to question it or second guess it. I stopped questioning and second-guessing all the bad shit in my life a long time ago, just accepting it for what it was. So now I'm going to do the same with this. Which is definitely weird, because I don't think I've ever had anything really good to do that with.

First time for everything, I guess.

I leave Knox and Ash sleeping in my bed, wiggling my way out from between them so I can get dressed. I throw on shorts and a tank top and head downstairs, smothering a yawn with one hand.

I drag my fingers through my hair, and I can hear Gage and Priest talking in low, serious voices as soon as I get close to the kitchen.

We might have spent last night eating and joking and fucking, giving ourselves a little break from everything, but there's still a lot going on. A lot

we've got to deal with.

"We have to make sure," Gage is saying. "There can't be anything they can sniff out. I know how people like him think, and there's no fucking way he's going to be satisfied unless he feels like he knows the ins and outs of our business."

Priest sighs. "So basically, we're going to have to be on our toes almost constantly. Julian's not an idiot. He's been in business since his dad died. Probably even before that. He's no low-rent thief."

"We'll figure it out," Gage replies. "We don't have a choice. And this is why we've been keeping things so tight anyway. We won't be starting from scratch."

"Morning," I say as I come in, cutting into their conversation.

They both look up, and I can tell in this split second that things are different between all of us today. I guess I could have assumed that from waking up in bed with Knox and Ash, but the way Gage and Priest look at me really cements it.

Gage smiles, and Priest has warmth in his eyes as he looks me over. I can feel everywhere his gaze roams over me, taking in my bare arms and legs, and it makes goosebumps pop out on my skin.

"You slept well," he says, and it's not a question.

I snort and move to make coffee. "So would you if you came as many times as I did last night. I'm exhausted."

"We had to carry you to bed," Gage puts in. "You couldn't even get up the stairs."

There's pride in his voice, like he's happy they knocked me out for the count like that, and I laugh. It feels good.

None of us are touchy-feely people, but the way they're openly talking about what happened and teasing about all the sex is nice. No one is being guarded about it, and no one seems to have any regrets.

That makes for a nice change.

"Let me guess," Priest says, finishing a bite of toast. "Knox and Ash are still asleep."

"They were snoring when I left them. I kind of hope they don't realize I got up and wake up cuddling each other."

Gage laughs, and Priest snorts, wiping his fingers clean from the butter and jam. "That would be a sight to see. Ash won't care. He'll cuddle anything, and Knox will just tease him about it."

“Maybe I’ll sneak back up later and see if I can get a picture or something. Just for the evidence.”

I grab a mug down from the shelf, and I can feel their eyes on me as I stretch up to get it. It makes my tank top ride up a little, exposing a strip of my back and stomach, and both of them seem to zero in on it.

Their gazes are hot and possessive, and they don’t even have to touch me or say anything to make me want them all over again.

“Do you really think you’ll be able to keep Julian out of your business?” I ask them, glancing over my shoulder as I try to focus on the matter at hand.

“We’ll do our best,” Gage replies. “We’ve been talking about—”

He’s cut off by the sound of someone knocking on the front door.

Immediately, the air in the room shifts from being open and warm to tense. Priest grips his mug a little tighter, and Gage gets up, heading toward the door with a stride that reminds me of a predator.

“I swear to god, if that FBI agent is back,” I mutter under my breath. I don’t know how many more times I can tell him I don’t have any information for him before he gets the hint. And if he’s heard about our deal with Julian already, then I’m going to have some questions for him, actually. About why he can’t stay out of our business.

But then I hear a voice, and it’s definitely not Agent Carter.

It’s female and so familiar that it makes my chest ache immediately.

Hannah.

She’s speaking to Gage, and I can’t make out what either of them are saying, but that doesn’t matter. She’s *here*. I practically drop my mug down on the counter and start to head toward the front door, but before I take more than a step forward, Hannah bursts into the kitchen.

She looks different than the last time I saw her, mostly because she seems furious and distressed. Her blue eyes are blazing and her eyebrows are turned down into a frown, instead of that timid expression she was wearing back in Julian’s basement.

“What the fuck did you do?” she demands.

The ferocity of her tone catches me off-guard, and I take a step back, not sure what she’s pissed at me for or what’s happening. “What? What are you—? How did you get here?”

I wasn’t expecting Julian to just... let her go. Not yet, anyway. Not until the ink is dry on the marriage certificate between Natalie and Knox at least,

and he can be sure he's gotten everything he can out of this deal. He's not the type to give up an asset until he has what he wants in exchange for it. I can tell that about him easily.

"I snuck out," Hannah says sharply. "And I don't have long. If he finds out I left, he'll..." She trails off, a look of fear crossing her face like a shadow passing over the sun. Then she shakes her head, tightening her jaw. "That's not the point."

"Then what is the point? Why are you mad at me?"

"Because you went behind my back and talked to Julian! I didn't ask you to do that."

"You didn't..." Now it's my turn to trail off, staring at her in confusion. "Of course you didn't *ask* me to. How does that matter? What else was I supposed to do, Hannah? Let him keep you? Just deal with the fact that you're married to someone who you don't even want to be with? The son of the man who almost killed you?"

"You don't understand," she mutters.

"Yeah, I guess I don't! How did you even find out what happened?"

I'm focused almost entirely on my sister, but out of the corner of my eye, I see Gage motion to Priest, who nods and gets up from the table. The two of them step out of the kitchen, giving us some privacy—as much privacy as we can have when Hannah is practically yelling at me—and I'm grateful for it.

"He fucking told me!" my sister snaps. "He came home last night with a smug, cruel look on his face and told me we were getting a divorce."

She spits the word like it's something bad, and my stomach clenches into a tight knot. I don't understand why she's so pissed off. I can't have read this whole situation that wrong, can I? It can't be that she wants to *stay* with Julian. Even if there was some kind of fucked up attachment there, she's smart enough to know that he doesn't treat her well. That he doesn't deserve her.

The fact that she had to sneak out of the house to see me says it all.

So I don't know what the issue is. At the same time, though, this is more like the Hannah I remember. She's not docile and cowed, not hunched in on herself.

The resemblance between the two of us is stronger now, with her facing off against me in the kitchen, so angry she's nearly shaking.

“You don’t... want to stay with him, do you?” I ask thickly, almost afraid to hear the answer.

If I have to convince her that Julian is a piece of shit and she has to leave him, this could get so much more dangerous and complicated. I can’t imagine why she would have bonded with him, but it has been a long time, and I don’t know what things have been like for her. I thought she was dead, and she didn’t have anyone else in her corner. So maybe that created some kind of fucked up Stockholm Syndrome type thing that makes her think she needs him.

Hannah’s eyes widen, her head jerking back as if I slapped her.

“No, I don’t want to stay with him,” she hisses. “But I’m just not going to fucking abandon my son. I’m not going to leave him with Julian. That’s why I haven’t tried to run away all this time, don’t you understand that? I couldn’t get Cody out, and I won’t leave without him.”

“But—”

“No. I don’t want to hear it, River.” She pushes several strands of her blonde hair out of her face, then clenches her hands into fists. “He’s my son. I have to protect him. If I leave, there will be no one but Julian to raise him. I don’t think I have to tell you how bad that would be.”

“Hannah.” I take a step toward her, my throat tight. “You can’t stay there. You don’t... you don’t know how he talks about you. How he sees you. He doesn’t give a shit about you. He doesn’t even give a shit about your kid. Cody is just an *heir* to him. A prop. Someone to carry on the family line. He sat there at that table last night and traded you away like it was nothing. Like *you* were nothing. All he wanted was to keep the kid and that’s it.”

“You think I don’t know that?” she fires back. “That’s why I can’t leave Cody. Julian doesn’t care about him as a person. He doesn’t care that he’s a three-and-a-half-year-old little boy who just wants to play and spend time with his father. He’ll turn Cody into a monster like him. Like Lorenzo. And don’t even try to tell me I don’t know how Julian sees me. I’m the one who’s been there with him this whole fucking time. I know *exactly* what he thinks of me.”

“I... I was just trying to help,” I murmur, my stomach twisting in on itself as guilt rises inside me. I remember the moment when Julian insisted he would keep Cody when he let Hannah go, and how the men all looked to me.

I made that call.

That's on me.

"I'm his mother," Hannah continues, her voice shaking a little. "And if it came down to my life or his, I'd pick *his* every time. He's a part of me. You don't know what it's like to be a parent."

That stings, mostly because she's right, and it's just another thing that's different about us now. She has this whole life, and a kid and I never knew. I can't even relate to it.

"Maybe I don't know what it's like." I swallow hard. "But you and I both know being a parent doesn't stop people from abandoning their kids."

Hannah sucks in a breath. Even though she's still clearly pissed off, I can tell she knows what I'm getting at. It was our dad who put us in this fucked up mess in the first place.

"I'm not like him," she whispers hoarsely, tears welling in her eyes and making her soft blue irises shimmer. "Dad abandoned us, but I won't let my child be a bargaining chip like he did. We have to be *better* than that, River. We have to *do* better. Otherwise, the cycle will never, ever end."

Shame punches me in the chest, and I press a hand over my heart like I'm trying to protect it from the sudden fierce ache. Even back at the restaurant when Julian first insisted on keeping Cody, I think part of me knew it was wrong to agree to that. That it would mean throwing an innocent child to the wolves. But I was so close to getting Hannah back, so fucking close. It was all I could think about. All I could see.

"I'm sorry," I choke out. "I just wanted to protect you. It's all I've thought about, all I've held on to for years. All I've lived for. I couldn't protect you back then, back when you needed me. There was nothing I could do, and I had to watch them kill you. I had to go on with my life, thinking you were dead and I had failed you. I was supposed to keep you safe. I promised you I would, and I failed. I have to do better than *that*. I have to protect you now."

Hannah blinks as I finally stop speaking to drag in a breath, and whatever she was going to say before falls away.

Some of the anger bleeds from her face, and she makes a choked noise in her throat before taking a step forward and wrapping her arms around me in a tight hug.

RIVER

HAVING Hannah in my arms is enough to make my eyes burn and my chest ache. It's been so long, and she's different now, but she feels the same. She even smells the same somehow, and if it wasn't for the fact that we're older and just got done yelling at each other, it almost feels like we've never been apart at all.

"It wasn't supposed to be your job to protect me," she murmurs, letting out a shuddering breath. "You needed protecting too. We *both* needed someone to protect us. We were both just kids, River. None of that should've happened. And none of it was your fault."

I swallow hard past the lump in my throat and tighten my grip on my sister, keeping her as close as I can. This is the first time I've been able to hug her since I realized she's still alive. Holding her like this unlocks all the pain and grief that I've held in my heart for all these years.

All the time I've missed her. All the times I've wished I could ask her for advice or have her tell me off for being reckless. I kept her picture to remind me of why I was on this mission, why it mattered, but all I really wanted was to have her back.

"I'm sorry," I whisper, my voice heavy with emotion. "I'm so sorry. I wish I could have been there with you. I wish you didn't have to go through all of that alone."

"I do too. I wish I could have been with you. I wished it every day."

She squeezes me tightly and then steps back, slowly ending the hug. The anger from before has faded, and now it's just the two of us. Both more alike than either of us would probably admit, headstrong and stubborn, but always oriented around each other.

I can't stop myself from staring at her, devouring her with my gaze like I'm trying to make up for all the lost time when we were apart. My sister is here in front of me, tired and a little worn down, but alive.

She looks me over, and I wonder what I look like to her now. Silver hair, scars, tattoos. I'm not the same girl who was taken and held captive with her years ago, just like she's not the same girl who I could have sworn died in that shitty house where they kept us.

We've both grown up and changed, molded by what happened to us.

"So..." Hannah takes another cleansing breath, smoothing her hair back and twisting the strands around her fingers in a familiar gesture. For a moment, she looks so much like her old self that it makes my heart ache. "What have you been doing all this time? Definitely not staying out of trouble, I know that much."

I huff a half laugh, not sure how much to tell her. While she's been forced into playing house with Julian Maduro, I've been doing pretty much the exact opposite. I've had to do a lot of things to get to where I am, to mark every name off that list I kept. It's not something I'd tell just anyone.

But Hannah isn't just anyone, and pretty much everything I've done since the day I was released from that house was done in her name. In the name of getting revenge for what I thought they did to her. What they *did* do to her, even if she survived it.

"I've been... busy," I answer slowly. "I spent the first year or so after they let me go in a daze. I didn't have a purpose, and I didn't know what to do or how to feel. You were gone. At least, I thought you were. I was keeping myself numb, I guess. So I wouldn't have to feel the pain of how badly I'd failed you."

"River, you didn't—"

"I know." I cut her off. "I know you didn't die, and I know you'll say it wouldn't have been my fault if you had, but... that's how I felt. I felt like I had let you down or made things worse, or..." I shake my head and swallow hard. "I didn't know where to go from there. Whenever I thought about it, I just got so sad. And then pissed off. Eventually, I let that angry feeling take over, and it got me out of the numbness. Gave me something to do with my life that felt like it mattered."

"What do you mean?" she asks.

"I killed them, Hannah," I say in a quiet voice. "Every single one of the men who kept us trapped and put their hands on us. They're all dead."

Hannah's eyebrows shoot up toward her hairline. She blinks at me as she processes my words, and then a pleased, vicious smile spreads across her face. "Even Lorenzo?"

I nod. "Even him. I didn't really know what I was doing back then, so it was... messy. But I took him down first."

She tugs at her bottom lip, her gaze going out of focus as if she's lost in some memory. "Holy shit. I knew he died, but I had no idea you were the one who had killed him. Julian and Natalie thought it was a hit from a rival gang or something. He had a lot of enemies."

Well, that answers the question of whether anyone suspected me in his death. I make a mental note to tell the guys about that.

"He deserved it," I say, an edge to my voice. "Whether it was me or someone else. But I'm glad it was me."

"I'm glad it was you too." Hannah nods decisively. "He *did* deserve it. They all did for what they did to us." She gets that faraway look in her eyes again as she adds, "I wish I could have seen it. I wish I could have been there."

More of the tension bleeds out of me just from hearing her say that. I didn't think she was going to condemn me or anything for getting my revenge—*our* revenge—on those fuckers, but it's nice to hear all the same. It's clear that she's stayed with Julian all this time because of Cody, not because she's developed some kind of sick feelings for him. She might be trapped in an impossible situation, but her spirit isn't broken. Which means there's still hope.

"I wish you could have been there too," I tell her. "I wish they could have looked up and seen the two of us in their last shitty moments. So they'd know who was responsible for it. That they were paying for their sins in their own blood."

Those words settle in the air around us as silence falls in the kitchen for a moment. Then my sister smiles at me, reaching out to tug on a lock of my silver hair. "I like this."

"Thanks." I chuckle. "It feels like *me*."

"It suits you."

