

EVA ASHWOOD



REIGN
OF
WRATH

— ♦ —
DIRTY BROKEN
SAVAGES

REIGN OF WRATH

DIRTY BROKEN SAVAGES #3

EVA ASHWOOD

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

To morally gray book boyfriends.

Thank you for raising our standards from “oh, flowers and chocolates are nice” to “bring me the heads of my enemies.”

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RIVER

THERE'S a weird pressure around my head.

It's like being underwater, everything muffled and muted. Numb.

I'm aware of vague sounds around me, penetrating my ears but then bouncing right back off. Screams in the distance, sirens. Raised voices and flashing lights.

There's chaos on the outside of my little bubble, but it's like none of it can reach me. None of it really sinks in. Anything could be happening. The church where Knox and Natalie were supposed to get married could be on fire, or there could be a gang war happening in the street, but it would be the same distant echoes as everything else.

All I can see, all I can focus on, is my sister's face. Blank and lifeless. As my mind tries to process the fact that she'll never open her eyes again, shock resonates through me.

Hannah's features are so similar to my own. We have the same nose, upturned a little at the tip. The same mouth, even though Hannah always had a dimple on the right side that would deepen when she smiled. When her eyes were open, they were the same dark blue as mine. The scattering of freckles across her nose and cheeks stand out starkly against the paleness of her face, and I swallow hard, trying to keep down the... *something* that wants to claw its way out of my throat.

Maybe it's another scream.

Maybe it's bile.

I don't know, and I'm not ready to find out.

Hannah's face used to be so full of life. It used to light up with her smiles and her laugh, her unwavering determination.

Her hair is light brown, almost a sandy blonde, instead of the silver of my hair, but even that seems lank and dead now.

Just like the rest of her.

Her face is slack, and there's nothing there anymore. No light, no spirit. Nothing.

She's gone.

Just thinking that makes pain burn through me. It's hot and intense, like being burned alive. It washes through my bones, through my soul, like it wants to consume every single part of me with the knowledge that I've lost my sister for real this time. There's nothing I can do to get her back.

I keep staring down at her, almost like I'm waiting for something to change. I'm rooted to the spot, shock and anger and hurt keeping me in place.

I don't know if I'm crying or not. I can't tell if my face is wet with sweat from running or if it's raining or what.

Hands grab me, trying to pull me away, and I instinctively jerk away from their grasp. I open my mouth to yell a firm and furious, "No," but no sound comes out. At least, I don't think it does. I don't want to leave my sister. I can't leave her dead in the middle of an alley, like she's just some other body to be tossed away. I won't.

Voices try to reach me through the haze, but I block them out.

A new hand closes around my arm, big and warm, and I snatch away from it, rearing back. More hands come down to try to get ahold of me, and I fight back, scratching and clawing, kicking away from the people trying to tear me away from my sister.

The voices get more and more insistent, but they're not making any sense. They may as well not even be there.

The hands manage to get me up to my feet, and I struggle to get away. Now that I'm standing, Hannah's body seems too far away, and something like panic hits me. A knowledge, sharp and terrifying, that if I leave her now, I really won't ever see her again.

That's just too much to handle. Too much to bear.

Arms wrap around me, pinning me to a broad, warm chest. My arms are trapped at my sides, making it harder to lash out and fight back.

That doesn't really stop me, though. I still yank against that hold, trying to get away. My heart races, and I can hear my own harsh breathing reverberating through my ears.

I don't take my eyes off Hannah. I just want to get back to her. I just want to hold her. I need to. I need—

A face comes into focus in front of me, and I have to blink a few times to recognize it as Ash's face. He looks grim, and there's dirt and grime and blood streaked across his face. His glasses are a little askew, a streak running across one lens, and his chocolate brown hair looks as wild and unkempt as the rest of him.

I can tell he's tired, worn down, and he reaches out for me, putting a hand on my shoulder. His mouth moves, but I don't hear him at first. I can almost read his lips though, making out the shape of what he's saying.

My name.

“River.”

That pulls me back, and I shake my head, trying to clear it. The little bubble of shock and numbness to the outside world is threatening to pop with each passing second, leaving a ringing in my ears and a searing pain in my heart.

“We have to go,” Ash is saying. “River, listen to me. Please. She's gone. There's nothing we can do. The cops are on the way, and we have to move.”

His words pop the bubble a little more, leaving me with more attention for what's going on. The scream of the sirens is getting louder in the distance, and I can hear the squeal of tires as the other guests at this shit show of a wedding peel out of the church parking lot themselves.

I can still hear my own breathing, loud and labored, but everything else is in much clearer focus now. The gunshots have stopped, and the church itself seems almost eerily quiet after the chaos that erupted inside.

Julian is long gone by now, escaped with Cody to who the fuck knows where. Natalie probably got away with him. Some of the guests are dead or hurt, but probably a good number of them got away as well.

A deep voice rumbles through me, coming from the man with his arms around me, keeping me pinned in place. I recognize the voice and then the arms as Knox's in quick succession.

“Yeah,” he says grimly. “We gotta fucking go. We killed a bunch of those cartel fuckers, and we don't want the cops tracing any of this shit back to us.”

Even with everything going on and the turmoil in my head and my heart, I recognize the truth of his words. The four men surrounding me

aren't strangers or enemies, trying to tear me away from my sister to hurt me or punish me, and us being here is dangerous.

I stop struggling and drag in a deep, painful breath.

"Good girl," I hear, and I can feel that Gage is close by too. Knox practically lifts me up off my feet and carries me to the car—the one we were going to use to get away from this when the plan was still a thing that mattered at all.

That feels like ages ago now.

Another fucking lifetime.

They put me in the middle of the back seat and climb in on either side of me. Once the car starts, we peel out, racing away from the church and the mess there.

"Well, that was a fucking shit show," Ash grunts beside me, sighing and slumping down in his seat. He leans his head back against the headrest and makes a face as he pulls off his glasses and attempts to clean the smudged lens.

His tone is flippant, as usual, but I can hear the tension under it.

"Understatement," Priest bites out. I can't see him where he sits in the front passenger seat, but he has that same tension and anger in his voice as well. "I don't think it could have gone worse."

Gage glances over at him, and Priest nods at something unspoken that passes between them. At a different time, I might have tried to figure out what they were saying to each other with that look, but now I can't even be bothered.

"Do you think we got them all?" Ash asks. "I took out a couple of those fuckers, but there were a lot of them."

"There's no way to know," Gage replies, and I can tell he's grinding his teeth in irritation while he drives. He glances in the rearview mirror, and his green eyes are bright with fury. His strong features look even harsher and more sharp than usual. "That was fucking chaos. There could be more of them that didn't show up to the church or some that got away. We won't know until..."

He trails off, and no one really needs him to finish that sentence.

Until they either try again, or they don't.

"Let them fucking try," Knox says, cracking his knuckles. "If they come after us a second time, they'll wish they'd stayed in whatever hole they crawled out of."

“We have to tighten things up,” Gage fires back. “We have no way of knowing what they’ll do, and we didn’t see their first attack coming. That was a mistake we can’t afford to repeat. We can’t let our goddamn guard down again.”

That raises the tension in the car even more, and Priest lets out a controlled breath that seems loud in the sudden quiet.

I can hear everything they’re saying, and I’m aware of the danger and the tension and how pissed they all are that this happened in the first fucking place. But I can’t *feel* any of those emotions with them.

It’s like my whole body is numb, and the shit with the cartel might as well have happened to someone else for how distant it seems in this moment. I stare blankly ahead, watching the city of Detroit pass us by through the windshield, but I don’t really see much of it. The buildings and headlights and exit signs are all a blur, and I don’t know if it takes us fifteen minutes or fifteen days to get back to the guys’ house. Time slides by like molasses, and none of it makes a difference.

Someone touches my arm at some point, sliding a warm, sure hand down from my shoulder to my bicep, and I barely feel it until suddenly pain explodes through the haze I’m floating in. I wince, cursing under my breath.

Ash frowns and pulls my jacket back enough to expose my arm. Blood has soaked into the sleeve, and I didn’t even notice. It didn’t even hurt before Ash touched it, but now there’s a dull, throbbing ache, but even that isn’t as sharp as it should be.

“What happened?” he asks, frowning.