I glance toward the door, biting my lip. "How long do you have? Before you need to get back?"

"Not long." A look of sadness passes over Hannah's face, but she shakes it off and grins at me. "But I can stay for a little while longer."

“Okay.” Trying to keep the mood light, I cross the kitchen to get another mug down from the cabinet, glancing over at her. “Do you want some coffee?”

“God, yes.”

I grin and start pouring it, and Hannah sits down at the kitchen table. It feels strange to have her here, in a place where I’m slowly building something new, but at the same time, it feels right. I could never *not* have room for her in my life. Now that I know she’s alive, I have a craving to be around her all the time, to soak up as much of her presence as possible.

Grabbing the coffee mug and a couple other items, I bring it all over to the table and sit with Hannah. It’s a toss-up between sitting next to her and sitting across from her, but being able to watch her wins out. I’m greedy for the sight of her.

It’s so familiar, watching her add sugar and milk to her coffee and stir it up, the way she always used to when we’d have coffee before school in the mornings.

Something settles in me, just from being able to watch her do a thing as simple as make her coffee the way she likes it. I thought I would never get to see her again, and having this little moment of normalcy feels so good, even if I know it can’t last.

Hannah looks up and smiles as she catches me staring at her.

“You still take it black, don’t you?” she asks, nodding at my cup.

I look down into the murky black liquid and then nod back. “Yeah, I still do. I just never take the time to add anything to it.”

“You always were in a rush all the time. As soon as your feet hit the floor in the morning, you were already off doing a million different things. I never understood it.”

I shrug one shoulder “I had stuff to do. I still do.”

“You wouldn’t be *you* if you weren’t dashing from one thing to the next, I guess.”

“Would you have me any other way?”

“Nah. Of course not.” She smiles, and I can’t help grinning back. Of all the people in my life, Hannah is the one who has always loved me unconditionally.

“It’s... been hard now that they’re all dead,” I admit to her. “Because you’re right. I’ve always had something pushing me forward, shit to do, someone to hunt down. Without that, I’ve kind of been floundering. That’s

why I was following Julian. I wanted to know if he was just as bad as his dad, and having a goal again felt good.”

The spoon slows as she stirs her coffee, and she nods. “That makes sense. And I wondered, you know? I thought about trying to contact you so many times, but I figured I was keeping you safe by not doing it. I wondered if you were going to settle down into a normal life or something. Somehow, I couldn’t see it.”

“Even if I’d tried, it wouldn’t have worked. I was too fucked up from everything to just move on. I thought you were dead. And I was so fucking angry at everyone who had a hand in it. The only thing I could think to do was get revenge. That’s the thing that brought me back to life.”

“I think that was Cody for me,” Hannah murmurs. “Otherwise, I would have just kept feeling numb. I retreated into myself a little, just because I didn’t want to feel that fear and that hurt anymore. And then I had a little baby to take care of, and it gave me a sense of... I don’t know. Purpose, I guess. Something to focus on. I had to be there for him because he needed me.”

“It’s weird to think of you with a kid,” I admit. “But I’m glad you had something. *Someone*. I’m glad it wasn’t just you and Julian and your pain.”

Hannah reaches across the table for my hand, threading our fingers together. “I missed you so fucking much, River.” Her voice wavers, and she clears her throat. “I used to try to listen in when Julian talked business with people, trying to see if anything sounded like it might have to do with you. I couldn’t just come out and ask him, because I didn’t want to put you on his radar or anything. And I couldn’t decide if it was better that you didn’t seem to be involved in any of his business or not. I just wanted to know if you were safe.”

“I’ve been okay,” I tell her, trying to reassure her. “I won’t say it’s been great, but I’m alive. Surviving. You know. And I haven’t been being held captive by Julian Maduro, so I *definitely* can’t complain.”

She winces and glances down when I say that, and I want to kick myself for not being more tactful. When she looks up at me again, I can see the weight of the last several years in her expression.

“It hasn’t been that bad,” she says, giving a smile that doesn’t quite reach her eyes. “He uses Cody to keep me in line, because he knows I’d do anything for my son. I think he knows I’d run if he ever let us be alone together. There are always guards around the house, and I can’t take Cody

anywhere on my own. But Julian doesn't abuse me or anything. At least, not as bad as Lorenzo did."

Anger burns hotly in my stomach. "That's not a high bar, Hannah."

She makes a face. "I know. I'm just saying it could be worse. Julian can be... controlling. And he's very cold most of the time. But for the most part, he barely touches me. He doesn't even really pay attention to me, and I just focus on Cody. So it's not that bad. Just... empty, I guess."

My heart squeezes with pain for her. She's not being actively hurt all the time, but she still deserves better than this. Better than Julian treating her like a belonging, like an asset he can trade or sell off. She's my sister, and one of the best people I know. She deserves the fucking world, and I can't stand the thought of her having to live an empty life. Not someone as bright and kind and wonderful as Hannah.

"I want to get you out of there," I tell her, leaning forward and resting my elbows on the table. "I can't let you live like that. Married to the son of your abuser. Broken and beaten down. There has to be a way we can figure this out."

Her expression tightens. "I already told you I'm not leaving without Cody."

"I know." I hold up my hands, guilt flashing through me again. "I'm sorry I didn't understand that at first. I know why you won't leave him behind, and I won't ask you to."

Even as I speak, my mind is already racing, trying to come up with something, *anything* that could work to get them both out.

Julian will let Hannah go if Knox marries Natalie and he gets to keep Cody. That plan is already in place. But Hannah doesn't want to leave without Cody, so we have to get Cody out with her somehow. And since Julian definitely won't agree to that...

It'll have to be done without him knowing.

"Wait." I sit up a little straighter, my pulse kicking up as a flood of adrenaline rushes through me. "I think I have an idea."

The thought is still taking shape in my head, but it gets clearer by the second, and as it does, my excitement grows.

"How?" Hannah looks pensive, like she's trying not to get her hopes up. "He's not just going to let us both go, River. You said yourself he only cares about keeping Cody."

“I know.” I lick my lips, my mind racing at a mile a minute. “I know. Just... come with me for a second.”

I scrape my chair back from the table and Hannah follows me in to the living room. As I expected, the guys are all in there, talking in low voices. Knox and Ash are awake now, either because they wandered down on their own or because they got woken up by me and Hannah yelling at each other in the kitchen.

Priest and Gage must have filled them in on what’s going on, because they don’t look surprised to see Hannah in their house.

They all glance our way when we walk in, expectant looks on their faces.

“There’s been a change of plans,” I announce.

“Okay.” Gage draws the word out slowly. “I think we need more than that.”

“Hannah won’t leave without Cody. Her son. She doesn’t want Julian to raise him, and I support her in that. He’s just a kid, and he needs people in his corner to look out for him. So instead of Knox marrying Natalie to get Hannah out, I think we should use the wedding as a cover to get them both out. Hannah *and* Cody. It’ll be a whole big event, and everyone from Julian’s family will be there, so it’ll be the perfect time.”

The guys are quiet for a bit, taking that in. Gage frowns, but it’s his thoughtful frown, meaning he’s turning over my plan in his head, examining it from all angles to see where the dangers might be and how it might work or not.

“It’s more dangerous than our initial strategy,” he says eventually. “But if it works, it’s definitely the better plan.”

Priest nods. “More risk up front, but less risk in the long run. The idea of tying our business to that family was... not great.”

“Understatement.” Ash snorts, adjusting his glasses with one hand.

Knox looks relieved, and it hits me that he *really* didn’t want to marry Natalie at all. He would have done it for me, though, because it seemed like the only way to get Hannah back.

“So we’re good, then?” I ask, a little bubble of hope expanding in my chest. “We’ll do it this way instead?”

“We’re good,” Gage replies. “We’ll need to hammer out the details, but this option is definitely a better one.” He gives me a little nod, and I grin and nod back.

“I need to go,” Hannah says, cutting into the conversation. There’s a strain in her voice that wasn’t there a moment ago. “I think I’ve pushed it as long as I can. If Julian finds out I left...”

No one needs her to finish that sentence. Even though I’m so fucking glad she came, my stomach twists with worry that she’ll get caught and punished for sneaking out.

“Yeah, okay.” I turn toward her quickly. “Let’s get you out of here.”

As I walk her to the front entryway, the guys stay put in the living room, giving us a moment alone.

Fuck, I don’t want to let her step out that door.

Some part of me feels like if she walks away now, I’ll never see her again, and it makes me nauseated just thinking about it. But if she stays, it’ll fuck things up even worse. So there’s nothing I can do right now but let her go and have faith that our plan will work.

We stop just inside the front door, and Hannah wraps her arms around me in another tight hug. I hug her back just as tightly, fighting down the tears that burn the backs of my eyes. She’s so real and solid in my arms, and I never want to let go.

“You know,” she says when we finally release each other. “In all the time we were talking, you didn’t explain about you and them.”

She jerks her head in the direction of the living room, and I follow her gaze toward where I know the guys are still sitting, biting my lower lip.

“Oh. That’s... a long story. I don’t want to make you late getting back, so I’ll tell you next time, okay?”

It’s a bit of a stall, because I’m not even sure what to say.

A smile spreads across Hannah’s face, amused and almost tender as she searches my face with her gaze. “That’s alright. I think some things are pretty obvious.”

“Yeah? What things?”

“Oh, I don’t know.” Her smile grows a little wider, something soft shining in her eyes. She squeezes my arm. “I’m glad you’re not alone.”

My heart gives a heavy thud in my chest, and I reach out to pull her into a hug again, desperate for just one more second with her.

“I love you, sis. Kill for you, live for you, die for you,” I whisper, repeating the phrase we used to say to each other all the time when we were held captive. Words that gave us hope in a situation that so often felt

hopeless, reminding each other that we weren't alone. That there was someone in our corner. Someone who cared. "I'll see you soon."

"Kill for you, live for you, die for you," she murmurs back, resting her cheek against mine.

Her eyes are hopeful when we separate, and I hold that image in my head as she leaves.

KNOX

IT'S NOT the plan I had in mind when I agreed to marry Natalie Maduro, but I can't be mad that instead of having to marry some frigid bitch who's not half the woman River is, I get to fuck shit up instead. It's like my ideal scenario, and just thinking about it makes me grin in the sort of way that often sends people scattering in fear.

I meant it when I said I didn't give a shit about marriage. It's just a damn piece of paper. All it really changes is how you file your taxes or whatever.

My parents were married, and they hated each other. Hell, my uncle was married too, and that didn't stop him from abusing me in secret. It didn't change anything. Didn't make any of them better people or make them realize the power of love or whatever.

It was just a ring and a title and some fake promises they made to each other and then probably immediately started breaking.

So whatever.

But still, not tying my family, my brothers and River, to the goddamn Maduro family is pretty relieving. It could've been good for our business, maybe. We could have tried to leverage that connection with their organization into greater power in Detroit. Gage is good at that kind of shit, so maybe he could've worked to spin it into something that benefitted us.

Even if he could've, though, it wouldn't really have been worth it. I'm not power hungry like some fuckers. I like what I've got. I just want a place to call my own, a family to call my own, and the chance to torture a few fuckers from time to time.

I don't need much. Simple pleasures and all that.

Anything else is just extra, and it's more for our standing than anything else. So we get respect and have connections and all that. But we can build that ourselves. We already have, just with what we have—our wits and Gage's brain and the fact that we don't take shit from anyone. We don't need to ride the Maduros' coattails to get somewhere in the city. We're doing fine.

I shake myself out of those thoughts after a bit and focus on my project.

Once River's sister left yesterday, we sat down and hashed out a plan. And a damn good one, I think. We're going to simulate an attack on the church on the wedding day, creating a distraction and giving ourselves cover as we get Hannah and the kid out of the church.

There will be a lot of criminal underground types there—the types who are always looking out for the next threat—so all my brothers and I are going to do is present it to them. Give them a reason to think they're under attack.

In the chaos, we'll grab Hannah and Cody and steal them away. Get them out of Julian's hands and somewhere safe.

Then I'll tell Natalie to go fuck a bedpost.

I grin. It's a good plan, and I like it.

I've got a floor plan of the church where the wedding will be held spread out in front of me on the counter in the basement. I don't know how Gage got it, but the man does good work, so I don't question it. I've got a handful of dice that I borrowed from Ash, and I use them to represent the people at the wedding.

A few of them go on our side, and even more on Julian's side, just because he's probably going to invite his whole damn family and anyone who he thinks he can get something out of. Lots of little fish trying to curry favor with wedding presents and shit.

I roll my eyes and clump them all together on the Maduro side.

I put a scalpel on the map at the front to represent me, and then grab a balled up piece of paper and put that at the altar for Natalie. Another die stands in for the minister or whoever Julian is going to have doing the ceremony.

Off to the side, in a little side hallway, three dice and a queen chess piece wait for the signal. I slam my hand down on the counter a few times, simulating the fake gunshots that will go off at the right time.

“Ahhh, oh no!” I screech in a high-pitched voice, rattling the little guest dice. “We’re under attack! Help! Help!”

I chuckle and scatter the dice around, like they’re running, looking for places to hide.

“It’s the consequences of my actions! They’ve caught up to meeeeeee!” I flick one of the dice off the counter, letting it clatter to the floor. I’ll have to find it and give it back to Ash eventually, but for now, I’m too busy having fun.

While the dice are scattered around, the pieces standing in for the other Kings and River go to the bottle cap and the gummy bear that represent Hannah and Cody. I grab them all up in my hand and march them around the back of the church. We’ve designated an exit for them that leads to the alley behind the church, one that’s farthest away from where the chaos of the faked attack will be unfolding.

I pick up the scalpel that represents me and stab the balled up piece of paper with it a few times, then do the same with the apple core that I have representing Julian, just for good measure.

There are footsteps on the stairs, and a few seconds later, the basement door opens. Without even looking, I know it’s River.

She catches me in the middle of my little production and raises an eyebrow, amusement clear on her face.

“Well, well, well. Looks like you’re enjoying yourself,” she says. “Like a kid at play time.”

I laugh and shrug a shoulder. “You know me. Any chance to fuck shit up.” I stab the apple core again.

“Julian?” she asks, glancing down at the impaled fruit.

“Yeah. The piece of trash is Natalie.”

She grins at me, her expression a little savage, and it makes warmth spread through my body. I knew she’d get it.

“Well, I hate to disturb your fun,” she says, glancing around at the carnage, “but you have to come with me.”

“Oh yeah? Where are we going?”

Even as I ask, I’m already dropping the scalpel and brushing all the little pieces off the map so I can roll it back up and put it away. River tells me to come with her, and I’ll go, no matter where she plans to take me.

“We have to get you something to wear to this thing. You know you can’t show up in jeans.”

Huh. She's right about that, I guess. I hadn't really stopped to think about what I was going to wear. Having a tux will make it feel more real, but whatever. It's not like I actually have to marry anyone. It's just for show.

We take my car, but River drives. She makes a show of scooting the seat up closer to the steering wheel, sighing under her breath at how much work it is.

"It's not my fault you're tiny," I tell her.

"I'm not tiny. You're just a fucking giant," she quips back, but she's smirking.

She drives us to the bougie part of town, close to where I found her after she killed Ivan, buying shoes. We bypass all the boutiques and shit and stop in front of a little place that looks different from the other stores on the block.

It smells like old wood and cologne when we step inside, and there are all types of fancy menswear on display.

An older man steps out from behind the counter when we walk in, a smile on his face. "Welcome, welcome," he says in a soft voice that kind of seems to fit the place. "What can I do for you today?"

"My friend needs to get fitted for a tux," River informs him.

"I see," the man replies. He eyes me up and down, and I force myself to stay relaxed and not reach for a weapon. He's not a threat or anything—just a guy doing his job. Probably trying to guess my size on sight or some shit.

"May I ask the occasion?" he asks, looking me in the face at last.

"Wedding," I tell him. "I'm the groom, I guess."

He raises an eyebrow but doesn't comment on my clear indifference. Instead, he just nods and motions for me to follow him to one of the side rooms. River follows, and if the guy thinks it's weird that she's coming with, he doesn't say anything.

"Step up here, please," he instructs, and I step up onto the little raised part of the floor, letting him circle me with a measuring tape. He hums and mutters under his breath, making little notes as he goes.

Once he has what he needs, he disappears back into the main part of the store and then comes back with a mostly finished tux.

"Put this on, please. Just the jacket is fine for now."

I do it, watching River watch me in the mirror as I strip out of my own jacket and ease the tux jacket over my shoulders. It's a little big, which is a

surprise, and the tailor tuts and starts taking things in, pinning them in places and walking around me.

River sits there, legs crossed. Her eyes are on the work, watching the tailor flit around my body as he makes his adjustments. Her gaze follows his hands over the spread of my shoulders and down my chest, and there's heat in their blue depths.

She looks so fucking sexy like that. Sitting there with her hair reflecting the light in the room, her dark eyes watching everything. There's a reason I picked the queen chess piece for her in my little simulation, and sitting there like she is, she looks just like one.

"I think the jacket is done," the tailor says, sounding proud. "Now for the pants."

"Why don't you take a break?" I suggest. "We need the room. I need to talk to my friend for a minute."

He looks surprised but nods, gathering his things. "Oh. Yes, of course. Well, just call for me when you're ready, and we'll get back to it. I'll just take the jacket—"

"I'll bring it out," I tell him, adding a little force to my tone.

His eyes go wide, like he can hear the threat there, and he nods again, practically tripping over himself to get out of the room and closing the door behind him with a snap.

River raises an eyebrow when he's gone, looking at me. "What was that all about?"

Instead of answering her, I stride over to where she's sitting and drop to my knees. I undo the button and zipper on her pants and yank them down to her ankles, along with her panties.

River gasps a surprised breath at the rough movement but doesn't try to stop me. Her eyes flash with heat, and she spreads her legs as wide as she can with her ankles still trapped by her pant legs.

It gives me a clear view of her pussy, and I can smell that she's starting to get turned on. It makes my mouth water, and I dive in like a starving man. Her taste and smell flood my senses, until all I know is her. I'm not thinking about the scratchy jacket or the wedding or any of that shit. All I'm focused on is River and how fucking amazing she tastes.

She bucks her hips forward, grinding against my mouth, and I growl into her pussy, grabbing her hips and using my hold on her to yank her even closer.

“Knox,” she groans, trying to keep her voice down. But I can hear the pleasure in it. I can hear how much she wants this. Wants me. “Fuck, that feels good.”

That just makes me work harder at it. I plunge my tongue into her hole, lapping up her arousal straight from the source. I find her clit with my right hand, teasing at it with one finger, pressing against that sensitive bud until she’s squirming in the chair.

She rolls her hips like she wants more friction, and I pull back a little so I can trade my fingers for my mouth and suck on her clit.

“Fuck!” she moans, a little bit louder, and then slaps a hand over her mouth.

I grin against her warm, wet pussy, amused at her attempts to keep herself quiet. Personally, I don’t give a fuck if the tailor knows we’re getting it on in here. It’s the perfect space for it, and making River scream is fun.

I double down because of that, flicking my tongue over her clit and working my fingers into her. She takes me so well, her body sucking my fingers in like it doesn’t want to let them go.

She moans behind her hand, rocking her hips forward, and I keep working on her clit, fluttering my fingers inside her.

I can feel the tension in her body, feel it growing higher and higher. She’s so close to falling apart, and I want that. I want her to lose it for me, to end up a mess right here in this chair.

She bucks her hips even more, and I let my teeth graze over her clit just a little bit.

The way she stiffens, it’s like an electric current is surging through her, and she bites her hand to keep from yelling. “*More*,” she whines. “Fuck, Knox. *More*.”

I’m happy to give in to that order, and I do it again and then one more time, thrusting my fingers as deep as they can go.

That’s enough to have her shaking with pleasure, and I pull my fingers out and go back to licking at her. She tangles her own fingers in my hair, holding my head in place, and I keep up my relentless pace until she falls apart completely.

She bites down on her own lip, trying to muffle her noises as she comes, and I don’t stop eating her out until she goes limp, flopping back against the cushions of the seat she’s on.

River lets go of her death grip on my hair, and I pull back to wipe my hand over my mouth. It comes away wet with her arousal, and I grin and wipe it on the tux.

“If I have to pretend to marry some frigid bitch soon, I’m at least going to do it with your cum on my tux,” I tell her with a growl in my voice.

“Fuck, yes.” Her eyes flash, and she drags me up to kiss me.

Her lips are just as possessive as mine are, and that’s my favorite thing of all.

RIVER

A FEW DAYS LATER, we have another meeting with Julian. This time, we go to his house, since it's to talk about the wedding plans and hashing out the rest of the details, instead of negotiating for something. It's supposed to be civil, but it's clear just from the moment we arrive that the guys still hate him.

I still hate him too, so that's fine with me.

Knox looks around Julian's massive house with barely contained distaste as we're shown inside. It's not over the top, really. Definitely fancier than the guys' place, but I know that's not what Knox cares about here. It's about it being *Julian's* house and the way he lets us in like he's inviting us into his castle.

I don't want to be here any more than Knox does. Even driving up to the driveway made me remember being held in Julian's basement, and I can taste a little bit of the fear in the back of my throat, thinking about how I was sure he was going to kill me.

It was definitely not the first time someone's wanted me dead, but there was a sinking feeling of certainty in my gut that he was going to come down those stairs and end me. There would have been nothing I could do, chained to the wall and desperate like I was. He could have done it, and that would have been it.

It makes me even happier that Knox isn't actually going through with this. The last thing I want is to have to deal with this fucking family all the time just because he and Natalie are married—even if it's just on paper. It's a bullet dodged in a big way.

There's something strange about being shown in and offered seats in the living room as if this is just some friendly discussion. Especially knowing that we're not going to be sticking to the plan at all. But we have to act like we're going through with it, so that nothing gets thrown off.

Julian is even more insufferable and shitty when he's in his home. He was already a smug piece of shit at his boxing ring, but here, it's like he's got nothing to lose and knows he's holding all the cards, pressing his advantage. There are a few of his goons stationed throughout the house, armed and watchful. None of them are in the room with us, which is probably supposed to be some twisted form of hospitality. Like a show of trust since we're about to be joining our groups together. He offers us drinks and food, but we turn down all of it.

I wouldn't take anything from him, even if I was fucking starving. No matter what deal he thinks we have in place, my hatred for him hasn't faded at all.

I keep looking at him and thinking about Hannah having to sneak out just so she could see me. How she said he's not as bad as his dad was, but her life is empty.

Not being as bad as Lorenzo fucking Maduro is a low-ass bar, and every time I look at Julian, I want to put my fist so far through his face that I lodge shards of his skull in his fucking brain.

But I don't let it show.

Gage slips into his usual role as leader, taking point on the discussion even though Knox is the one getting married, and no one seems to think that's weird. Knox clearly couldn't care less about all of this, and Natalie is sitting next to Julian on the expensive white leather couch looking just as cold as ever.

I almost feel bad for her, stuck in this family with someone like Julian, growing up with Lorenzo as a father.

But at the same time, I can't feel *too* sorry for her. Natalie is obviously heavily involved in the family business, so she's not innocent. Not by a long shot. She knows that Julian is married to Hannah, and she clearly hasn't done anything to defend her or try to get Julian to let her go.

So she's just as complicit as her brother at the end of the day.

Julian sips his drink, smiling at Gage as they talk. "I have some ideas for how we might make the joining of our organizations work well for both of our interests," he says

“Really?” Gage lifts a brow, pretending to be interested.

“Really. I’ll share those thoughts after the wedding, of course. Until then, I can’t give you too much insight into my business dealings. You understand, I’m sure.”

I fight the urge to roll my eyes at him. He’s just stringing us along, trying to assert himself as the leader of this little fucked up family he thinks he’s going to get. Gage was right to be wary of what he might try to do when he gets closer to their business interests, and I don’t trust him at all.

Luckily, it won’t ever come to that.

“Business aside...” Natalie speaks up, and I’m pretty sure it’s the first time she’s ever spoken while I’ve been around. She has a clipped tone that goes well with the cold expression she’s always wearing, and she sounds like she’d rather be anywhere but here but has somehow found it in herself to grace us with her presence.

Bitch. Any sympathy I had for her goes right out the window.

“Business aside?” Julian asks, cutting her off. “This whole thing is business, Nat.”

“Don’t call me that,” she says sharply. “And it might be business, but it’s also my wedding. I have some... requests.”

“Go on then.” Julian sounds amused, but he sits back and takes a sip from his drink, letting her have the floor.

“The wedding is going to start on time,” she tells us coolly. “No one will be fashionably late, or they’ll be turned away at the door. Anyone from your...” She looks between all of us, distaste clear as day on her face. “... party will need to be there on time as well. I don’t care if it’s your *grandmother*. She won’t be seated if she’s not inside at the right time.”

“Eh, my grandma’s dead,” Knox says flippantly. “So if she shows up, we’ve got bigger problems.”

Ash snorts under his breath and then pretends to cough to cover it up. Natalie just gets a pinched expression on her face and keeps talking.

“Anyway,” she says, her tone becoming even colder if that’s possible. “Have you taken care of your tux yet?”

“Yup.” Knox nods.

“Good. Have them add a lavender pocket square to the order. We will be doing a black and white affair, with lavender for an accent color. I’ve already ordered the flowers. Carnations and lilies will make up my bouquet and the decorations.”

She goes on about everything from the catering to what the guests are expected to wear, and her eyes linger on me for a long, uncomfortable moment. Clearly she wants me to fall in line too, and I just stare back at her, not responding.

“Sure, whatever,” Knox says as she rambles on, waving a hand. “I don’t give a fuck about those kinds of things. I’ll show up, and I’ll look good. That’s all you need to worry about.”

Natalie looks at him like he’s something nasty she’d find at the bottom of her shoe, letting out a huffed sigh. “Fine. That will do for now. But once we’re married, I’ll have to work on teaching you better manners.” A sneer curls her lips. “Maybe we’ll even get you house-broken.”

I narrow my eyes, my fingers twitching like they want to curl into fists.

What a fucking bitch. If it weren’t for this deal and the fact that this is probably my only chance to get Hannah out of this nightmare, I’d leap across the coffee table separating us and smack Natalie right in her smug face.

I hate the way she looks at Knox—like he’s beneath her, but also like he’s a piece of property. She talks to him like he’s a pet of hers, one she didn’t even want but is resigned to training because it was a gift or something. I fucking despise that.

I don’t even want her to look at him, let alone be in a position where she thinks she has any right to tell him what to do. Just hearing her talk about being married to him makes a raw possessiveness flare up inside me, but I keep it tamped down as best I can, refusing to let it show.

If everything goes according to plan, then at the end of the day, Natalie will be left with nothing, just like her brother. All I have to do is keep it together until then.

I can do that, right?

I’ve done harder things.

“My sister has specific tastes,” Julian says, grinning and shrugging a shoulder. “We’ll take care of all the decorations and the flowers. And the catering as well. All we need is for you and yours to show up.”

“On time,” Natalie snips.

“On time,” Julian allows, chuckling.

“Don’t worry,” Gage replies. “We know how important this is. We’ll all be there.”

“Good.”

Julian opens his mouth to say something else, but before he can speak, Hannah and Cody come walking in. Hannah's eyes are downcast, and the little boy clings to her leg as they come into the room. He's wearing a pair of pajamas, even though it's the middle of the day.

My sister glances over at Julian, and he lifts an eyebrow at her and gestures a negligent hand for her to go sit in one of the chairs off to the side. Present, but not really a part of the conversation.

"You're late," he tells her, and the smug tone is gone, replaced by that cold, patronizing voice he seems to always use with her. "I said we were meeting at two."

"I'm sorry," Hannah murmurs, and there's no trace of the fire and anger she had when she stormed into the house the other day and yelled at me. She's back to being meek and timid, and I hate it. It makes anger boil inside me like lava. I have to take a deep breath and remind myself that soon, she won't have to worry about any of this anymore.

She'll be away from here, free and safe. And so will her son.

Julian's gaze drops to his son for a moment, and he narrows his eyes. "Why isn't Cody wearing his regular clothes?"

"He didn't want to get dressed after his bath. He said he was cold, so I told him he could wear these for a while," Hannah says softly. The little boy leans into her side, hiding his face from all the strangers in the room.

"He needs to wear what you tell him to wear. He should know that by now. He'll never become a man if you baby him." Julian's tone makes it obvious that he thinks it's Hannah's fault that their son is acting like a normal kid and not a goddamn robot.

Hannah doesn't argue back, just nods and wraps an arm around Cody. I glance down at the little boy, trying to see past his obvious resemblance to his father. He looks more like Julian than like Hannah, which seems like a cruel joke on the part of his DNA.

But he's not just a Maduro. He's half Hannah's. There's half of my sister in there, and she's the best person I know. Maybe Hannah is right, and if we take him away from this family and make it so he can't be influenced by their sick bullshit, then he'll be okay. He'll be free, just like his mom.

Julian gives them both one more hard look, then goes back to pretending they don't exist. "How does a week from today work for you?" he asks. He glances at Knox, but the question is for Gage.

“That works fine,” Gage replies. “We’ll supply the alcohol for the bar, assuming you want one. It only seems right that we contribute something to this.”

“Well, you’re contributing your guy,” Julian says, looking smug as fuck. “But I won’t turn that down. I hear you have excellent suppliers.”

“The best in the city,” Gage agrees with a tight smile.