I shake my head. I don’t know. I don’t remember. So much was happening in the church, and everything before Hannah—

Everything before the alley just feels like a blur.

“Shit,” Ash mutters. He presses gently at the edges of the wound. “Just tagged, I think. But you’re losing too much blood.”

Maybe that’s why I feel so hazy. Maybe it’s the blood loss and not the growing realization of just how badly this all went down.

Ash puts pressure on the wound, trying to keep it from bleeding more, but I can’t really feel that either.

Gage hits the gas, weaving in and out of traffic to get us back to the house. No one calls him out on it or comments on his wild driving at all, and we make it to the driveway in what’s probably record time.

“Inside,” Gage bites out, and the four of them move like a well-oiled machine. Ash and Knox cover me, flanking me on either side. Dimly, I realize they’re making sure that if someone is waiting to leap out of the bushes and take me down, whoever it is will have to go through them first.

Gage and Priest get to the door before us and unlock it, and we all make it inside without incident. I just let them guide me along. Their hands feel warm and comforting and safe, and they take me up the stairs to my bedroom.

Without them, I’d probably still be standing outside, staring blankly into the middle distance, not knowing what to do next.

But the four of them leap into action so I don’t even have to think about it.

Hands start undressing me, helping me out of my outfit from the wedding. I let them do it, lifting my arms when they urge me to and stepping out of my shoes and pants. They touch me like I’m something precious, running their fingers over my face and down my good arm.

They all look tired. Gage and Knox and Priest all have the same grime and blood smeared on them that Ash did. Their suits are dirty and rumpled, and there’s none of the confident poise from before the wedding.

Someone puts their hand at the small of my back, and I go where they guide me.

We end up crammed inside the bathroom, all five of us. I can hear the guys murmuring to each other, talking in low voices, but I can’t focus on what they’re saying.

“Hey.” The deep rumble of Knox’s voice cuts through the haze for just a bit. “Sit here, okay? Let me look at your arm.”

He pushes down the lid on the toilet, and I sit on it obediently. I can’t really feel the blood on my arm, but I can see it, stark and red against my skin and the white of the bathroom tiles where it drips down my arm to the floor.

Knox moves with the precision that always seems so surprising for someone his size. He cleans the blood away and disinfects the wound, his inked hands dextrous and efficient. Part of my brain thinks to brace for the sting of the antiseptic, but I barely even feel it, so I don’t flinch.

I also barely feel the needle when Knox threads it through my skin, stitching up the wound on my arm. There’s more blood on the floor and on

my arm, and I stare at it with no real feeling. It's almost like it belongs to someone else.

"River."

I hear my name again, and I blink, trying to look to see which one of them is calling me. Ash leans in, squatting down in front of me.

"Are you with us?" he asks.

Am I? It's a good question. I don't even really know.

"Are you okay?" he tries again.

I open my mouth, but at first, nothing comes out. My throat feels dry and tight, and the words feel locked down deep, somewhere I can't access them. I swallow hard and try again.

"I'm fine."

It comes out thick and raspy, and probably not convincing at all, but it's all I've got.

Clenching my jaw, I take a deep breath and then another one, trying to force back the cloud in my brain. I can't let this drag me under. All my life, I've been able to shake off the pain and the hopelessness and keep going, powering through by sheer force of will.

I don't want to have to think about that alley and what happened there.

I don't want it to be real.

If I give in to these feelings, let them consume me, then I won't be able to hide from it anymore. I'll have to face it.

"I'm fine," I say again, stronger this time. At least, I hope it is.

Ash still looks worried. He reaches up and strokes a hand through my silver hair, not getting in the way of Knox's quiet stitching.

The others are still there, leaning against the wall and lurking in the doorway. No one seems to know what to say. Or maybe there just isn't anything worth saying in this moment.

"Okay," Knox murmurs after a few more seconds, and his voice is quieter than I've ever heard it before. He pulls the last stitch taut, and aside from the tugging at my skin, I'm barely aware of him finishing up his work on my wound.

He steps back, looking down at me, and the downturn of his full lips gives away his worry. His dark brown irises appear almost black as he narrows his eyes, never tearing his focus away from me.

I feel like I have to do something to reassure them that I'm alright. That they don't need to hover and worry. So I move to stand up, bracing myself a

little on the sink to help me get my balance.

It doesn't help.

As soon as I'm vertical, there's a rush to my head, and my vision swims. Dark spots cover my eyes, and before I can try to blink them away, they grow and grow until the darkness is consuming me.

Then it takes over entirely, stealing away my consciousness.

PRIEST

“FUCK,” Knox grunts as River’s legs give out.

It’s a good fucking thing he’s right there beside her, because he manages to catch her before she can hit the floor.

Or hit her head on the sink or something.

He hefts her up into his arms bridal style, and she looks so small there. She’s down to just her underwear since we undressed her, and her skin looks pale. Maybe from the blood loss, maybe from... everything else.

Her silver hair hangs down in a shimmering cascade, and her limbs dangle. If it weren’t for the fact that her chest is clearly rising and falling with her breath, it would be easy to think she was...

No.

I shake my head, not even wanting to entertain that thought for a second.

She looks so small and so vulnerable like this. Like a delicate bird that flew into a window, battered and injured. There’s still dried blood on her, and the same grime and dirt and sweat that the rest of us are streaked with after the fight in the church.

Knox has a hold on her, and I know he’d fight to the death if someone tried to take her away, but he looks lost, like he has no idea what to do in this situation. I can’t blame him for that. He looks to us for guidance, and Gage steps up.

“Put her on the bed,” he says, his voice strained.

Knox nods and carries her back into her room, laying her down gently on the bed. He treats her like she’s something precious, something that

might break if he handles her too harshly, which is different from how he usually is with her.

He's worried.

We all are.

He looks at her arm, checking the stitches, and Gage moves in to help him check her over.

"We didn't miss anything, did we?" Knox asks, scrubbing a hand over his neck. He lost his suit jacket somewhere along the way, and he's rolled up his sleeves over his forearms, revealing the tattoos that cover his skin.

But there's nothing. No hidden, terrible wounds that we didn't notice in our first check. Nothing that explains why she passed out so suddenly like that. Aside from the shock and the blood loss—but those are harder to fix.

She's mostly okay physically, aside from the bullet wound and a few scrapes and cuts here and there from the fight.

Gage lets out a relieved breath, and Ash leans heavily against the wall. Her being physically okay is good, since it means that we don't have to rush her somewhere for more advanced medical attention than just a few stitches, but it doesn't necessarily mean much for the long run.

I know that better than almost anyone.

There are scars and wounds that will never show, that never leave a physical mark at all, but those injuries to the soul can be just as debilitating as being stabbed or shot.

"What do we do?" Knox asks.

He looks down at River's sleeping form, flexing his hands in a motion I recognize as him wanting something to distract from his worry for her. He wants to hit something or break someone, but there's nothing to rail against right now.

"We should let her sleep." Ash answers before Gage can speak. "She's probably exhausted."

We all nod and file out of her room, closing the door gently behind us.

By the usual unspoken agreement, we head downstairs and gather in the kitchen.

It's evening now, closing in on dinnertime, but I don't have an appetite. No one else makes any move to find something to eat either, even though the last meal we had was lunch, and that feels like days ago now.

Knox sits at the kitchen table, still flexing his fingers in what's probably a soothing motion for him. He stares off into the distance for a bit and then

presses his palm down on the table.

“Well, fuck,” he says. “That went all to hell, didn’t it?”

His words are almost flippant, the usual devil-may-care tone he takes when it comes to serious shit. But there’s a gleam in his eyes and a tension in his shoulders that tells me he’s serious. Our plan got fucked, and Knox knows how bad it is.

“Fuck,” Gage grinds out, pacing the kitchen floor. “It was a fucking mess from start to finish. We should have known. We should have planned for this.”

“Planned for the plan to go wrong?” Ash asks, lifting an eyebrow as his amber eyes glint behind his glasses. He sounds tired too, but there’s agitation in his body. He’s got a coin in his hand, turning it over and over and over again between his fingers like he can’t be still.

I can feel the same agitation I see in Knox and Ash in my own body.

The anger, the *fury* that someone hurt River.

“It must have been the cartel that sent the fucker who tried to shoot River the other day too,” I put in, shaking my head. “Their assassin didn’t succeed in killing her, so they picked a different location and ambushed her. Ambushed us.”