Julian smiles back, and the animosity between them simmers even hotter under the surface.

“We’re inviting our family, of course,” Julian continues. “But also a lot of the important families in Detroit. We want this to be a big production to draw attention to our alliance. Both of our enterprises have reputations and a certain amount of power, and people should know we’re joining forces.”

Gage nods, doing a better job than I ever could of pretending that he actually takes anything Julian says seriously. “Good. It will bring opportunities for networking and also warn away anyone who might have been sniffing around before. Taking on both of us will be much harder than going after one or the other.”

“Exactly. I’m glad we have an understanding here.”

“We do.”

Julian seems satisfied, slipping back into his usual smooth smile. He glances at his sister as if to ask if she has anything else she wants to add. She doesn’t reply or even really look at him, so he just shrugs.

“I think that’s that, then. We have everything we need. Date, time. Color palate.” He smiles over at Natalie. “Now we just have to wait for the big day.”

“We’ll be ready,” Gage says as he reaches out to shake Julian’s hand. There’s no hint of deception in his voice, but the other Kings and I know what he *really* means. It’s not the wedding we’ll be ready for, but the plan we have in place to free Hannah during the ceremony.

Julian, secure in his own smugness and the thought that there’s no way this could backfire on him, shakes Gage’s hand. He doesn’t try to do the same to Knox—which is good because, knowing Knox, he might try to break Julian’s hand just for the hell of it.

We all get up to leave, making our way around the couch and back toward the hall that leads to the front door. As I pass by where Hannah and Cody are sitting, she finally looks up from her lap and our gazes meet. I try to let her see the promise in my eyes. That we *will* get her and her son out

of here. That she doesn't have to put up with being treated like this for too much longer. Soon she'll be free of Julian and his cruel coldness.

It's just a split second, too fast for anyone to notice, but it fills me with hope as we leave the house, heading for the car.

"Holy fuck, I *hate* Natalie," Ash mutters under his breath, shuddering as he walks toward the back of the vehicle. "She's such a bitch."

"Ugh, she really is. The way she was talking to Knox like he's some kind of animal. I wanted to punch her in the face," I grumble as I climb into the back seat with him. I end up in the middle, framed by Knox and Ash.

"No punching," Gage reminds me firmly. "That's not a part of the plan."

I make a face at him. "I know that, Dad. That's why I didn't punch her. I just thought about it really hard."

Knox belts a laugh, then drags me into a kiss right there in the backseat of the car while Gage gets us moving. "It's kinda hot that you wanna defend my honor," he murmurs, low and deep in my ear.

I snort and settle against him, giving in to that possessive urge for just a bit.

"Anyway." Gage drums his fingers on the wheel. "This is good. They're going to invite a lot of the big families in Detroit to this thing, and that will only help our plan. They're all paranoid, especially with what happened to Ivan still pretty fresh in everyone's minds. As soon as they think they're under attack, it will be chaos."

"We should go over the plan a few more times," Priest comments. "Just to make sure we all know it by heart. We don't want any mistakes while this is happening."

"You worry too much." Knox drapes an arm around my shoulders, letting it hang low enough that he can toy with my nipple through my shirt, playing with the piercing and making me shiver. "It'll all be fine. I've run it a bunch, and as long as we're all where we need to be, we'll get Hannah and her kid out with no problems."

"Did you pick up the supplies?" Gage asks.

"Picking them up tomorrow," Knox says, giving my nipple another tweak. "It'll all be ready. Someone's gotta swing by and get my tux though."

He grins at me, and I feel a rush of heat at the memory of how he made me fall apart in the fitting room of that nice tailor shop.

"It's a nice tux," I say, then hiss in a breath as he tugs on my piercing.

“So we’ll have everything we need, and we’ll be in place,” Gage continues. I’m sure he knows what Knox is doing in the back seat, but he doesn’t even mention it. He’s entirely focused on what’s to come, single-minded as always when it comes to protecting the people he cares about. “River, Priest, and Ash will be standing by, ready to grab Hannah and Cody and go. You’ll run out the back and around to the side street where the car will be parked and drive off. I’ll meet you at the rendezvous point. Hopefully, we’ll be a good distance away before the smoke clears. We’ll get your sister and her son out of town and claim they escaped during the attack and we don’t know where they are.”

A few minutes later, we pull into the driveway at the house and spill out of the car, still talking and going over the plan.

I head up the walkway toward the front door, where I can already hear Dog yapping from inside. “Jesus. You’d think that mutt hadn’t spent most of his life living alone in an alley,” I scoff under my breath. But at the same time, it’s nice to know I was missed. That we all were.

But before I can make it to the front door, a sharp pain stings my neck.

I hiss out a breath and raise my hand to the side of my neck, thinking I got stung by a bee or something. But when I draw my fingers away, they’re red with blood.

“Fuck. There’s a shooter! Get down!”

Ash barrels into me, knocking me off my feet and bringing me down to the ground, landing heavily on top of me.

PRIEST

THERE ARE shouts and yells from the other Kings as Ash pulls River up into a low crouch and drags her behind the car. Another bullet hits the car's bumper with a metallic *ping*.

Everything crystalizes in my mind in a single heartbeat, and the adrenaline that beats through my body making things seem to slow down for a moment. There was blood on her neck. I don't think the bullet pierced anything vital, or she would've gone down like a sack of bricks the minute it hit her. But it almost did. It almost killed her.

Someone is trying to hurt River.

There's someone with a gun here, who knows where we live and that she's with us, and they want to hurt her.

No.

That's the only thought in my head. Just no. I don't give a fuck who they are or what they want. They can't have her. They can't hurt her.

I won't fucking let them.

I scan the street, eyes frantic as I search for any hint of whoever is doing this. I catch a glint of light reflecting from the shooter's gun from behind a tree halfway down the block, and I draw my own weapon and fire in that direction.

There's a muffled grunt and then the person takes off running down the street, dashing off to try to get away. Knox takes off after them, and I'm right on his heels, chasing them down the road to catch up. Both of us are running like machines, like nothing could stop us.

I can hear my feet pounding the pavement, and Knox is just a little bit ahead of me. My breathing is harsh and my heartbeat thuds in my head.

It almost reminds me of the two of us going after the gang that killed Jade all those years ago. Knox is a good person to have in your corner when you want people to suffer. All the Kings are, but my cousin makes it into an artform. And together, the two of us are unstoppable.

Back then, nothing else mattered more than finding each and every motherfucker who was responsible for what happened to Jade and making sure they paid for it. Knox was more than happy to help me with that, just because I asked. Just because we were family who actually gave a shit about each other.

That's part of what cemented the bond that we still have now.

And now?

Now it's personal for him too.

He cares about River just as much as the rest of us. He was one of the first to accept her and want her to stick around. The one who went after her when she left and brought her to the gala that night because he wasn't done with her, even if the rest of us were trying to pretend we were.

Someone trying to take River out, or even hurting her in the crossfire because they wanted one of *us*, sparks that dangerous anger in him. I can see it in the way he runs, like a predator that's not going to stop until it's captured its prey. He'd hunt this fucker down to the ends of the earth if he had to.

So would I.

I'm right on his heels, cold fury beating at my chest as we go.

All I can think about is what could have happened. How River could have been shot, and none of us were ready for it. I remember my nightmare, all those hands trying to drag her down and take her away from me.

It's not going to fucking happen.

I don't care who this asshole is. I don't care if he's the one with the vendetta or if he's doing someone else's dirty work.

He's not going to have her.

No one is.

That thought beats in my mind like a war drum, keeping me going. My muscles burn as I run, but I don't slow down.

The shooter keeps looking over his shoulder, and when he sees we're still after him, he tries to run faster.

It doesn't work well.

Knox and I are closing the distance quickly, running this guy down. We're well away from our neighborhood by now, running through the trees that form a little wooded area near our subdivision. There's a nature trail back there somewhere, but no one ever uses it.

That's good for our purposes. Everything is empty and quiet except for trees and leaves on the ground, and the sound of a few birds in the trees. Aside from a few of our neighbors who might have seen us running down the street near our house, there won't be any witnesses.

My gun is still in my hand, and I narrow my eyes, dragging in a deep breath before I aim and fire. The bullet tags the guy in the side, and he stumbles, tripping over a tree root and going down hard in the dirt. Knox and I both put on an extra burst of speed, pressing our advantage and catching up to him while he's down.

His chest is heaving as he gasps for breath—from the running, maybe, but also because he's bleeding out in the dirt and leaves, staining them red.

Knox skids to a halt in front of him, and then kicks him right in the side where I shot him, hard enough that his whole body jolts with it.

The man screams out in pain, trying to roll over to protect that side, but Knox kicks him again, forcing him onto his back.

"Oh, you don't like being in pain, huh?" he sneers, and there's something savage and dark in his face as he drops down to his knees beside the guy. "You probably should have thought about that before you fucked with us."

He draws a knife from his pocket and flips it open, holding it up so the man can see it.

The guy is already pale and sweating, but he goes white as a sheet when he sees that knife. It's impossible to tell if he knows who Knox is, knows his reputation as the Butcher of Seven Mile, or if he's just showing his true colors as a coward now that he's been caught.

Either way, it doesn't matter. He's done something unforgivable, and this is Knox's element. The dirty work that has to be done when people don't know better than to stay the fuck out of our business and away from our people.

Knox shoves the knife into the gunshot wound, and the man howls, blood bubbling out of his mouth to run down his chin.

"Shut the fuck up," I snap, letting my rage take over.

We need to find out who the fuck this guy is and where he came from and why he's after River, but a part of me wants him dead more than I want the information. Just for thinking he could try to hurt her.

"Who are you?" I demand.

He tries to roll over again, batting at Knox weakly with one hand. Like that would ever be enough to get him to stop.

I move in to help, kicking the man's other side and then stepping on his wrist hard to keep the hand down. Something gives under my foot, and I press down harder, making sure he feels the pain of his broken bone.

It's what he fucking deserves.

Knox twists the knife in his side, and the shooter arches up as much as he can, writhing from the agony.

My chest heaves as I stare down at him, all the red from the blood spilling out of his body blurring with my vision. I can barely think past the anger in me, but I know we need to find out who sent him and whether he was deliberately trying to kill River or if he was after one of us.

"Who the fuck sent you?" Knox demands, finally letting up with the knife.

The man doesn't answer. He bites his lip, taking little shuddering breaths through his nose.

"I asked you a question, asshole," Knox growls, digging the knife in deeper. "Who were you after? Were you trying to fuck with the Kings? Or River?"

The guy just shakes his head, not saying a fucking word.

I stomp down harder on his arm, and this time, his pained cry is much weaker.

Shit. We're losing him.

Knox grabs the front of his shirt and hauls him up, but he goes limp in that hold almost immediately. His head flops to one side, and his eyes go blank and sightless.

He's dead.

"*Fuck!*" I explode, the sound echoing around us. "Goddammit."

RIVER

MY HEAD IS STILL RINGING from the gunshots, and I can't focus on anything other than the fact that someone just tried to kill me. I'm pressed down to the concrete of the driveway, Ash's body on top of mine again.

"Come on," he grunts. "We've gotta get you inside. Now."

He rolls off me, and Gage is there immediately, crouching down on my other side. They haul me up and practically shove me toward the front door, shielding me with their bodies as we go.

"Wait," I blurt, fighting against their hold. "What about Priest and Knox?"

I don't see them anywhere, and fear twists in my gut as I scan the yard and the street.

"They're fine. They went after the guy. We have to get you the fuck inside, River," Gage says firmly. "There could be a second shooter. We don't know what this is."

My heart is racing so hard it makes my chest hurt, and I know they're right. I have to trust that Knox and Priest will have each other's backs and be okay. I won't be helping anyone if I stay out here and put Gage and Ash at risk too, so I let them hustle me into the house.

But even once the door is closed firmly, I can't relax.

What the fuck?

Someone was lying in wait here, knowing we were out and would be coming back before too long. They knew where I was. The guys probably draw their fair share of enemies, with their club and everything, but the shooter didn't take a shot at any of them.

It was at me.

“Do you think he had backup?” Ash asks, moving aside the blinds over the window next to the front door so he can peer out carefully.

“I’ll check,” Gage replies.

I want to tell him not to, to stay inside where it’s safe, but I feel like my voice is stuck in my throat. I’m not used to feeling this afraid, and I realize vaguely that my fear is more for the guys than it is for myself. My chest tightens as Gage slips out the front door.

Ash strokes a comforting hand down my arm as if he can sense my distress. “You know, our lives have gotten a whole hell of a lot more exciting since you came into the picture, killer,” he murmurs. “We used to just play video games in the evenings, not have shootouts in front of our house.”

It’s a joke, his attempt at lightening the mood, but I’m too fucking worried to laugh.

Dog comes out of the kitchen, whining softly like he can sense the tension in the air. Maybe he can. Animals are supposed to be good at that. He comes over and noses at my hand for a second and then licks it, his tongue warm and wet.

I pet him absently, straining to hear anything from outside.

I feel like I’m braced to leap into action at the first sign of movement or a sound of gunshots or anything. Every muscle in my body is tensed up, and I’m barely breathing, waiting for Gage to come back in or Priest and Knox to show up.

Time seems to crawl by, and as it does, I can imagine all kinds of horrible things that could be happening. Maybe it was a trap in the first place, and there were more men waiting farther down the street, ready to ambush the men as they chased the first shooter. Maybe they want to lure all of them away so they can get me alone.

Maybe Priest and Knox are in trouble right now, hurt, bleeding out, and I’m hunkered down in the house with no way to know.

Fuck. I hate this feeling. This is what happens when you let people into your life. You worry about them, and when something goes wrong and their lives are on the line, it’s even worse.

Ash keeps looking out the window, and I fight the urge to drag him back away from it. Dog nudges my side, which at least gives me something nicer to think about than imagining all the different ways the Kings could be

hurting right now, or who might be lying in wait on the other side of the door, ready to kill me.

The front door opens several minutes later, and my heart lurches in my chest. My mouth is dry, and I feel kind of like I'm moving through molasses as I move toward the door.

When it swings all the way open, I see a bloody body first and foremost. It's slumped over and clearly being dragged. I fear the worst for half a second, but then I realize it's not any of my men. Priest and Knox are carrying the body, and Gage is behind them.

"I think this was the only one," he says, sounding tense and pissed off. "I didn't see anyone else."

"Neither did we," Knox replies. "And this fucker died before he could say anything useful."

"Take it downstairs," Gage says, and they drag the body to the basement.

Ash and I follow, watching as Knox dumps the body on the floor and then cracks his knuckles. He's got that caged animal energy going on, and it's clear he's as pissed as Gage. Ash has a watchful eye on me, protective and calm, even though it's clear he's angry too.