“Fuck.” Gage curses again, the scar on his lip curving as he scowls.

“There was no way we could have accounted for the fucking cartel,” Ash says. “We didn’t even consider them.”

“They were in our blind spot,” Knox replies, running a hand through his shaggy dark hair.

He’s right. I was there with River after she accidentally took out the leader of the Cartel, Diego. I killed the three members of their rank who threatened her after they chased her down. I should have remembered they would be a threat.

But there was too much going on. Too many other things to focus on.

We had a blind spot, and it almost got all of us killed.

“Could it have been the cartel that put Ivan’s body on display?” I throw out, wondering if it’s all connected somehow, and what else we might have missed.

Gage considers that, then shakes his head. “I doubt it. It doesn’t make enough sense. Ivan’s body being hacked up and placed on that art piece at the gala was subtle. It sent a message, but it doesn’t track with the way the

cartel came into the church with guns blazing. They wanted something big and loud and showy.”

I curl my hand into a fist at my side. I feel... on edge. Like all the control I usually have in spades is slipping out of my grasp.

“I didn’t realize the cartel had managed to connect River to Diego’s death,” I tell them. “But they clearly did.”

“Yeah,” Gage echoes. He rubs at his face and finally stops pacing. “I’d ask her if more cartel fuckers saw her after that incident when she tried to kill Ivan, but...”

He gestures helplessly with one hand, and we all know what he means.

Right now, River has bigger issues than the cartel. They want her dead, but she’s struggling to even be present. Struggling to keep her spirit alive.

“I hate seeing her like that,” Ash murmurs. “So fucked up and out of it. It was like she barely knew who we were.”

“She got there,” Knox cuts in. “She stopped fighting once she realized it was us.”

“But then she was just blank. Unresponsive. I had to say her name a few times before she even realized I was talking to her.”

“Yeah.”

Knox stares down at the table, his nostrils flaring as his jaw clenches. It must be hard for him to know he can’t kill or maim someone to make this go away for her. None of us are all that skilled at dealing with emotions. We don’t know what to say or how to act to make things better, and considering what just happened to River, it might be a while before she can surface through all that pain.

Ash looks to me, and there’s something hesitant in his gaze at first. Then he takes a breath, clearly deciding to just go for it.

“How did you survive?” he asks. “After Jade.”

My stomach tightens immediately. Normally, the other Kings of Chaos don’t mention Jade around me. It’s just sort of an unspoken agreement that they don’t bring that shit up or poke at the old wounds. We all do it for each other, not dragging up crap from the past that can only hurt to think about in the present.

But I know why Ash is asking about her now.

I think about how to answer him, and I realize I’m not really sure. Jade was the only woman I’d ever loved as a young man, and watching her be

burned to death by a vicious gang to teach me a lesson ripped out a part of my soul.

It was a dark time for me, and there were so many times that I almost slipped away into that darkness, losing myself to the pain. It definitely seemed easier sometimes—easier to give myself over to it than to keep fighting.

Most of what I remember from back then is a void. The dark nothing where Jade used to be.

Even thinking about it now makes the ragged edges of that wound ache. It's healed a little, enough that it's not always fresh and gaping, throbbing with trauma and pain the way it used to constantly, but I know that it's always going to hurt.

It'll never be fully healed.

Most likely, it'll be the same for River. She was on her mission to kill the six men on her list because of what they did to her and her sister, and even years after it happened, she still wanted revenge because the pain was still there.

Now there's this new wound layered on top of that, and it will just compound the whole fucking thing.

Something in me aches for her, and I try to think of a useful answer to Ash's question, because I know we'll need to have some kind of a plan to help River in the days to come. We need to do something so that we don't lose her to the darkness.

Bracing myself, I open up the dead, closed-off part of my heart, allowing myself to experience that old pain almost like it's new.

As I do, I remember how all-encompassing it felt. How it made it hard to see anything else. It blocked out my vision, my happy memories, making it so all I could feel was the loss. And every time I was alone, with nothing else to do and no outlet for my energy, it crept in a little more, trying to take me down with it.

I remember that very well.

There was always something that pulled me back from the brink of total ruin, though. Something else I could focus on, something that gave me the kind of purpose I needed to keep moving.

And when I think about it now, I realize what it was.

I had *them*.

My brothers.

In the immediate aftermath of Jade's death, I had Knox by my side. He was the one who helped me get my revenge on the men who had killed her. And not long after that, we fell in with Ash and Gage.

If I hadn't had the other Kings in my life, I wouldn't have made it back out of my darkness. I know that for a fact.

"It was you," I tell Ash, glancing up at him. "All of you."

Ash frowns, furrowing his brow in confusion. "But we didn't really do anything. Gage and I didn't, anyway."

"You didn't have to do anything," I tell him. "You were just... there." I look at all of them in turn. "You were there for me, and I knew you always would be, and that was enough to keep me from losing myself completely. That's what we have to do for River. Hollow words and trying to fix her aren't going to help. She's hurting, and it's a kind of pain we can't even touch. We just have to make sure she knows that we're here for her. No matter what."

They all nod, and it's clear that my words have taken away a little of their worry. At least enough that they can see a way forward.

Ash looks determined, like he's never going to let River know loneliness another day in her life.

Gage looks furious, like he wants to find the cartel members and Julian and everyone who ever laid a hand on her and make them wish they were never born.

Knox has that look on his face as if he's mentally going through his list of "toys" and planning ways to use them on anyone who hurts River.

It helps to see them all so protective of her. I can feel the same urge to take care of her burning in my own chest. I won't allow her to ever suffer the way Jade suffered, and knowing my brothers will have my back in that goal eases the tight knot in my stomach.

I still feel uneasy, though. Still on edge and unsure of what to do about it.

River is just upstairs, but she seems far away. The fact that I can't see her just adds to the agitation in my chest and the unsettled feeling spreading out to my limbs.

The house is secure, and anyone who broke in to try to hurt her would be in for a rude fucking awakening, but still.

I want to be near her.

I need to be able to see that she's okay.

So I slip out of the kitchen while the others are talking and go back upstairs.

Her room is growing darker as evening turns closer to true night, and she's right where we left her on her bed. She's shifted a little in her sleep, curled up on one side, almost in the fetal position.

I can only imagine how tired she must be after everything that happened today. It was supposed to be a triumph, this plan. It was supposed to end with her sister and her sister's little boy free of Julian.

Instead, there's just death hanging over everything like a shadow, and the shattered remnants of River's heart to put back together.

I watch her for a little while, taking in the matted mess of her hair and the way the light from the streetlights outside cast shadows on her skin, making her tattoos look almost like wounds in the darkness.

She huffs out a small breath, and I finally cross to the bed. I toe my shoes off and lie down with her, and something in me settles a bit just from being close to her.

River needs her rest, so I won't disturb her. But I hope she can feel that she's not alone, that she's safe and I'm here for her, no matter what.

We all are.

RIVER

JULIAN STANDS at the mouth of the alley outside the church, fury and frustration on his face. It's stark and harsh, twisting his features into a mask that makes him look even more like a villain than I already think he is.

The sounds of the fighting in the church are loud, but they seem very far away. Like they're echoing down the alley from a distance, the noise growing tinny and distorted by the time it reaches my ears.

Everything stands out in vivid detail. The sunlight is harsh, even though the alley is shaded a bit by the buildings on either side of it. Hannah's breathing is loud in my ear, and I can feel her panting from the mad dash out of the church.

I can tell it's a dream.

A nightmare.

Some dreams are more muted, hazy, with an almost mist over them, but this is nothing like that. This is like being right back there in that alley, watching it all go down again, the same as I did the first time.

I stand there, Hannah at my back, her son behind her, and I tell Julian that Hannah is my sister, and her business is my business, no matter what he wants to think about it.

He wants to shoot me.

I can see it even clearer in this nightmare than I did when it happened in real life. That rage, that hate. He wishes he'd shot me when I was in his basement, so he could have avoided all of this shit. But it's even worse now because he thought he was going to get something out of our bargain—a connection to the Kings of Chaos by marriage—and I'm here trying to take it all away from him.

Julian pulls the trigger.

Time seems to slow down.