Priest comes over to me, and I can see rage burning in his clear blue eyes, mingling with the panic and pain. I remember what he said that night when they got me back from Julian, about how he was going to keep me safe and no one else could have me. It's obvious this rattled him. He runs his hands over my body, not just to touch me but checking to make sure I'm okay.

"I just got grazed," I tell him softly, turning my head to let him see the spot where the bullet just missed piercing my neck. The wound stings, but I can tell it's not bad. It'll be fine once I have a chance to clean it up and put something over it.

Priest lets out a heavy breath, like he's been holding it in his lungs since the moment the shots started firing. "Okay," he murmurs, still touching me. "Okay."

I put one of my hands over his, trying to reassure him. "I'm just... shaken up. But I'm not hurt."

He nods, and either that or the fact that we definitely have a more pressing issue lets him turn his attention back to the dead man on the floor.

“Okay,” Ash echoes, moving in closer so he can look down at the body. “I’ll say it, I guess. What the fuck just happened?”

“That’s what I want to know,” Gage replies, folding his arms. He looks down at the body too. I follow their lead and peer at it, examining the face.

It’s just a guy. Generic square jaw, dark hair cut close to his scalp. Big build, but not even close to being as built as Knox is. There’s nothing remarkable about him at all, and after looking him over, I lean back and shake my head.

“I don’t know who he is. I’ve never seen him before.”

I run through a mental list of everyone I’ve ever pissed off or tried to kill before, but nothing about this guy stands out at all. So whoever he is, he’s probably not the one who wanted me dead. He’s just a hired gun.

“So someone is trying to kill you by proxy,” Gage growls, echoing my thoughts. “But who?”

“I mean, I’ve made my fair share of people mad before,” I tell him. “But I usually clean up my messes. I don’t know who it could be this time.”

Ash pulls a coin out of his pocket and starts flipping it while he thinks. “Assuming they were only after River,” he says. “Then it seems like it has to be someone tied to Ivan or one of the other guys on her list, right? Maybe the same person who put Ivan’s body up on that pedestal.”

“Except we still have no fucking idea who that was.” Knox scrubs a hand over his jaw. “Do you think it’s Julian?”

“That wouldn’t make any sense.” Priest shakes his head.

I nod, poking gingerly at the raw patch of skin on my neck where the bullet grazed me. “Yeah. He did want me dead at one point, but now we have this deal in place. It’s better for him if I’m alive, right?”

“Right,” Priest confirms, glancing at the other Kings. “He needs her alive for it to go through, otherwise we’d definitely walk away. He doesn’t get anything out of her being dead. Keeping Hannah clearly doesn’t mean that much to him.” He looks back at me. “No offense.”

I shrug, because he’s right. Julian is willing to trade my sister in order for his sister to get married to a powerful player in Detroit, so it doesn’t really make sense to assume he’d try to kill me just to keep her. Because that would blow this whole wedding deal he’s got set up.

Gage tugs at his full lower lip and then blows out a breath. “So basically we have another fucking mystery on our hands. Someone *else* with a motive

we have no idea about, who could be anyone. We don't know if they're watching us or how much they know or what they want."

"Yeah, that seems to sum it up," Ash agrees. He flips the coin into the air and then catches it. "We're going to have to be careful. Keep our heads down. We don't know if this is one person or a group or what. We can't take any chances."

"Agreed," Priest says. "We have to keep River safe. Whatever it takes."

"No more leaving the house without one of us with you," Gage tells me. "I know you can take care of yourself, but we're not going to risk something happening."

I nod, going along with his order. There was definitely a time when I would have pushed back against it and told them I'm not a fucking child who needs to be watched and guarded like I can't defend myself. But now that I'm so close to getting Hannah back and so close to having things I never even knew I wanted, I don't want to fuck it up.

And I don't want any of them to get hurt in the crossfire. So it's better to just stick together until we can figure out where this new threat came from and deal with it.

"I'll get rid of the body," Knox offers. He snorts, sounding pissed off. "If this one shows up on a goddamn piece of art somewhere, I'm gonna be pissed as fuck."

"There's nothing artistic about this one," Ash jokes, clearly trying to lighten the mood.

Knox rolls his eyes and kicks at the body. "Yeah, because those chunks of Ivan St. James were so fucking aesthetically pleasing or whatever. I don't think whoever's doing this really gives a shit about art."

He grabs a tarp and starts rolling the body in it, muttering under his breath as he goes. That's how I can tell he's mad as hell. Usually this kind of thing puts him in a better mood, not a worse one.

Once it's rolled up, he hefts the body over his shoulder and goes to dispose of it, and the rest of us go back upstairs.

Gage catches my arm and pulls down the neck of my shirt, exposing the wound I got from the bullet. "This needs to be cleaned," he says, and his voice is still rough with anger.

When I look up into his green eyes, they're simmering with fury, but he seems to be holding it together okay.

"I know," I tell him. "I'll get to it."

“That’s the only place you’re hurt?” He was there when Priest checked me over, but I can tell he needs to hear it again.

“Yeah. I’m okay, really. Just worried about what all this means.”

Gage nods and sighs again. “I wish we had answers. Even *one* fucking answer would be great. There’s too much going on for there to be this many loose ends, and we don’t even know where this one is coming from.”

That’s exactly what’s making my stomach churn with anxiety.

It’s unknown, and it feels out of the blue.

Everything feels like it’s hanging on a knife’s edge, and there are players lurking in the shadows that I can’t even see.

G A G E

IT'S quiet in the library, which isn't surprising since it's so late. It has to be after one in the morning, and the entire house is silent and still. River and my brothers are all asleep, but I couldn't make my eyes stay closed. I'm agitated and on edge.

The body of the shooter has been dumped in the woods, taken care of the way Knox does best, but that doesn't calm me down at all.

We've never shied away from death, me or my brothers—from facing our own or causing others. But since River came to join us, there's been more fucking death than ever. It puts me on edge.

I usually don't believe in this kind of shit, but maybe it says something that we literally met her over a death. Over her killing someone in the alley behind our club. Maybe that's why we can't seem to shake it now.

It's like destruction follows her like a black cloud, and all my brothers and I can do is try to keep her alive despite it all.

Now that I know her story and everything she's been through in her life, I can tell she needs someone to protect her. She'd never agree to that or say she wants it, but I know. It gets exhausting being on your own, being the only one you can trust. The other Kings and I can all look out for ourselves well enough, but we're stronger together. We all know that, and there's no shame in relying on people to have your back.

River's coming around to that, I think. She's had to deal with things on her own by necessity for a long time, but things are different now. Now she has us to help.

We're trying. We're all going to keep an eye on her and do our best, but there's so much we still don't know. Ivan's body being dragged back up,

this newest shooter, whatever Julian has planned under what he's telling us. I hate when I don't have all the information. Even more when there's someone counting on me to protect them and I don't know what I'm protecting them from completely.

But anyone who wants to hurt River will have to go through us. All of us. Even at a disadvantage, we're nothing to sneeze at, and River herself can fight like hell when it's important.

If someone wants her dead, they're going to have to really fucking work for it.

I draw in a deep breath and let it out slowly, trying to calm the almost frantic pace of my mind. I came in here to try to relax since I couldn't sleep, and dwelling on this shit isn't helping. There are only so many ways I can turn it over and over again in my head, and it's not leading to any answers, so it's really just a waste of time.

I do another deep, slow breath and then turn my attention back to the book in my hands. It's been open to the same page for the last twenty minutes or so, the soft light from the lamp I turned on casting accusing shadows over the neatly printed letters.

It's not a happy book, and the chapter I'm on is about the protagonist losing everything and being faced with his own mortality after thinking he was untouchable. I dive into the depths of his despair on the page, making little notes in the margins here and there about how he failed to see this coming and how the signs were there, but he was too clouded by his own arrogance to realize it.

It soothes my own feelings as I lose myself in the words, and gradually, I can feel the tension seeping out of my body as I start to relax.

As I turn to the next page, I hear footsteps coming down the hall. A moment later, River slips into the room.

I'm aware she's there, but I keep reading.

It's impossible not to be aware of her presence. Even when I didn't want to be, it was as if she took up so much space in any room she was in. Like as soon as she came into our house, she was immediately a fixture there, impossible to ignore. Now that I *want* her here, I'm attuned to her on an entirely different level. I don't have to look up from my book to know she'll be tucking her silver hair behind her ear as she moves from the doorway to the bookshelves.

That little wrinkle between her brows will be present while she looks over the books.

“Hmm,” she murmurs, and I can just picture her tapping her chin with one finger, her nail polish probably chipped by now, while she tries to find something to read.

Or to pretend to read to get a rise out of me.

She pulls a book from the shelf and opens it. “Huh,” she says, sounding surprised. “Something must have happened to this book. The pages are all stuck together.”

I growl at her, because we both know exactly why the pages are stuck together. But it’s playful now, with no real anger in it.

River laughs softly. I look up at her as she puts the book back on the shelf and leans against it, facing me.

“Why are you still up?” she asks.

I shrug. “Couldn’t sleep. Too much on my mind.”

“Yeah.” She runs a hand through her hair, the strands parting like quicksilver around her fingers. “It’s been a fucking day, hasn’t it?”

“That’s an understatement, I think. A day and a half, maybe.”

That makes her smile, her gorgeous lips curving up a little.

“Why are you up?” I ask her.

Now it’s her turn to shrug. “Same reason, I guess. I keep thinking about what happened earlier. All the things we don’t know.”

It’s funny how similar we are. When we first met I would have lashed out at anyone who suggested there was anything similar about us at all, but the proof of it is there in her answer.

“It’s the same for me,” I admit. “I kept lying there trying to make my brain stop going over all the things that are still up in the air, but it wasn’t working. So I gave up and came down here.”

She watches me for a bit and then pushes off from the shelf, coming a little closer. “Do you want a distraction?”

I raise an eyebrow at her, looking her over in her oversized shirt and little shorts that she must have gone to bed in. “Yes.”

River smirks, and there’s already heat in it. Her dark blue eyes seem even darker in the low light in the library, but it makes everything else about her seem softer, like it’s dulling her edges.

They’re still there, though, and that just makes her even more enticing.

She holds my gaze and then lets her hands slide down her body slowly. Her fingers caress her curves until they find the hem of her baggy shirt. Even with that covering up most of her, she's still hot as fuck, and when she pulls the shirt over her head, I can see she's not wearing a bra.

Her nipples are already peaked, and my dick twitches at the sight. "That's a good fucking distraction," I murmur roughly. "Keep going."

She does, smoothing her hands over her skin this time. There's no music, but she grinds to a beat in her head anyway, shaking her hips a bit as she turns in a slow circle. When she has her back toward me, she hooks her fingers in the waistband of her shorts and starts sliding those down her legs, showing off the black panties she's wearing.

They're lacy around the edges and slung low enough on her hips that I can see the top of her ass as she bends over to take the shorts all the way off.

I put the book to the side, closing it and setting it on the little table next to my chair. Giving River my full attention.

Her little striptease isn't as finessed as the dancers who work at our club, but it's a thousand times sexier.

Still dancing to that beat only she can hear, she turns back around. Her body is toned and fucking gorgeous, and she cups her tits in her hands, pressing them together as she shakes her hips.

My hands itch to touch her, and my dick is half hard in my sweatpants, probably already noticeable if she looks. But I don't even care. Why shouldn't she see what she's doing to me?

I want her to know how fucking sexy I think she is, stripping for me in the library at ass o'clock at night, just because she wants to take my mind off things.

Her panties are the last things she has on, and she takes her time with them. She reaches back and grabs her own ass, squeezing it before letting go and doing another slow spin so I get the full effect.

Her hands tease over the lacy waistband, and she smirks at me, licking her lips slowly. Inch by inch she drags her panties down, revealing more and more skin.

I can see the neatly trimmed patch of hair that covers her pussy, and when she turns to the side, I get a great view of the swell of her ass.

Finally, the panties come all the way off, and it's a struggle not to reach out and grab her, hauling her in so I can touch her like I want to.

But I keep my hands to myself for the moment, letting her finish.

She makes a show of kicking the panties off to the side, and they land on a bookshelf, draped over the edge.

Still swaying her hips slightly, she walks over to me and deposits herself in my lap with a grin. She's completely naked, and I can feel the heat of her skin through my clothes.

Now that she's close, I give in and touch her as much as I want. I run my hands down her back to her ass, and grip it, harder than she did when she was touching herself, until she gasps and squirms in my lap.

I grin at her and then drag her down into a hot, hard kiss.

There's no struggle, and no walls up between us right now. River kisses me back, her hands planted on my chest. She melts into the kisses, grinding forward against my lap, making my cock go from half hard to almost completely erect in a matter of seconds.

It shouldn't be fair for her to be this fucking alluring, this fucking hard to resist, but I can't complain. Not when she smells good and feels good and is almost boneless against me while we make out.

I drag my mouth from hers down her neck, leaving biting kisses along the way.

It's so fucking easy to lose myself in this. To focus only on River and her taste against my tongue. I bite her neck, and she shivers against me, arching up like she's begging for more with her body.

I give it to her, biting down harder, until she gasps, and then I drag my tongue along her pulse point.

She makes a sound that's half hum, half moan, and I laugh a little breathlessly against her skin, pulling back to look her in the eyes.

"You're so fucking sexy like this," I tell her, not ashamed of saying it. She can clearly feel how hard I am under her ass, so it's not like I could hide how I'm reacting to her at all.

River grins and purposefully rolls her hips in a slow wave, grinding down on me until my cock throbs with the need to be buried deep inside her pussy.

"Fucking tease," I mutter, although there's no anger in it.

"It's only teasing if there's no follow through," she shoots back. Her eyes are dark with desire, but bright with good humor. It's good to see that, after everything that's been going on. There's no trace of the panic I saw in

her that night out in the rain, or the fear from earlier today when she was being shot at.

This is River at her best, teasing and bright, sexy and unstoppable. It's addicting to have her like this, naked in my lap, her attention on me and not any of the things weighing her down.

"You'd better follow through," I tell her, putting a low growl in my voice. "Otherwise it'd be a pretty shitty distraction."

She laughs and then leans up and kisses me again. I thread my fingers into her hair, using the grip to hold her head still as I ravage her mouth, tongue and teeth scraping her lips, biting and sliding against hers until she's fisting her hands in my shirt and rocking against me.

When I pull back to breathe, I look at her again. She's so fucking beautiful in this light. Hot possessiveness rises in me, and it makes me want to keep her close and never let her go.

Which sparks a question that might kill the mood, but I have to ask it.

"What are you going to do when you get your sister back?" I ask.

River pulls back, looking surprised. "What do you mean?"

"Ivan's dead. You'll have Hannah and her kid." Those have been her main goals since I've known her. Her reasons for nearly everything she's done. "Will you disappear on us like a ghost once it's all done?"

The question feels loud in the room, as if we both know how big it is and have to bear the weight of it. River is quiet for a second, but it doesn't seem like she's thinking through her options as much as just trying to figure out how to formulate her answer.