I watch the gun fire, the recoil making his arm jerk back just a slight bit. It's a good shot, all things considered. The bullet flies through the air, heading right for me, right for my heart.

But then I feel Hannah move. She dives in front of me, intercepting the bullet before it can find its intended mark.

It hits her hard, and she goes down even harder, blood already blooming on the fabric of her dress and pooling to stain the pavement where she lands.

Julian curses violently.

I go down to my knees at Hannah's side, ignoring Julian when he lunges forward to grab Cody and book it the fuck out of there. That's not the part I care about.

I care about the pain on Hannah's face, the dimness of the light in her eyes. The way she trembles with the loss of blood and life.

It's just a nightmare, but it feels so real, and the pain of losing her lances through my heart like a knife.

There's blood on me, blood in her sandy hair, and her dark blue eyes start to lose some of their light and color, almost like it's draining out of her along with everything else.

I watch Hannah try to reach for me, and her hand trembles and loses momentum halfway through, all the strength gone from her body.

No.

The thought hits me with the force of a freight train.

No. Not this time.

If it's a dream, then it's all in my head. And if it's all in my head, then I can do something about it. I can change it. I can rewrite the rules.

I close my eyes and take a deep breath, trying to breathe past the ragged hole of loss and grief in my chest.

"No," I whisper, almost like I'm using the sheer force of my will to rewind time and make things different. "Not like this. Please, not like this."

The weight of Hannah's body disappears from my lap, and when I open my eyes, things have shifted. It's like I'm in my body but also outside of it, watching Hannah, Cody, and myself come running into the alley.

I can feel my lungs burning like I'm also doing the running, but being outside of myself lets me pull more strings. I reach down and grab Hannah's

hand, pulling her more firmly behind me this time.

Julian still sees her, and the fury cuts across his face like a vicious mask just like it did before. He still pulls his gun and aims it right for me.

My mind races. If he shoots me and Hannah doesn't get in the way, what will happen then? I'd give my life for my sister in a heartbeat, so I don't even flinch when Julian fires this time.

I just tighten my grip on Hannah's arm, trying to keep her in place.

But it doesn't work. She shoves me to the side hard, and I stumble, letting go of her hand for a split second. That's all the time it takes for her to take the bullet for me again, going down in the same heap as before.

"No!" I shout. "No. This isn't right."

"You should have stayed out of it!" Julian screams. He runs in and grabs Cody. He doesn't spare a look for Hannah as he escapes the alley.

My chest goes tight as I stand there, watching Hannah die for the third time.

No, goddammit.

There has to be a way.

There has to be something I can do to keep this from happening.

Once more, I force time back, this time a little bit farther. Before we come bursting out of the church. The alley is empty, and I realize I don't know what Julian was doing before we got there.

Was he waiting for us? Was he trying to make his own escape?

There's nothing to fill that in with, so as soon as we come pelting into the alley, Julian appears at the mouth of it. He catches sight of us, and his face twists with that familiar anger, the same as all the other times.

We argue, and he fires.

I try to yank Hannah back when she runs forward, but this time she just spins and holds onto me in a hug, her back to Julian as the bullet hits her right between the shoulder blades.

This one is so, so much worse because I can feel it when she jerks in pain. I can hear the labored rattle of her breath and see the pain and anguish in her eyes before she goes down to the ground.

Something warm and wet rolls down my cheek, and I realize I'm crying.

Seeing this over and over again is like ripping away more and more parts of my heart, but I can't stop. The thought that there's something I could do to stop this from happening or fix it consumes me, and I can't accept that it won't work.

I force time back time and time again.

I keep pushing, keep trying, but it doesn't help.

I try attacking Julian, knocking him back before he has a chance to shoot at me, but the bullet just goes wide and ends up hitting Hannah anyway.

I try putting Cody in the front, thinking that Julian won't shoot if his son is on the line. But Hannah jumps in front of her son, and that makes Julian shoot all the same.

I push Hannah out of the way, knocking her down before the gun goes off, but somehow she still ends up in the way.

Three, four, five, six, seven times. Seven times, I watch my sister bleed out in the alley. Watch her blood pool under her body. Hear that whispered promise we made to each other years and years ago.

"Kill for you, live for you, die for you."

It's like the first time each time, only with a new layer of agony, because I don't understand why this isn't working.

Why I can't save her.

Nothing works, and each time I watch her go down, it's that much harder. I feel frantic, crying uncontrollably now, trying to drag in deep breaths through my mouth, even though it just makes the stabbing pain in my chest hurt even worse.

"Hannah. Please." I choke the words out, and they come out raspy and broken. They also make no difference.

Her body is cold.

Her spirit is gone.

There's nothing left of her here.

My eyes pop open, and I glance around the dark room wildly for a second. I'm awake, out of the nightmare...

But that's not right, is it?

I'm still living the nightmare, because what happened in my dream is true. Hannah is dead, and there's nothing I can do to bring her back.

I feel so numb. Dead inside.

My heart is still beating, and I'm still breathing in and out, but I may as well have died in that alley with my sister.

I don't remember lying down to go to sleep, and I'm still in my underwear from when the guys undressed me earlier. Everything after that

is kind of a blurry mess, and it makes my head hurt to try to think about it too hard.

So I stop.

Someone shifts in the bed behind me, and I turn over and realize Priest is sleeping with me. His face is unlined and more relaxed than usual in his sleep, and there was a time when I would have reached for him or cuddled up and tried to take comfort in his presence and warmth.

But now I'm barely aware of him. If I hadn't felt him move, I might not have even realized he was there. The connection between us feels thin and muted, just like everything else.

I just lie there, staring at the ceiling for what could be minutes or hours. Time doesn't even matter.

Eventually, the numb blankness shifts to a restlessness that I can't ignore. It feels like something is pressing down on me, making it hard to breathe. It makes me feel like I'm going to crawl out of my skin, and the closest thing I can compare it to is the feeling I had after I killed Ivan and the pain didn't go away.

Lying here in the dark feels wrong somehow.

It feels like I shouldn't be here.

Like I can't be here.

I can't do this.

I know if I try to go back to sleep, I'm just going to see Hannah die all over again, and the thought of that makes bile churn in my stomach. I can't do that again. I don't want to.

But I also can't just lie here. It feels like I'm going to lose my mind if I try to do that. So I get up silently, careful not to wake Priest. He needs the sleep, and I don't want him to try to stop me.

I go to my dresser and grab the first clothes I find, not even paying attention to what they are at first.

A skirt, a shirt, some shoes.

Anything that covers me enough that I can leave.

It's late as fuck, but I'm not sure exactly what time it is. The house is quiet and dark, and I guess everyone's in bed, asleep. Even the dog isn't stirring as I creep down the stairs and into the living room.

It's too quiet, too dark, just like my thoughts.

Dog does look up when I pass by where he's curled up on the couch, a small whine escaping him.

“Hush,” I whisper, shaking my head.

He lies back down, but I can feel his eyes on me as I head for the front door.

I slip outside and start walking down the sidewalk. It feels almost like I’m still in a dream. Like the world around me is hazy and distorted, and none of it is real.

I can’t feel anything.

The trees rustle with a passing breeze, but I don’t feel it on my skin. It lifts my hair a bit, but I don’t feel that either. My feet move down the street, carrying me past the fancy-ass houses in this neighborhood, but I don’t really see them.

For so long, I called myself Ghost, but now I really feel like one. Like I’m drifting between the realms of being alive and being dead, cursed to wander forever because I fucked up the one thing I promised I would do.

I don’t even know where I’m going, and I don’t even really care. I just keep walking, letting my feet carry me out of the guys’ neighborhood and down the road.

The streets are mostly empty at this time of night, and it’s quiet except for the occasional passing car or the rustle of the leaves in the trees.

That starts to change a little when my surroundings do. I walk and walk until I hit a shittier part of town, and it’s much more alive and awake here.

It makes sense that all the respectable people are in bed, while the criminals and thugs and lowlifes are all up and about.

“Hey.”

A rasped voice cuts into the haze of my thoughts, and I turn my head to see a man in torn and dirty clothes coming over to me. I think maybe he has a beard, but I can’t really focus on him at all.

“You got any change, girlie?” he asks me, and I reach into the pocket of my skirt and pull out a couple coins I find there, passing them to him without even really thinking about it at all.