"I can't," she says finally.

It's not what I was expecting. But then, I don't really know *what* I was expecting.

"Why not?" I ask.

"Because..." She glances around the room, but it's like she's seeing beyond it. Like whatever she's looking for isn't confined to this space, but encompasses the whole house. "Because there's too much of me *here*," she murmurs. "I couldn't just walk away or disappear."

Something like relief settles in my chest when she says those words, and I let out a breath.

"Baby girl," I breathe, "that's exactly what I wanted to hear."

Almost before I finish speaking, I drag her into another kiss, this one a bit more heated than the others. I pour my feelings into it, letting her taste

how much I want her to stay. How much I want her, period. None of us are great with words, but action seems to be a language we all speak pretty damn well.

So I know I can show her better than I can tell her how much she belongs here with us.

My hand goes back to her hair, tangling tighter this time, yanking her head back until she gasps at the slight pain of it. Her eyes are wide and dark, and her tongue darts out to lick her lips.

I follow it back into her mouth, kissing her until we're both breathless.

"Fuck, Gage," she pants, writhing against me. "Fuck, I want you."

I press my hips up like I'm urging her to take what she wants. When I let go of her hair, she scrambles to do just that, going for the drawstring on my sweatpants so she can shove them down my hips enough to free my cock.

It's rock hard, precum beaded at the tip, and as soon as she wraps her hand around it, I curse under my breath. It feels good, but it's not what I want.

What I want is to be buried in that sweet, wet heat of hers, so I help her lift up enough that I can guide my dick into her.

"Fuck," I groan as she starts to sink down. She feels too fucking good. Hot and tight, velvety soft and wet around my cock. All my nerve endings are on fire in the best way, and I thrust up into her hard, burying myself to the hilt inside her.

She moans at the force of my intrusion, clenching around me, and I dig my fingers into her hips, helping her ride my cock while she straddles me.

Her tits bounce as she moves, and I dip my head to drag my tongue between them, tasting the salt of the sweat that's starting to bead on her skin.

Her breath catches, and she moves in another of those slow waves, making sure I feel all of her when she sinks back down.

"That's another thing I like about you," I pant, digging my fingers in harder to her flesh. I want to leave fingerprints behind, so she'll see them the next time she's naked and remember who put them there. "You fuck like a champion."

She laughs breathlessly, leaning up to kiss me. It's messy and punctuated with harsh moans and muttered curses as we move together.

“I’m getting a lot of practice,” she manages to shoot back, and I laugh with her.

At this point, she’s probably been fucked in every room of the house, and knowing that just makes it feel like she belongs here even more.

We’re both wrapped up in each other, but not so much that we don’t hear it when someone else comes walking into the library.

It’s Ash. He leans in the doorway, eyes intent as he watches us. River catches me looking over her shoulder and turns her head to see him there, but she doesn’t stop bouncing on my cock.

“I guess—*fuck*—I guess nobody is sleeping tonight,” she says, moaning halfway through her sentence when I thrust up into her harder.

“It seems like the real party is down here anyway.” Ash grins broadly at her. “Don’t stop on my account.”

“Oh, we weren’t going to,” River fires back.

Ash gives her a heated look, and it’s clear he likes what he sees. He’s shirtless, his glasses off, wearing just a pair of low slung pajama pants. When his cock starts to jut out against the thin fabric, he reaches down and starts palming at his dick, never taking his eyes off us.

River clenches around my cock again, and I feel a surge of wetness as she turns back to face me. Ash showing up turned her on, and I remember the dirty talk from the last time we were all together and fucking around.

How we teased her about using her holes and fucking her all together, and it got her off again and again.

I look over her shoulder at Ash, and then thrust up into River a couple more times. Then I let go of her hips and slap her ass hard enough that the sound rings out in the room and she moans just as loudly.

I lift her up and off me, and my cock bobs as it pops free, shiny with her arousal in the dim light. River looks confused, like she wonders if I’m stopping because I don’t want Ash watching.

I just smirk at her. Before she can say anything, I spin her around so her back is to my front and she’s facing out into the room. Facing Ash.

Then I pull her right back down onto my dick again.

“Oh, fuck,” she gasps.

Like this, Ash can see everything. The way her legs are spread over my lap, her pussy impaled on my cock and the way it sinks into her over and over again as I fuck her. Her tits bouncing, the silver rings in them catching the light every time she moves.

Judging by the way her pussy clenches hard around me, she likes that. A lot.

Ash seems like he likes it too. He moves closer, closing the distance between him and the chair we're fucking in. There's a heated look on his face, and he tips River's face up so he can kiss her.

She moans into it, sounding desperate and needy. Ash practically swallows the sounds she's making, kissing her hard and deep. His hands roam over her body, groping her tits and playing with her nipples until she's a mess, shaking and rocking between us, so turned on.

When he steps back to give her a second to breathe, I can tell from the smirk on his face that he has something planned. He goes for his pants, shoving them down enough that his cock can spring free, jutting up and aimed right for River.

He doesn't even have to coax her down or anything. She practically lunges for him, bent forward on my lap so she can wrap one hand around Ash's cock and take it in her mouth.

"Shit," Ash curses. He puts a hand in her hair, like he needs it to steady himself, and River goes to town, sucking him down, bobbing her head as she takes more and more of him in her mouth.

She's lost in it, and between her moans and the sounds of her enthusiastic sucking, it's clear she's enjoying herself. I like the little noises she makes, how obviously turned on she is by blowing Ash while I'm fucking her. She's split open on both our cocks, full at both ends and taking it so well, driving us both a little bit crazy, but in the best way.

I grip her throat from behind and use that hold to control her movements, taking over. She moans deeply at that, and I grin, forcing her to arch her back as I slap her ass with my free hand and bob her up and down on Ash's dick.

I push her down, making her take him deeper and then even deeper, until I can feel his cock hit her throat through her skin.

"Oh my fucking god—" Ash chokes out, and River gags a little but muscles through it, swallowing around him and staying down there until I let her up.

She gasps for breath, and then I push her down again, making her take it as I fuck her harder. I can feel the stirrings of my orgasm in my gut, and judging from the mess River's making in my lap and how her pussy is practically pulsing around my cock, I can tell she's close too.

“That’s it,” I tell her, my voice low and intent. “Take it. You love this, don’t you? Being stuffed full. Having two cocks in you. You’re just stuck here between us, taking what we give you, and it’s driving you fucking crazy, isn’t it?”

She whimpers around Ash’s cock, bucking against my hold. I let her up to breathe for a second, and then slam into her hard when I push her back down.

That’s enough to trigger her orgasm, and her cry of pleasure comes out on a muffled breath since she’s practically gagged with Ash’s cock at this point.

“Come on,” I groan. “Let me feel you come for us. Show me how much you like this.”

That’s all the encouragement she needs. She whines deep in her throat, shaking and practically thrashing on my lap as she falls apart. Her orgasm hits her hard, and I let her up from Ash’s cock so she can breathe.

“That’s right, baby girl,” I say with a grin.

“Fuck.” River curses, breathing hard. Her body is still shaking, and her pussy is still pulsing around my cock, clenching like a vise, threatening to milk my release from me.

I grip her hips and start fucking her in short, shallow thrusts, so close to losing it myself.

Ash reaches up and runs his thumb across the fullness of her bottom lip, and she swirls her tongue around it.

I can just imagine the glazed over look on her face as she comes down from the high of her orgasm, sucking on Ash’s thumb while he fists his own cock.

He strokes himself fast, using the drool and spit from River’s mouth to slick the movement of his fist. The sound of him jerking off is loud in the room, mixing with the slap of our bodies as I fuck River even harder.

“Please,” she gasps, looking up at Ash. “Fucking give it to me. I want it.”

“Yeah, I know what you want,” Ash pants back. He groans and goes stiff as his orgasm hits him, and he splatters River’s tits in his cum like he’s marking his territory.

River moans as if she’s getting turned on all over again just from the feeling of that, and that’s enough to tip me over the edge. Pleasure slams

into me, so I slam into River, fucking up into her hard one more time before I pump her full of my cum.

She's a mess now, hair sticking to her forehead in sweaty strands, cum on her tits and leaking out of her pussy. She's still breathing hard, slumped back against my chest, looking up at Ash while he stands there, grinning like an idiot.

It's comfortable in a weird way. Even though the four of us, my brothers and I, have never done this before, it feels right. We've always been good at sharing a home and a business, so maybe this is just another step on that path. Or maybe River is just special.

I reach up and turn her head to face me so I can kiss her deeply. She melts into it, humming softly while she kisses me back.

"Well, now I just feel left out," Ash teases.

River rolls her eyes and reaches for him, and he comes to her, bending over so he can kiss her too. If he cares about the taste of his own cock in her mouth, he doesn't show it. But then, I guess I didn't care either.

She slumps back against my chest, and I stroke one hand down her leg.

"We're going to have to carry you to bed again, aren't we?" I tease her.

"No." She scoffs, trying to sound indignant but just sounding amused and well-fucked instead. Her voice is a little raspy from having Ash's cock down her throat, which takes the edge off of anything she might say. "I can walk myself."

A chuckle fills my chest. "We'll see."

I pull her closer against me, wrapping an arm around her waist as I tug possessively on the nipple piercing Knox gave her while we all watched.

"You know," I murmur in a low voice, "it's a good thing you're staying. Because I don't know if I could let you go."

And I know I'm not the only one who feels that way.

RIVER

THE REST of the week passes way too slow and too fast all at the same time. It's like every time I look up and check the date, it feels like no time at all has passed, but then I can't really remember what I did the day before.

It's all a flurry of planning and plotting and making last minute adjustments to the plan to make sure this all goes off without a hitch.

Knox runs his simulations on the blueprints for the church with all of us over and over again, until we know our parts by heart. I've never seen this church in person, but I'm starting to dream about it now, about walking my path to get to where I need to be when I need to be there.

I think it's pretty safe to say I have it down.

Gage is a planner, and the others follow his lead, so we all know the plan backward and forward before we're even two days out. I know it's important, and we have to be prepared, but at the same time, I can't wait to just have it all go down and get it over with.

Rehashing it every day just makes it seem bigger in my head, and I want to be past this part already.

I want to get to the part where Hannah is safe and happy already. I want one goddamn thing to finally go right for her, so she doesn't have to deal with Julian or anyone else from the Maduro family again. So she can raise her kid and start moving on from the abuse and pain they all put her through.

It's that thought that I come back to throughout all the planning of this. *It's for Hannah. So she can live a better life.*

All the guys have an air of determination about them, like they're ready for anything and will do whatever it takes to make sure this works out.

They're just as committed to this as I am, except instead of doing it just for Hannah, they're doing it for me.

It's sexy and inspiring at the same time, and it's kind of crazy how good it feels to not be doing this shit on my own for once. I always made it work, always got my mark one way or another, but it's nice to be running through battle plans over pizza with four people who are just as invested as I am, instead of alone in my shitty apartment, wrapped in a blanket, not sure if I even remembered to eat that day.

On top of the determination, everyone is also still on edge after the attack the other day. Sometimes I find Gage looking out the window, like he's making sure no one has walked up to the house without him knowing.

Dog has picked up on the tension and has taken to pacing in front of the door as well, like he understands what happened and is making sure it's not going to happen again. Hell, maybe he *does* understand. Maybe there are some latent watchdog tendencies in him, and he's protecting his home.

I barely leave the house anymore, and never without an escort, just like the guys said. I don't put up a fuss about it like I might have before. I know they're doing it because they're worried about me being attacked again. Even when we all go out together, the tension in them is thick enough to cut with a knife, like they think someone is going to leap out from behind every car or building and try to take a shot at me.

They keep me flanked on all sides, and they're always armed when they leave the house. Just in case.

A couple days before the wedding, Priest and Ash come with me to pick out an outfit for the ceremony. We plan to grab Knox's tux on the way home, just so we won't have to make a separate trip.

We walk into the store together, and I swear, we barely fit through the door because the guys refuse to leave my side. I would give them shit for it, but I can't really blame them.

Priest usually comes along when I have to go out, making good on his promise that he won't let anyone take me from him. His tension is easy to pick up on, from the set of his jaw and the way his blue eyes flash when he looks around. He's easier to read than he used to be, and although I like *that* part, I wish the thing I could read in him wasn't just a fuckton of stress. Even Ash is alert and serious, not fiddling with his coins or cards like usual, and not even making jokes, which is really not like him.

They both stand outside the dressing room while I choose an outfit, opting for a suit with a jacket and low cut blouse rather than a fancy dress.

It's still in Natalie's approved colors, so she won't be able to go off on me for violating the dress code or whatever, but it'll be easier to move in when the time comes. I don't want to have to try to move through a crowd of people all freaking out and going in the opposite direction while worrying about stepping on the hem of a dress and falling on my face.

This is just more practical.

And it helps that when I step out of the dressing room to show off to the guys, they both stare me down like they want to back me into the dressing room and devour me.

I'm almost tempted to try to seduce them into it, curious what kinds of fun the three of us could get up to together. But we need to be alert, and it'd be pretty hard to focus on anything else if they were both balls deep in whatever holes they wanted to claim. So I behave, focusing instead on picking out the perfect pair of shoes.

I find a pair that are gorgeous but don't have a crazy high stiletto heel. Not that I mind a stiletto sometimes— I've got some sexy as fuck ones in the shoe collection I've been amassing over the years. But just like with the rest of my outfit, I'm thinking strategically and tactically. I need shoes I can move fast in.

Because at the end of the day, it's not really a wedding we're going to. It's a rescue mission.

EVERYONE IS as ready as they're going to be when the day of the wedding arrives. I wake up in a flurry of nerves from a dream that I can barely remember—but I'm willing to bet it was about today. I drag in a deep breath and steel myself for what's coming.

The Kings and I all gather in the kitchen, our usual meeting place, and go over the plan one more time.

Gage presides, as usual.

The blueprints are spread over the kitchen table, and Knox's little pieces of random things that stand in for the major players and the guests are in their places. If Ash cares about the big man appropriating his dice for the

demonstrations, he hasn't said anything, but he has one of them in his hand, rolling it between his fingers and making it travel the length of his hand over and over again.

Knox wraps his arms around me from behind while Gage talks. He keeps nuzzling my ear while we go over it, playing with my hair or nipping at my neck.

Gage looks over a few times, and the line between his eyebrows grows more and more pronounced until he cuts himself off with a growl and glares at Knox.

"Could you pay attention for five minutes?" he snaps. "Or did you forget this is going down today? In a couple of hours?"

Knox just laughs in his usual Knox way. He's unbothered by so much in life, and I've come to realize that it's not because he doesn't care or doesn't take things seriously when the chips are down. It's because he doesn't hold on to shit the way the rest of us do.