Two women walk down the street in high heels, and one of them laughs at something the other one says.

For some reason, that sparks a memory in my head of the way Hannah used to laugh. She was quieter than me a lot of the time, but her laugh was always loud and bright. I used to think that she laughed with her whole spirit, the joy spilling out of her because it couldn’t be contained.

I think about the way she would carefully dissect her sandwiches and eat them in pieces. Layer by layer, bread, meat, cheese, bread. I used to give her shit for it, teasing her about eating like a fussy old lady, and she'd give me shit right back, calling me an animal for eating all the ingredients at once.

I think about her brushing her hair out, and the way she'd braid it at night, hoping in the morning when she took the braids out there would be luscious waves in her sandy brown hair, like the women we saw on TV. It worked for about an hour, before her terminally straight hair went back to its natural state.

I remember telling her that half the girls we knew with curly hair wished they had hair as straight as hers, and she teased me for trying to give her a "the grass is always greener" speech. In the end it made her smile though, so that was good enough for me.

I remember the first time she tried to cook dinner, and how she set a towel on fire and we dumped it in the sink, and then buried it out in the postage stamp of a backyard we had then, making sure our dad would never find out.

Even though the kitchen still smelled like burnt shit when he came home, he didn't say anything.

There are so fucking many memories. From when we were younger, growing up together and inseparable, to when we were taken by those men and used as a way for our dad to atone for his stupidity. I see Hannah's face in my mind over and over, happy and sad and angry and scared. I see her standing up for me when some kid at school called me a bitch, and I see her crying when some idiot broke her heart.

I want to feel something as they all run through my mind. Happiness at remembering the good times or even sadness that I'll never see her destroy a sandwich again.

Anything.

But there's nothing. It's like I'm watching a slide show from someone else's life, standing behind a wall of glass and watching it all play out.

I'm broken.

I've always kind of wondered if I was broken before, but I had shit to do and no time to really think about it too much. But now I know. Now I really am. I'm not sure how to live anymore, and honestly, I'm not even sure if I want to.

Hannah is—was—my reason.

Even when I thought she was dead the first time, I kept going because I wanted to avenge her.

Losing her again after getting her back? I don't know how to resurface after that. I don't know how to keep myself from drowning in the darkness and numb silence, and it's hard to come up with reasons why I should try.

A neon sign catches my attention, breaking through the loop of memories as I walk by what looks like a shitty dive bar.

There are a few people hanging out outside, leaning against the side of the building smoking cigarettes.

They eye me as I walk in, but I don't pay them any attention, just walking inside and going up to the bar, still numb all over.

"Get you something?" the bartender asks. He's tall and broad, but that's about all I notice before I stop caring.

"Whiskey," I manage to tell him. My tongue feels thick and clumsy in my mouth. The word feels weird, like even talking has become too hard to do.

He just nods and gets a bottle down from the shelf behind him, slopping a generous measure into a glass before shoving it in my direction.

I wrap my hands around it and knock back the drink in one motion. It barely burns going down, just a slight warmth that settles in my stomach when I'm finished.

If the bartender thinks there's something wrong, he doesn't ask. Just lifts the bottle and raises an eyebrow.

I nod, and he pours again.

I drink the next drink just as quickly, not even tasting it. I don't know if it's good whiskey or drain cleaner shit, and I don't care.

Someone else comes into the bar, stealing the bartender's attention for a second, and when he looks back to me, I push the glass toward him and meet his eyes.

"Another."

GAGE

MY EYES SNAP OPEN, and I sit up with a feeling of sudden urgency.

It's dark in my room, and the house sounds quiet, but my body feels tense, like all my muscles are ready to leap into action at once.

I don't know what woke me up, since there's no sound in my room except for the usual house settling noises and the crickets and shit outside. The house is quiet beyond my door too, so everyone else is probably asleep. I can't remember if I was dreaming or not, but I'm wide awake now, as if something shook me out of my sleep.

With a sigh, I scrub my hand over my face and sit up in bed, letting the covers pool around my waist. My pack of cigarettes is on the nightstand, and I grab one, lighting it with a practiced flick of my thumb.

I rest my forearms on my thighs and inhale the smoke, letting it linger in my mouth and my throat for a bit before blowing it all out in a rush.

It's a calming ritual, breathing in and out, and I let it settle me down from whatever woke me up.

It's sometime late as fuck at night, and I know I haven't been asleep for more than a few hours since I laid down. But I'm wide awake now.

My mind goes immediately to the last thing it was on before I fell asleep, and it's no surprise that it's River. It's been like that for a while now, if I'm being honest. It's hard not to think about her and the impact she's made on our lives, but especially now, she's on my mind.

I'm worried as hell about her.

I've never seen her like she was when we got back from the church, so blank and empty. Like all the fight and the fire had been drained out of her, and the part of her that was all spark and sass died when her sister did.

I haven't known her all that long, which is strange to think about, considering how well I feel like I know her now. She's made a space for herself in our home, our little family, and she fits right in.

She's in a fucked up place, that's for damn sure. No one can blame her for that. Getting her sister back only to have her taken away on the same day she was supposed to get free is a shitty fucking twist of fate, and I have no idea how to help her.

Priest said to just be there and make sure she knows she's not alone, so I guess that's what we'll have to do. It feels like there should be something else, something more I can do to fix it, but I know it doesn't work like that.

No matter how much I wish it fucking did.

There's an ashtray on my nightstand, and I stub the remains of my cigarette out on it, then get out of bed. My shirt is in a crumpled heap on the floor, and my sweats hang low on my hips as I head for the hall.

River's room is just a few doors down, and I walk quietly, not wanting to wake any of the others just because I can't sleep.

I know Priest is in River's room, but I want to be near her too, almost like seeing her sleeping—hopefully somewhat peacefully—will soothe me back to sleep as well. And if she's having trouble sleeping, then at least maybe me being there will help her. Let her know she's not alone in the dark.

Her door is cracked open a bit, and I push it open the rest of the way and peer into the room. The bed is rumped, and there's enough light falling into the room from the combination of the moon and the streetlights to see that there's only one sleeping shape on the bed.

Considering it's tall and broad, I know it's not River.

My chest tightens.

What the fuck?

“Priest.”

I say his name out loud, at full volume, and Priest wakes up immediately, sitting up in bed. His usually light colored blue eyes are shadowed by the darkness in the room, and the longer parts of his blond hair are tousled from being asleep. He has creases on his cheek from the pillow, and he's still in his clothes from earlier.

“Where's River?” I ask him, hoping like hell he has an answer for me.

Priest looks to the side of the bed we laid River on when she passed out and then back to me. I can tell from the expression on his face that he

doesn't know, and something drops into my stomach like a lead weight.

Dread. Worry. Fear.

Maybe some cocktail of all three.

She's not here.

"Fuck," Priest mutters, dragging a hand down his face.

Then he leaps up and comes around the bed, passing me so he can step into the hall. I go with him, and we make an unspoken plan to search the house, starting with the bedrooms.

Priest goes to peer into Knox's room, to see if she maybe went to curl up with the tattooed teddy bear if she couldn't sleep or something, and I crack Ash's door open to check the same thing.

I'm not really trying to be quiet at this point, spurred on by the worry churning through my gut. I'm more concerned with making sure River's here in the house somewhere and okay than making sure my brothers don't get woken up.

They'll forgive me for it, and if River is alright, we can all go back to sleep eventually.

Ash is alone in his bed, and he yawns and rubs at his eyes when the sound from me stepping inside wakes him up. He's a light sleeper for the most part, and he sits up, squinting through the darkness without his glasses on.

"What's going on?" he mumbles, fumbling in the direction of the nightstand at the side of the bed for his glasses. "Jesus, Gage. People generally like to sleep at this time of night."

"River's missing," I tell him shortly, ignoring the sass and getting right to the point.

"She's—? *Fuck.*"

Ash curses with feeling and pulls himself out of bed, shoving his glasses on his face as he goes.

In the hall, Priest has clearly had a similar conversation with Knox, because he's standing there too, his dark brows furrowed and his arms crossed.

"What the fuck do you mean, she's *gone*?" he demands, glaring at Priest like that's going to make some more answers magically appear.

Priest gives him a flat look. "We have to search the rest of the house."

Even though his voice is steady as usual, I can sense the agitation there—the worry that she won't be here, that something happened to her while

we were all sleeping.

It usually falls to me to keep a level head when it comes to this kind of shit. Although we function as a team, I often step into the role of leader of our group, so I take a deep breath and try to push away my worry until I know for sure that there's something to worry about.

I need to keep a clear head, and panicking won't fucking help.

"Split up and keep looking. We'll cover more ground that way," I say curtly.

No one responds or even nods. They just do it, striding in different directions to search the house as they call out River's name. Knox heads down to the basement to check, and Ash even looks in all the closets just to be on the safe side.

But when we meet up again downstairs, no one has anything good to report.

"We're sure she just... left?" Ash asks. He's standing in the middle of the hall downstairs, running a hand through his hair.

Priest shoots him a look, his carefully controlled emotions obviously close to snapping. I step in before he can go off on Ash.

"What's the alternative?" I ask. "That someone kidnapped her?"

"No," Priest says sharply. "No. We would have woken up if someone had broken in here. The dog would have lost his mind. That didn't happen."

He sounds like he's trying to convince himself as much as he's trying to convince us.

There's a flare of possessive rage in me at the thought of someone breaking in and taking her, but Priest is right. There's no way they would have gotten in and left with River without one of us knowing.

"We keep looking," I tell them. "No one took her."

She's not in the living room or the kitchen or the piano room or the library.

Every time I open a door or step into one of the rooms and find it empty, something winds tighter in my chest. I keep hoping to see River, curled up in a corner in a blanket. Asleep or not, angry or not, at least she'd be here.

But that doesn't happen, and my heart beats more frantically the more places we check off with no sign of her.

The air in the house is thick with the worry and the possessive need to have her back with us.

All of us are feeling it, and I silently swear to myself that when we find her, I'm going to hold on tight and refuse to let go.

She's *ours*.

She belongs with us, no matter what she might be feeling right now.

Knox comes back from the basement as we regroup in the living room, and for a moment, the room is totally silent.

"*Goddammit!*" Knox explodes, cutting into the quiet. "Where the fuck is she? What if she's hurt?"

"Don't fucking say that," Ash snaps back. "She's *fine*. She has to be fine. Shit."

Knox doesn't even answer him. He grinds his teeth and clenches his jaw, and then when the anger gets to be too much for him to hold back, he hauls off and punches right through the living room wall, leaving a hole where he hit.

Ash just keeps muttering to himself, cursing under his breath like that's going to do something to help. Maybe it helps him, since his hands are empty and he doesn't have anything to fidget with while we try to get to the bottom of this.

Priest looks fucked up, standing still as a statue and not really paying attention to the rest of us. His eyes snap with anger and pain, and his face is set in harsh lines. For once, he's not making any effort to control himself, just letting the pain practically surge out of him.

It's gotta be hard for him right now. We talked about Jade earlier, and now River is missing. I can imagine the places his mind is going to with that worry for River and the feeling of letting her down.

I'm only just barely keeping my own rage under control. I want to hit something, but that won't really help. I'm not even angry at River for leaving.

No, this rage is at the world that hurt her.

The world that will *still* hurt her if it gets the chance.

She's a warrior through and through, and I still believe that, even if she's hurting right now. But it's also true that she's in a vulnerable state and not thinking clearly. Probably unarmed and dazed, wherever she is.

It would be easy for someone to hurt her like this. Easy for anything to happen, and I don't want to take that chance.

"We'll find her," I tell them. "We'll go find her."

I'm not about to sit around and wait for her to come back when there's a chance that maybe she won't.

"Knox, come with me. Ash, Priest, you two stay here in case she comes back."

If the other two want to argue that they should come too, they at least don't waste their breath. They know it's more important for people to be here in case River comes back on her own.

Ash nods and swallows hard, looking like he's trying to get himself back under control. "Yeah. Okay."

"Bring her back," Priest rasps. His voice is tight and choked, as if he's holding back a tidal wave of emotion by sheer force of will. Like he's holding on by a thread.

I nod. I want to promise him that I'll do it, that we won't come back without her, but we all know there's no guarantee I'll be able to keep that kind of promise.

Because shit happens. Life is cruel, harsh, and unfair, and all four of us know that truth better than most people.

All we can do is hope for the best, which isn't comforting at all.

Knox is already moving toward the front door, pausing to put his shoes on and then leaving the door open as he steps out into the driveway.

I follow along behind him, closing the door behind us.

"She didn't take her car," he mutters, catching my attention.

"What?"

He nods to the pile of rust and engine problems that River insists on driving, still parked in the driveway behind Ash's car.

Shit. I don't know if that makes me feel better or worse.

At least on foot, there's a chance she might not have gotten too far, but that means she's walking somewhere in Detroit at night alone. I'd bet on her in a fight nine times out of ten, but that's when she's in her right mind, focused. Now she's out of it with exhaustion and grief, and there are too many scumbags in this city who would love to take advantage of that.

"We need to go," I tell Knox, and he nods.

The two of us get into my car, and I peel out of the driveway, speeding down our street. Knox keeps his eyes peeled for any sign of her as we head out of the neighborhood, but there's nothing.

"Right or left?" I ask him, pausing at a stop sign.

Left will take us toward the highway and into the nicer part of the city where all the expensive restaurants and shopping boutiques are.

Right leads toward less savory parts of Detroit, and before Knox even answers, I know we're not turning left.

"You think maybe she went back to her old place?" Knox asks. "Her apartment?"

It's hard to say. I don't think she has any real attachment to that place, and from what I remember of the things River said about her past, she didn't live there with Hannah or anything.

"No." I shake my head, chewing on my lip in agitation. "But we can't just keep guessing either. And we can't cover enough ground quick enough to find her. Call Harv. Maybe he can run a sweep of security camera footage in the area and help us find her."

Harv—Harvey Magellan—is one of our contacts, a hacker we keep in our back pocket for when we need to get into security systems or people's bank accounts. He's an odd guy, quiet and almost shy, but he knows his shit.

"Good idea."

Knox calls him, his leg bouncing irritably when it takes Harv several rings to answer the phone.

Finally, he does, and I can hear the muffled sound of his voice from where I'm sitting in the driver's seat.

"Hey," Knox barks. "We need a favor."

There's some murmuring from the other end, and Knox barely lets him get through a sentence before he's cutting Harv off.

"Don't care. It's an emergency, so get it done, or I'll come over there and make you."

Usually, I'd tell Knox that being shitty to our contacts is bad for business, but now I keep my mouth shut. The longer we don't know where River is, the higher a chance something bad is happening to her.

We can smooth shit over with Harv later if we need to, but there will be no coming back from it if something happened to River.

Knox relays the information we have, telling Harv to check the security camera footage on the streets in a perimeter around our house. He describes River, from her hair to her tattoos, and just hearing him talk about her sends a pang through my chest.

Where the fuck are you, River? Where did you go?

Harv grumbles something, but then I pick up the faint sound of a mechanical keyboard clacking through the phone, so he's clearly doing it.

I stop at a red light, and Knox's leg bouncing gets even worse. I clench and unclench my hands on the steering wheel, trying to focus on breathing and not letting my irritation get the better of me.

"What the fuck is taking so long?" Knox snaps when we get moving again.

This time I can hear Harv clearly when he says, "It's a big fucking area, and I'm trying not to miss her. Keep your pants on."

Apparently, our usually shy hacker friend is bolder and surlier at night—probably from being woken up at ass o'clock. Knox just grits his teeth, holding in his rage better than he normally would because we need Harv's help.

He puts the phone on speaker and settles it in the center console, and I pull into an empty lot to wait. No use driving around aimlessly until we know where to go. Several long minutes tick by, and I swear every second takes a year off my goddamn life.

If this doesn't work, I don't know what we'll do.

I don't know how the fuck we'll find her.

"Got her," Harv says at last. "Silver hair, tattoos like you described. She's just... walking. She left your house on foot, and she passed by a convenience store about an hour ago."

He rattles off two cross streets, and that's enough of a bearing that I pull back onto the road, heading in the direction he indicated.

"Did she stay on that path?" Knox wants to know.

"Seems like it. She just kept walking... walking... walking. Ah! There. Crappy dive bar called O'Malley's. She went in, and... it doesn't seem like she left."

"Got it," Knox says.