That's probably for the best, honestly. I know I can get lost in my own head sometimes, and Gage can be over-analytical to a fault. We need someone to counterbalance those traits, and Knox definitely has that covered.

"Hey, I'm walking down the aisle today," he jokes. "I gotta get my kicks while I can."

I narrow my eyes at the thought of him marrying that bitch. Every time it gets brought up, even though I know it's not really happening, I get a little flare of anger in my chest, followed by a rush of possessiveness. I think about Knox writing 'mine' on my chest in our blood, and I wish there was some way I could mark him back, so it would be clear that he doesn't belong to that frigid cow.

Running on instinct, I turn in his arms and kiss him possessively, wrapping my arms around his neck and leaning up onto my toes so I can really get into it.

Knox puts his hands on my hips and hauls me in closer with a low, deep groan. I can feel his cock stirring, and I grind my hips against his a little.

"For fuck's sake!" Gage curses and slams his hand down on the kitchen table. "Once this is over, you two can fuck on the goddamn kitchen counter if you want to. But for now, I need you to focus so we can go over this again."

He's still irritated, and it's written all over his face. Ash and Priest don't seem as pissed about the interruption, but their tension is evident in the way they're holding themselves.

We're all on edge. We all want to get this over with.

Knox and I separate, and we run through it all one more time. The timing, waiting for the right moment to simulate the attack. Moving through the chaos of people panicking to get to Hannah and Cody. Grabbing them and leading them out and around the church to where the car will be waiting to take them away.

It's a simple plan, really. Not many places for things to go wrong or for anyone to fuck it up. But there's still a tingle of anxiety in me that goes back to the very first time I ever hunted anyone down.

I won't be able to relax until it's done.

But we're close now.

When it's finally close enough to the time the wedding is supposed to start that we won't be obscenely early, we all head to the church. We're dressed up as if we're all just here to witness our friend getting married, and we mingle in with the other guests that are starting to arrive. Some of them I recognize by face, some by reputation.

Julian wasn't kidding about inviting the important families. He wants to make a spectacle of this, but he has no idea how literally he's going to get his wish.

Out of the corner of my eye, I see Hannah enter the church with Cody.

The little boy looks uncomfortable in a tiny suit, but he clutches at my sister's hand as she leads him in. Hannah looks beautiful in a black dress with her hair pinned back. Glancing around to make sure there aren't too many eyes on us, I walk over to her.

"Ready to get divorced?" I ask, trying to lighten the mood.

"So ready." She smiles, but it doesn't reach her eyes. She's nervous. This has always been more my area than hers, the crazy plans where a lot of things hang in the balance.

There's so much I want to say to her, but we don't really have the time to find a place to be alone. And I don't want to act suspicious.

"Trust me," I murmur quietly, reaching for her hand and squeezing it. I lean in like I'm going to kiss her cheek in greeting and whisper in her ear instead. "Be ready to run. Both of you."

I pull back and glance down at the kid, who's staring off at some of the flowers that decorate the church, his wide eyes taking in everything around him.

"We'll be ready," Hannah whispers back.

I nod at her and move away, letting her and Cody move out of the sanctuary and into the main part of the church to find their seats in the pews.

More guests arrive, trickling into the church bit by bit. The guys move through the growing clusters of people, going through the motions of schmoozing, shaking hands and the like, but I know they're really making sure everything is set.

The explosives we'll use to stage the attack have already been laid out, put in place last night by Knox, so that part is ready to go. Gage has the detonator that will trip them in an erratic sequence to simulate gunfire.

There are only about twenty minutes left before the ceremony is supposed to start, so I do one more check of the building to make sure the layout matches the one in my head from the blueprints and that I've got my path charted correctly.

Ducking out of the large sanctuary space at the front of the massive church, I head down a side hallway that runs toward the back of the building, checking to make sure there aren't any spots that the blueprints didn't cover.

Everything looks fine, and I'm about to turn back to rejoin the others when a noise stops me.

Frowning, I creep a little farther down the hall. There's a room off to one side, the door hanging open a crack, and I peer inside.

There are two people in the room. Their backs are to me, but the fluffy white dress kind of gives it away that Natalie is one of them. She's bent over a small table that's set against one wall, her dress hiked up around her hips, and judging from the noises she's making, she's being absolutely plowed by the second person.

It takes a second for me to realize who it is from behind, but then he speaks, and I feel like I'm going to be fucking sick.

It's Julian.

Julian goddamn Maduro, balls deep in his own goddamn sister on her supposed wedding day.

“Don’t forget who you belong to,” he pants, not even bothering to be that quiet about it. “You might be marrying that idiot, but you’re mine. I’m going to make sure you remember that.”

Natalie whines and bucks back against him, meeting him in the middle of every single thrust.

She’s clearly into it, clearly *enjoying* this, and they’re both so wrapped up in each other that it’s like no one else even matters.

“Say it,” Julian hisses. “Say you’re mine.”

“I’m yours,” she moans. “Julian, fuck! I’m yours. I’m yours. I’m yours. Just don’t stop.”

That’s the most emotion I’ve heard in Natalie’s voice since I met her, and it’s no wonder she hasn’t been interested in Knox or anyone else if this is what she’s into.

My stomach churns with nausea and anger, and I start backing away from the scene. I don’t want to see any more. I don’t want to hear any more.

Every Maduro is a sick fucking bastard. I already knew the apple didn’t fall far from the tree where Julian was concerned, but I didn’t know it was going to be this bad. This sick and twisted.

Hannah was right. We have to get Cody out of there and away from Julian before he gets swallowed up by the darkness of this fucked up family.

Her kid deserves better than that.

I slip back down the hall as fast as I can, bile rising up my throat.

RIVER

I WALK AS QUICKLY as I can without flat-out running back to the front of the church, looking for my men.

The entryway has started to empty out as more people have gone into the nave, or whatever it's called, to find their seats. I spot the guys in a little alcove off to one side of the sanctuary, talking in low voices, and I hurry to join them.

"There you are," Ash says, grinning when he sees me. "I thought you were getting cold feet."

"Not *my* wedding, Ash," I mumble back.

"Everything's ready," Gage informs us, his voice tight. "Now we just have to wait for this thing to get started."

He's more focused on the plan than anything else, but that's good. Someone has to be, after what I just saw. I'm surprised my fucking eyeballs aren't bleeding.

"What's wrong?" Priest frowns as he glances at me.

He has that expressionless mask back up, his features a lot more rigid than I've seen them lately. It's probably because of all the strangers around. There are plenty of people here we know for a fact we can't trust, especially when we're about to pull off a heist of sorts here at this wedding. But I realize with a little thrill that I can still read him pretty well, even with his control firmly in place. He's worried, which means there must still be a disgusted look on my face after what I witnessed at the back of the church.

I lean in closer, swallowing the acidic taste at the back of my throat.

"Julian Maduro is a sick fuck," I mutter to them. "Even worse than we knew. I just saw him in the back, railing his sister."

Gage, Ash, and Knox all look disgusted. Something flickers through Priest's expression, the only visible sign that he's grossed out too.

"Jesus fucking Christ. And I thought that fucker couldn't get worse," Gage mutters. "You're sure?"

"Unless there's someone else walking around in a big white dress today, then yeah," I reply. "And she was moaning his name, so it's pretty hard to mistake that for someone else."

He shakes his head, like he doesn't even know what to say to that, and that makes two of us.

"Good thing you're not actually getting hitched to that bitch, huh, Knox?" Ash whispers, smirking at his friend.

Knox scoffs. "As if I would have touched her with a ten foot pole even if we were. But yeah. It's a damn good thing I'm not."

The last few guests start to trickle in to find their seats, and two of the ushers that Julian has standing by move to close the doors. The wedding is about to begin.

I smooth my hands over Knox's shoulders, getting any wrinkles out of his tux. I reach up and fix his tie, then step back to look him over.

He looks fucking good.

It's the first time I've really had a chance to take him in since we all got dressed and headed to the church. The tux is tailored to perfection, hugging his muscles in a way that shows them off without making it look like he's about to burst out of the fabric. Even the lavender pocket square that Natalie insisted on works well with the whole thing, and although Knox definitely doesn't want to be doing this, he stands straight and proud and looks fucking amazing.

I'm so tempted to lean up and steal a kiss, but that's probably really bad form when he's about to pretend to marry someone else. So instead, I just gaze at him, letting the heat smolder in my eyes so he knows that I would be all over him if I could.

He smirks back and winks at me.

"It's time," Gage murmurs.

The four of us go sit down in our seats, leaving Knox at the back, preparing to walk down the aisle.

"Who do they think they're kidding with this church ceremony?" Ash mumbles as we take our seats. "Given what you just saw Natalie and Julian doing, I'm surprised they dared to set foot in a church. I would've thought

they'd be afraid of burning to a crisp as soon as they walked through the door."

"It's all for show," Priest replies, his tone clipped. "But it works out for us. If they were doing an outdoor wedding, this would have been much harder."

I nod, because he's right about that. There are guards posted around the space, dressed to look like they belong at a wedding but standing out like sore thumbs anyway. Julian obviously takes his security seriously, and it would be a lot harder to get Hannah and Cody away if we were all outside. We'd be spotted too easily, by one of his guards or someone else. The back rooms and hallways of the church will give us better cover.

Music starts up a moment after we're settled in our pew, soft and unobtrusive. The priest or whoever the fuck the Maduros hired to perform this thing stands at the front behind the altar, and Knox comes through the door at the back, walking down the aisle.

I can feel my nerves rising as it gets closer and closer to being time to move. But looking at Knox helps a little. He winks at me again as he passes, and it makes me smile.

I'm glad the ceremony will be interrupted before he has to kiss Natalie, because I don't want his lips anywhere near that whore's.

Once Knox is in place, the music changes to the bridal march, and the doors open again. Natalie comes walking out on Julian's arm, and everyone turns to watch.

Her dress is an over the top confection of lace and tulle and beading, like she thinks she's some kind of princess or something. The train flares out behind her a good three or four feet, and it probably cost a small fortune. If she'd had the time, she probably would have gotten it handmade. By orphans or something.

Julian is dressed to the nines as well. He's straight-backed, his lavender pocket square and tie fitting the theme Natalie wanted. His arm is looped through his sister's, and he doesn't spare a glance for anyone as they make their way down the aisle to where Knox is standing.

Neither the bride nor the groom will have people standing up with them, so when they reach the altar, Julian kisses Natalie on the cheek and then moves to take his seat as well, leaving her to remain up there with Knox alone.

The priest takes over then, beginning the ceremony in dull, dry tones. I barely listen to him, letting the droning words go in one ear and out the other, paying just enough attention so that I'll know when it's time to move.

I search the seats for where Hannah is supposed to be sitting and find her in place with Cody at her side. Her posture is a little stiff, and she's looking straight ahead at the couple at the altar as if she's paying attention to this farce of a wedding. But I can see the tension in her shoulders and jaw, and I know her thoughts are on what's to come.

She's nervous. I am too.

The plan is to set off the flash bangs and small explosives right before the rings are exchanged. Gage has the trigger in his pocket, and the charges have been set in places where they're likely to get a lot of attention but not injure anyone.

If things go well, no one will get hurt. Maybe a little singed and trampled in the chaos, but there's nothing lethal there. Just loud and bright. Enough to make this room full of jumpy, paranoid people think that they're finally about to get their comeuppance for something.

It'll simulate an attack on the church, which is entirely plausible considering the high concentration of powerful people here. They'll all run and scatter and try to fight back against an unseen enemy to save themselves, and in the madness, we'll get Hannah and Cody out.

I feel the tension in my body, like I'm poised to cut and run at any second. The priest's droning seems to take forever, and I bounce my knee nervously, waiting.

A warm hand covers my knee and presses it back down, and I glance over at *my Priest*, who's still staring ahead.

Even without him saying anything, I can guess what his silent signal means—and he's right. There's no point in getting all worked up now. We have the plan in place, and all we can do is stick to it.

"Now," the priest at the front of the church says, lifting his hands. "Who has the rings?"

Julian stands up with a little box in his hand. None of us know what the rings look like. Knox said they asked him if he had a preference, and he told them he didn't care. Which probably pissed Natalie off, but whatever. It's not like he's going to be wearing it.

I remember Gage being ticked off, worried that acting so blasé about things was going to tip the Maduros off that something wasn't right, but

Knox helpfully pointed out that he'd feel the same way even if they were getting married for real. So there's no point in pretending otherwise.

I glance at Gage, catching his gaze. He holds up three fingers and then puts his other hand in his pocket.

As soon as Knox goes to put the ring on Natalie's finger, it'll be go time.

Gage puts a finger down, and Julian hands the box to the priest. The priest says some more shit about the power of love or whatever, which is hilarious considering this would have been a marriage of convenience at best.

Gage puts another finger down. The priest flips the box open.

And then several loud pops cut through the air, cutting the moment off.

Someone near the front screams in fear, and that sets off a ripple through the rest of the crowd, everyone shuffling and turning to see where the noise is coming from.

More shots ring out through the air, and more people start screaming.

For a second, I don't understand. We had the plan down, and this isn't it.

Did Gage set flash bangs off early?

Did his hand slip or something?

I look around, trying to figure out what's happening, then a woman sitting in front of me gets hit hard in the arm with what can only be a bullet. A real one. She jerks from the shock, and blood seeps through the thin fabric of her dress.

Oh, fuck.

This isn't fake.

Seeing the blood and someone else go down off on the other side of the church makes the chaos even worse. The screams get louder and people start trying to scatter out of the way.

This is a real attack.

The one thing we didn't plan for.

Fuck.

RIVER

THE SHOOTING DOESN'T STOP.

Several people sitting in the pews get up and start returning fire, shooting toward the doors of the church and wherever else they seem to think the attackers are hiding.

Others start taking cover, hitting the floor in their nice clothes and army crawling toward places they think might be safe.

There are people hiding behind the pews, using bibles as cover like that's going to protect them somehow.

It's the chaos we wanted... only it wasn't caused by us.

Someone grabs my arm, and I almost go to shake it off before I realize it's Priest. He drags me down to the ground with Gage and Ash, and we shelter behind our pew.

"I have to get to Hannah!" I tell them, raising my voice to be heard over the noise.

Gage nods quickly. He sticks his head up enough that he can look around, trying to spot her. "There," he says as he ducks back down, helping me move forward. "Left side, three rows up."

The same place she was sitting, then. She hasn't moved. That's helpful.

I start crawling over, thanking anything and everything in the universe that I was smart enough to not wear a dress for this. It would have been twice as hard to crawl as it is now.

Bullets keep whizzing overhead, thudding into the wood of the pews and shattering the stained glass windows. The glass rains down on the people sheltering near them, and there's another round of screaming. Shouts and cries rise up, some panicked and some angry.