He hangs up the phone without so much as a thank you, and I gun it down the street as he looks up the bar's location on his phone. It's late as fuck now, and the glowing numbers on the clock in the car tick closer to four in the morning as Knox tells me where to go.

We finally pull up outside a run-down looking dive bar. I park a few doors down, and we get out, making our way inside.

The bar is almost entirely empty, and a new wave of worry floods me as I scan the dim interior for signs of her.

Did she slip out the back? Was Harv following the wrong girl through his pieced-together snippets of security footage?

But then I spot a fall of silver hair near the back of the place.

I elbow Knox and jerk my chin toward her, and we start in that direction. Once we're close enough, I can see that it truly is River.

She's slumped over a table at a booth in the back, and a man with greasy hair and wandering hands is sitting next to her, trying to feel her up.

Rage lights in my soul, building off the anger that was already there. As one, Knox and I stride toward River and the slimy fucker who sits close to her.

His hand is on her side, sliding up her shirt slowly, like he's worried if he moves too fast, she might wake up. He's so absorbed in it that he doesn't even notice the two of us before it's too late.

I grab him and yank him away from River and out of the booth. He splutters, trying to say something, and the smell of alcohol hits me like a wave. Before he can get a word out, I shove him over to Knox.

Knox gives him a savage grin that would shake even the hardest people to their core. He grabs the fucker's face roughly and gets close to him.

"Seems like someone missed it when the rest of us learned about not touching people without their fucking permission," he says, his voice low and menacing. "So why don't you come with me, and we'll have a little fucking chat about manners."

The guy tries to argue, but Knox's grip is unbreakable as he drags the asshole outside through the back door.

"Hey," the bartender calls, leaning over the bar to look at me as the door slams shut behind Knox and his prey. "Not in my fucking bar."

I shoot him a cold look, letting him see how unimpressed I am by his attempt to act like he gives a shit.

"You seem to be pretty fucking good at ignoring what's going on in your bar," I tell him with a snarl in my voice. "So you can ignore everything that's about to happen too."

I'm not even sure what my face looks like in this moment, but it's probably reflecting the murderous anger I feel. The bartender stares at me for a second, and I wait to see if he's going to press the issue.

He doesn't. Instead, he shrinks back behind the bar and starts wiping it down, not making eye contact with me.

Good. That leaves me free to focus on River.

She seems almost catatonic, her eyes closed as she remains slumped over the table. Gently, I reach for her, and she doesn't even try to fight me off. That's a sure sign that she's out of it. She's punched people in the face for less. I tug her from the seat, and she comes with me, stumbling to her feet.

Her eyes open, but it hardly makes any difference. It's like there's nothing behind them. She stares blankly, unseeing, and my stomach churns with dread. I don't know if it's the booze or everything that's going on inside her that has her almost dead to the world, but either way, I don't fucking like it.

"Come on," I murmur to her, pulling her along.

She follows unquestioningly, which is also a bad fucking sign. I can't count on her even knowing that it's me, and all I can think about is what could've happened if someone else had tried to pull her away.

Would she have gone with them just as easily? And what would they have done to her?

I shake that thought from my head, because there's no use dwelling on the fucked up shit that could've happened. If I think about it, I'll get so fucking pissed that it'll eclipse everything else, and River needs me to be here with her in this moment.

So instead, I lead her down the hall to the bathroom.

It's a single occupant room, covered in graffiti but cleaner than I would have expected, given the type of place this is. There's enough room for us both to move around comfortably, and I haul River over to the toilet.

She groans unintelligibly, and I smooth my hand down her back.

"I know," I murmur to her. "I know, baby girl. Come here."

I help her lean over the toilet, holding her close. When I push my fingers into her mouth, she doesn't fight that either, and I stick them down her throat to make her throw up.

Or I try to, anyway. It's not fucking easy. I know from experience that she doesn't have much of a gag reflex.

When nothing happens the first time, I shove my fingers in deeper, not exactly being gentle with her. I can feel the desperation driving me, the worry about how much she might have drunk. I want the booze out of her system.

"Come on," I murmur to her, trying to soothe her with one hand while I keep jamming my fingers into her mouth. She feels limp, just letting me do

it, until finally, she gags and then follows that motion by leaning over and puking.

She heaves, throwing up mostly bile since she hasn't eaten for hours. I flush the toilet and rub her back while she pukes again, her body shaking as she works herself through it.

The bathroom door opens, and I look up, ready to fuck up whoever's coming in. But it's just Knox, so I flush the toilet again.

He has a glass of water in his hand, and he looks at me with a grim light in his eyes. I know that expression on his face means he took care of the guy who had his hands all over River. There are flecks of blood on his shirt and on his hands.

Serves the fucker right.

River groans again, her face twisting into a grimace, and I shift my focus back to her, taking the water from Knox.

"You're okay," I tell her. "Can you drink a little of this for me, baby girl?"

She looks at me, and the fog is still there, but less heavy than before. At least she seems to know who I am, even if she isn't responding.

River doesn't make a move to take the glass, but when I hold it up to her mouth, she doesn't fight me, sipping at the cool water and swallowing.

"Good girl. That's good. Have a little more, okay?"

She swallows again, drinking in little sips until I pull the glass away.

Her skin is pale, and there's spit and drying vomit around her mouth, so between Knox and me, we get her over to the sink. Together, we wash her face, splashing the cold water on her skin to try to jolt her back to reality.

We help her rinse out her mouth a little too, and by the time we're drying her off, she seems less fucked up—from the booze, anyway.

She's able to stand on her own, not swaying or stumbling like she was before, but she's still just... gone. There's nothing behind her eyes. None of that fire that's usually there.

She's checked out, like she's being swallowed up by her demons and has just stopped fighting it.

Even when we talk to her, her face is dull and empty.

It's so different from how she usually is, and it's fucking terrifying. Fear for her rises inside me, hot and intense, threatening to swallow everything else.

Priest said we need to be there for her, but it seems like there's nothing left of her to be there for. There's no way I can stand by and watch her be swallowed up, watch her refuse to fight back, and I grip her jaw hard, forcing her to look at me.

There's still no light to her dark blue eyes, and the shadows underneath them look like bruises, adding to the pale, sickly look she has.

"River," I say gruffly, trying to get through to her, trying to make her hear me. "Listen to me. Do you remember what I asked you the night you killed Ivan?"

Her brows pull together a little, but the glazed look doesn't leave her eyes.

"Are you ruined?" I demand, repeating the words I said then.

They've always been enough to pull her back from the brink, to make her remember her fight and her spirit. To remember she's a warrior who can't be taken down.

But now she just blinks at me. Her beautiful dark blue eyes are clouded and dark. She opens her mouth, but nothing comes out at first. Then she licks her lips and tries again, whispering one word. The first thing she's said since we found her here.

"Y... yes."

My chest tightens, and it feels like the air is being sucked out of the room. But I keep it together. I hold it together for her because she needs that right now. I shake my head, my jaw clenching so tightly that my cheeks ache.

"Wrong answer." My voice comes out gruff and hard with emotion, and I don't even try to hide it. "You're fucking *wrong* if you think that. You're not ruined. You're strong as hell. You're a queen, with four men who would all get on our knees for you. We wouldn't want you so damn bad if you weren't steel all the way through, baby girl. You're not. Fucking. Ruined."

She just stares at me, and I can't take the blankness in her expression for another damn second.

So I use my hold on her to haul her closer, then I kiss her hard and fast. I pour all my feeling into it, pressing my lips to hers like I'm trying to breathe life back into her.

Knox moves to stand behind her, helping me hold her up, and let him take some of her weight. Maybe the press of his body along her back will do something to anchor her too.

But there's no response.

Nothing.

Her lips are stiff and cool against mine, and she doesn't stop me from kissing her, but she doesn't kiss back either. Usually, she would melt into Knox's touch or arch against me, but she just stands there, letting us touch her without doing anything in response, like a broken doll.

"River, *please*."

I murmur her name like a prayer, like I'm fucking pleading with some higher power to hear me, even though I've never believed in that shit. I believe in *her*, though. I believe she's still in there somewhere. I believe she's strong enough to come back from whatever fucked up place she's in.

"Please come back to me, baby," I whisper roughly. "Don't do this. Don't let the darkness take you. You're stronger than this, I know it. Please. Come back to us. We fucking need you."