I keep moving, pressing up on my hands and knees as high as I dare to so I can crawl faster and get over to Hannah. She's hunched down behind her pew, thankfully alone.

Her arms are around Cody, and the little boy cries into her chest while she keeps him tucked away. I grab her arm, and she jerks back, her blue eyes wild for a second before she realizes it's me.

"What's going on?" she hisses, sounding terrified. "Is this how it was supposed to go?"

"No. This wasn't the plan," I tell her, my stomach twisting itself up so tight that I feel like I swallowed a rock. "This isn't how it was supposed to go at all."

And I have no idea where it went wrong.

But there's no time to think about that now. Right now, we have to try to salvage what we can of the original plan and get the fuck out of here.

I look back to where I came from and see that Gage and Priest are returning fire against the group attacking the church. Someone grabbed the actual priest and got him away from the altar, it looks like, and the bride and groom to be aren't in the front anymore either. Now there are figures in black tactical gear and masks up there, firing round after round into the crowd. One of them gets hit right in the chest with a bullet and goes down hard.

I glance over, tracing the path of the bullet that took the guy down. Knox and Ash are behind another pew, shooting as they make their way over to where Gage and Priest are.

"Stay with me." I turn back to Hannah, giving her a serious look. "We're still going to try to get out of this. We can do it."

She looks worried, but I can tell it's more about what's going to happen to her son than anything else. She nods, though, moving with Cody to be closer to me as I start to crawl back to where the Kings are.

I pull my gun from the holster at my back and start shooting at anyone who gets too close, laying down enough cover that Hannah doesn't have to worry.

Hopefully.

I hear a yell and the pounding of footsteps, and I look up just in time to see a man with a gun racing toward me. I'm out in the open, in the middle of the aisle, and I try to get my gun up in time to get him before he reaches me.

He gets close but then goes down hard, shot through the gut.

“Fucker,” Knox snarls, moving in closer.

“Shit,” I gasp, breathing hard. My heart is galloping in my chest, and I have to try a few times to get in a deep breath.

I turn to make sure Hannah is okay, and her eyes are wide and terrified. But she’s in one piece, Cody still clinging to her.

The guys cluster in, forming a kind of barrier around us. The man Knox shot lies on his back, his breathing labored and blood bubbling out of his mouth.

“Who the fuck are you?” I ask him, trying not to sound as shaky as I feel. “Why are you doing this?”

“Bitch,” he curses at me, voice raspy and heavy with pain. He’s dying, the light fading from his eyes. “We—we bite back. We do not... yield. For Diego.”

He takes one last rattling breath, and then he’s gone, dead in the middle of the floor.

“Who the fuck is Diego?” Ash asks, firing off a quick burst as more gunmen try to get close.

I open my mouth to say I have no fucking clue, but then it hits me. I look up and meet Priest’s gaze, and I know he knows too.

It feels like it was a long time ago now. So much has happened since my first botched attempt to take out Ivan St. James. In all the chaos and confusion and emotions since then, I’ve barely thought about missing the shot and killing the leader of that cartel Ivan was meeting with instead. And then the frantic chase through the alleys that ended with me being cornered and sure I was going to die.

But then Priest showed up and killed the men who were after me, and we managed to get away.

I should have known this would come back to bite me in the ass, but there’s just been so much going on that I barely remembered.

“The cartel,” Priest spits, the anger in him rising so much that it’s definitely visible now. “The men we killed the day River let Ivan get away.”

“I didn’t let him get away, he—” I cut myself off, because that’s not the point.

“Fuck,” Gage curses. “Goddammit. We didn’t even think about them. Of course they’d want their fucking revenge. They’ve probably been planning this.”

“I bet they’re the ones behind the attack the other day too,” I say as the pieces fall together in my head. “They hired someone or sent someone after me.”

Gage nods, still looking furious. “They must’ve pieced together that you were responsible and then sent someone after you. That failed, and their man never reported back, so they resorted to this.”

“How would they know she’d be here, though?” Ash asks. “It’s not like she’s the one getting married.”

“They knew she was at our house, Ash,” Gage says back. “And Julian reached out to anyone who was anyone about this wedding. It wouldn’t have been hard for them to find out about it and know she’d be here.”

Fuck.

Fuck, fuck, fuck, fuck, *fuck*.

This is the last goddamn thing I needed. Hannah and Cody are still right here, and I have no idea where Julian or Natalie is. The plan is well and truly off the rails now, and I don’t even know if we can salvage it.

The shooting is still going on. There are more bodies on the ground, some dressed in the black of the attackers, some in the finery of the wedding guests. It’s fucking chaos, and everything is a mess.

“You have to go,” Priest says, pausing to turn and shoot at someone coming up on the side of the nave, trying to sneak around the pews. “You need to get out of here.”

“But—”

“The plan, River,” Gage barks, cutting me off. “You need to get to safety. You and Hannah and Cody. We’ll cover for you in here. Just go. Now!”

I hesitate, still not sure if I should leave them, caught between two conflicting impulses—to get my sister out and to make sure the guys are okay, to stay and have their backs.

As if sensing my internal struggle, Priest grabs my arm and pulls me closer. He cups my face with the hand not holding his gun and kisses me hard enough that I see stars for a second.

Then he pulls back and holds my gaze. “Go. We’ve got this.”

“Okay,” I whisper, so much adrenaline barreling through my body that I feel like I’m vibrating. “Okay.”

“We’ll get you an opening,” Knox grunts.

Without wasting another second, he and the other Kings lay down cover fire while I grab Hannah and Cody and we start moving. Luckily, it's not far to that side door. The original plan—to get them out through the alley around the back of the church—is probably still the best plan, so I lead them in that direction.

Compared to the noise of the shooting and screaming in the main part of the church, it's eerily quiet in this hallway. The heavy huffs of my breathing and the sound of Cody sniffing into Hannah's dress as he clings to her seem too loud in my ears.

"It's okay, sweetie," she whispers to him, smoothing his hair back. "It's okay. We're safe. We're going to get out of here."

He just nods and clings to her tighter, and Hannah hefts him tighter in her grip as she looks over at me, determination blazing in her eyes. It's the same expression she had on her face when she told me she wasn't going to leave her son to save herself. This is the version of Hannah I remember so well from when we were growing up—strong and brave and determined, even when she's afraid.

"Stay behind me and be as quiet as you can," I murmur. "I don't think there's anyone back here, but I don't know for sure. I don't want to take any chances."

Hannah nods, and we set off, moving through the back halls of the church. I keep my gun ready, taking each corner slowly and peering around them to make sure we're not about to get ambushed.

But like I thought, the coast seems to be clear. The fight is all happening at the front of the church, and if anyone has been able to get out, they've probably escaped through the front doors. I try to move as quickly as I can while still staying alert, just in case the cartel members figure out that I'm not hiding behind a pew anymore and start trying to chase us down.

I'll give it to the kid, he doesn't even cry. He just clings to his mother silently, gazing around at the shadowy corridor as he jostles in her arms with every footstep. My heart clenches at every strange sound, but no one jumps out at us, and we managed to make it out the door and into the alley in one piece.

As soon as the door of the church closes behind us, we make a run for it. I'm still in front, and Hannah races just behind me with Cody in her arms, heading for where the car is parked.

“Get in as soon as we get to the car,” I call over to Hannah. “I’ll get us out of here.”

“Got it,” she pants, a little out of breath.

And then I’ll come right back, I promise myself. I’ll make sure Hannah and Cody are safe and then come back for the Kings.

I know they can handle themselves in a fight and that they’ll have each other’s backs, working as a team to protect each other. But I still can’t help but worry about them and all of this.

I can’t believe the fucking cartel showed up here. They must not’ve known what the guest list for this wedding looked like, or they never would’ve made the decision to ambush us *now*. It’s the worst fucking timing, but I don’t let myself dwell on that. For the moment, I have something more important to focus on.

I can be pissed about this shit show later.

We keep running, and the mouth of the alley looms ahead of us. The car is parked about a block away, and the keys are burning a hole in my pocket.

But just before we reach the street, Julian steps around the corner at the alley’s exit, blocking our path with his gun drawn.

I skid to a halt, stopping so quickly that Hannah runs into my back. Julian’s eyes narrow, and I watch him put together what’s happening. He can clearly see Cody in Hannah’s arms, and the three of us are running away from the church. Fury flashes over his face, and he bares his teeth, aiming his weapon right at me.

“Put your fucking gun down,” he spits. “Now.”

My skin prickles, and I hear Hannah suck in a breath. I hesitate for a second, a dozen different scenarios running through my head. Can I shoot him before he shoots me? If he kills me, what will happen to Hannah and Cody?

Just live. Just live long enough to keep protecting them.

That’s the only thought in my head as I slowly lean down and set my gun on the hard pavement.

Still keeping his gun aimed at my chest, Julian flicks a glance at Hannah and Cody. “You ungrateful fucking cunt. After everything I’ve done for you? This is how you repay me? Cody, come here.”

His voice cracks like a whip on that final command, and the little boy squirms in his mother’s arms, obviously terrified of disobeying his father.

She sets him down but keeps a firm grip on his hand, keeping him from walking toward his dad.

“Wait. *Listen*,” I say, trying to keep my voice steady and even. “We didn’t plan any of this, okay? That shit going on in the church? That has nothing to do with us.”

And that’s mostly the truth. The part that *did* have to do with us never even got to happen. I can tell Julian is furious, and that the fight in the church has him riled up and bloodthirsty. I need to try to talk him down, to find some way to convince us to walk away from this.

I just don’t fucking know how.

“Oh? So you just thought you could use the opportunity to steal away my wife and son,” he spits.

“You already agreed to let Hannah go,” I insist, glancing sideways at my sister. I can see the tension in her body, and I know she’s as on edge as I am. Maybe if we can get Julian to step closer, we can attack him together. “I was just trying to keep them safe. To get them out of the church.”

“You expect me to believe that?” A sneer curls his lips. “I always thought Hannah was a handful, too mouthy and headstrong. But I guess I got the good sister. You should’ve stayed out of my business, bitch. I warned you once. I don’t give second chances.”

A second too late, I realize what he’s referring to. His warning that if he caught me interfering in his business, he’d kill me.

He meant it then.

And he means it now.

Fuck. No.

A hoarse noise gets trapped in my throat as he squeezes the trigger.

Hannah screams, moving at the same time Julian fires, shoving her shoulder into mine and knocking me sideways.

I stumble to one side as the bullet meant for me slams into her torso. It hits her so hard that it knocks her off her feet, and she falls to the pavement in a heap. My heart lurches violently, shocked horror rising inside me like bile, acidic and sickening.

Gunfire sounds from the part of the alley where Hannah and I emerged from the church, and a chunk of the church’s stone exterior explodes outward as a bullet hits it.

“River!” A deep voice shouts my name. One of the Kings, I think, but I can’t tell who.

“Fuck.” Julian curses as Cody lets out a plaintive wail. Before I can react, he darts forward and scoops up his son, then ducks around the corner onto the street and out of sight.

Footsteps pound behind me as the men rush to reach me. I can hear their raised voices, calling to each other that Julian is gone. Someone curses.

I’m barely conscious of any of that, though. Everything around me feels muted and hazy. Like it’s happening outside of a fishbowl or something, and I’m locked inside. I think someone says something to me, but I can barely hear it. It doesn’t register.

I drop to my knees on the ground, my heart slamming so hard against my ribs that I feel like it’s going to burst out and go rolling across the asphalt.

There’s a puddle of blood around Hannah, soaking into the fabric of her black dress, turning it heavy and impossibly darker. Her life blood seeping out, spilling onto the pavement where it’s not doing her any fucking good.

I pull her into my arms, not giving a shit about the blood. I try to put my hands on her wound, try to stop the bleeding, but there’s so much of it.

Her breathing is raspy and faint, and her eyes are a little unfocused when she looks at me.

“Hannah,” I say, and my voice cracks halfway through. “Please. It’s... you’re going to be okay. Just stay with me, okay? Please. You... you’ll be fine. It’ll be fine. *Please.*”

Her eyes close in a slow blink and then don’t open, and I shake her a little. “No. Don’t die on me. Please, don’t die. I just got you back, you can’t.”

I can hear the despair in my own voice. The desperation in my begging. Like I could stop this and somehow make things better if I just *want* it badly enough.

My sister opens her eyes again, and it looks like a struggle. They flutter open weakly, and she looks up at me. Her arm jerks a little, like she wants to lift her hand but doesn’t have the strength for it.

I grab her hand in mine, and even though mine are sticky with her blood now, I can tell her hand already feels cool and clammy.

Her lips move, and she whispers something, but I can’t tell what it is. The sound barely comes out, and it’s just air.

“What?” I ask, licking my lips. “I can’t—”

Hannah tugs at my hand, like she wants me to move closer, so I do, leaning all the way down. She squeezes my hand with the last bit of her strength. She draws another breath, and I can hear it rattling in her chest. I can tell how much it hurts her.

“... kill for you... live for you... d-die—”

“No.” I cut her off before she can finish. “No, Hannah. Fuck, no. Don’t do this. Please! You’re not gonna die. You’ll be okay. You’re not—”

Her eyes go blank, and her hand goes slack in mine. When I let go of it, it flops to the side of her body, just as still as the rest of her.

My heart stops.

Things are still happening around me. Vaguely, I’m aware of screams and sirens in the distance. The chaos of the attack still going on inside the church. The guys are somewhere, either close by... or maybe they chased after Julian. I don’t know.

I’m numb to anything other than my sister’s body in my arms, and all the sounds around me are muffled and indistinct. All I can hear is a single scream.

Someone is screaming, the sound thick with pain and loss.

Screaming.

Screaming.

And then I realize, it’s me.

The series will continue in [Reign of Wrath](#).

Want to talk about this book and lots of other books with an amaze-balls group of readers? Join my [Facebook group](#)!

BOOKS BY EVA ASHWOOD

Clearwater University
(college-age enemies to lovers series)

[Who Breaks First](#)

[Who Laughs Last](#)

[Who Falls Hardest](#)

The Dark Elite
(dark mafia romance)

[Vicious Kings](#)

[Ruthless Knights](#)

[Savage Queen](#)

Slateview High
(dark high school bully romance)

[Lost Boys](#)

[Wild Girl](#)

[Mad Love](#)

Sinners of Hawthorne University
(dark new adult romance)

[When Sinners Play](#)

[How Sinners Fight](#)

[What Sinners Love](#)

Black Rose Kisses
(dark new adult romance)

Fight Dirty.
Play Rough
Wreak Havoc
Love Hard

Dirty Broken Savages
(dark new adult/mafia romance)

Kings of Chaos
Queen of Anarchy.
Reign of Wrath
EoS - coming soon

(contemporary romance standalone)

Say Yes

Magic Blessed Academy
(paranormal academy series)

Gift of the Gods
Secret of the Gods
Wrath of the Gods