If she hears me, she doesn't show it, and I tighten my hands around her upper arms, like she might disappear if I let go of her. Gripping her so hard that my fingers dig into her skin, I lean down and kiss her again, putting my whole soul into it, everything I've got.

Trying to drag her back from the darkness before she's gone forever.

RIVER

EVERYTHING FEELS WRONG.

That numb feeling is still there, like there's a thick pane of glass between me and the rest of the world, keeping me trapped behind it and keeping everything else out.

But slowly, things start to trickle in.

I can hear Gage.

I can feel Knox.

I can feel Gage kissing me. There's so much emotion in it, so much need. More than I've ever felt from him before.

At first, I'm numb to that too. I'm aware of what's going on, but I don't feel anything. It's almost like all my emotions and nerve endings have been shut off.

But Gage doesn't stop.

He keeps kissing me, something relentless and demanding in his lips. He's not giving up on me or on this, and I can taste that with every press of his mouth against mine. Knox is behind me, big and hard and warm the way he always is. He keeps me steady, and instead of feeling boxed in or trapped, I feel... safe.

They have me, the two of them, and that starts to wake me up.

It starts like a tingling in my chest, spreading outward slowly and warming my limbs. It feels almost like I was dunked in ice, made numb, and now that I'm between the blazing heat of these two, it's thawing me out.

Slowly, I reach up and wrap my arms around Gage's neck.

He makes a soft noise into the kiss and pulls me in even closer, closing the already tiny amount of distance between us. Knox fits himself in closer too, pressing himself all along my back until I'm completely sandwiched between them.

My mouth starts to move with Gage's, kissing him back. At first it's almost on autopilot, just going through the motions, but then he bites down on my lower lip and that sends a shower of sparks through me, enough that it spurs me to kiss him back with more passion.

Which urges him on more.

There's no finesse to it, nothing even particularly sexy or hot. It's base and animalistic once I really get into it. Like we're just two people trying to bind ourselves together closer than our physical bodies will let us get.

It's like I can feel Gage's soul calling out to mine, drawing me back from the cold and the dark and trying to lead me home. Back to where I belong. It's easy to follow, to give him that energy back and pour out all I have to him.

His hands start roaming down my back, grabbing my ass, sliding under my shirt. I let my hands move too, sliding over the firm planes of his chest and down to his stomach. It's like my hands are relearning how to feel, and all they want to touch is Gage.

The kiss gets messier and rougher, teeth colliding with soft lips, and it tinges the kiss with blood. I can hear my heart beating in my head, feel my pulse hammering through my body, and my breathing comes in short, hard pants.

I'm getting worked up, and the heat of it chases away the numb darkness even more, making me feel more than I have since the agony of this afternoon. There's still a layer of hazy fog between me and the world, but at least as far as Gage and Knox are concerned, I can feel again.

"You're not ruined," Gage mutters into the kiss. He pulls back enough that I can feel the heat of his breath against my mouth. "You're not broken. You're a fucking warrior, through and through. You hear me, goddammit? You're strong enough to survive this."

He says it with so much conviction. Like he believes it beyond a shadow of a doubt. I don't know if *I* believe it. I still feel numb to everything but the feel of him and Knox boxing me between them.

The heat between us flares brightly, though, and it feels like the only point of light in the black emptiness that threatens to engulf me. I kiss him

harder, blocking out anything else. I grind my hips forward, pressing against the growing hardness I can feel between his legs.

Knox grunts behind me, and I press back against him too, grinding my ass back so I can feel how hard he is in turn. Raw need rises in all three of us, and I can feel it pounding through me, making my heart slam against my ribs.

I'm still teetering on the edge of the darkness, and it's like I can see the abyss there, deep and unending, waiting to suck me down. But I want to claw my way back. Back to the heat and the light and the men who have me in their hold.

I need this.

I need *more* than this.

A noise of frustration gets caught in my throat, and then I'm practically climbing Gage's body. I get my legs around his waist and roll my hips forward, seeking more of that amazing friction. Practically dry humping him as I try to get the bulge of his growing erection to rub where I want it to.

My pussy throbs, needy and empty, and it's clear it wants to be filled.

"Fuck." Gage curses into the kiss as he licks his tongue over my lips. "Stay with me," he murmurs. "Don't let go, baby girl."

I whimper softly and chase his tongue back into his mouth.

He tastes so familiar, and he's so steady that it's easy to focus on him in this moment, and on Knox's hands as they travel over my back and down to my ass.

It's like a flame, burning bright enough to cut through the dark and lead me back to where I'm supposed to be.

With them.

Between them.

Between *all* of them, but the other two aren't here right now, so this will have to do.

Knox's hands go under my shirt, and he teases at my pierced nipples. The newer one still throbs with a bit of pain when he pinches it, but I roll into it, arching my chest against his big, calloused hands, so he can take more if he wants it.

His breath huffs over my ear, and he grinds himself against my ass while he plays with my tits, letting me feel the effect this is all having on him.

“Knox,” I whimper, exhaling the sound into Gage’s mouth. If he has an issue with me saying his friend’s name while he kisses me, then he doesn’t show it. Instead, he just rocks against me, grinding his clothed cock against the heated core of my pussy.

“Please,” I gasp out, not even sure what I’m begging for at this point. For more, for them to keep going. Something like that.

I don’t want them to stop. The fog I was under is still there, threatening to suck me back in, and I want to keep ahead of it. I want to lose myself to this pleasure instead.

It just keeps growing between us, all three of us guided by pure instinct.

Knox paws at my tits, groping and cupping them, making my pussy drip from the rough and possessive way he manhandles me. Gage’s breath comes in harsh pants, and he trails his mouth down from mine to my neck, leaving harsh bites along my skin.

I don’t try to hold back the noises that spill out of me, and every other breath is basically a plea for more.

“You’re right here with us,” Knox growls in my ear and then drags his tongue along the shell of it. “We’re gonna remind you of that.”

“Please,” I choke out. “Touch me. Something. *Please.*”

I feel like I’m being burnt up, and it’s a mixture of pleasure and pain that sucks me in and makes me crave more.

“Knox,” Gage grunts out. “Get rid of her panties.”

Knox growls like a damn animal, and the sound travels up my spine and makes me shiver. Even though I can’t see him, I hear the snick of the switchblade being opened, and I decide it’s probably a good time to hold very still.

The cold metal of the knife grazes over my skin, and Knox cuts my panties at the waist, slicing them away so I’m bare for them both, my pussy soaking wet and on display.

My inner walls clench hard, hungry to be touched or filled or something, and Gage doesn’t make me wait. He reaches down between our bodies and shoves down his pants. His shaft is hard and hot, and he wastes no time in shoving it into me.

It’s clumsy and almost frantic, and there’s a bite of pain at the sudden stretch of having his thick cock inside me, forcing its way into my body. But I don’t shy away from the sensation. The pain is just more proof that I’m alive, that I can *feel*, and I cry out when he’s balls deep inside me. My

pussy spasms around his cock, like it's trying to suck him in even deeper, and I let the waves of sensation carry me, clinging to them like a lifeline.

"Gage," I moan, his name falling from my tongue like a plea.

"I've got you," he promises. "I've fucking got you."

And I know he does. I know he's not going to let me go, and he'll give me what I need.

He draws his cock back and then slams in hard, rocking my body. If it weren't for Knox at my back and my legs around Gage's waist, my knees would have already been buckling from the intense surge of pleasure when he buries himself inside me.

His pace is fast and rough, making sure I feel every single stroke of his thick length as he drives into me.

"Fuck," I choke out. My hands clench at Gage's shirt, and I rock my hips forward harder and faster. I'm so full of his cock, and the friction is amazing, but somehow, it's not enough.

It's good, so good that my mouth is open and I'm struggling to remember how to breathe as pleasure and heat swirl through my body, but I need more.

"Please... Oh, shit. Fuck, I need..."

My babbled words die out as I reach behind me, trying to grab at Knox.

He either takes the hint or has been fighting back his own need, because I can feel him moving behind me with purpose. He shoves down his own pants, and then the head of his cock is right there against my ass, hot and slick and practically pulsing with want.

I suck in a sharp, surprised breath, but I don't tell him to stop. I need this. I need him inside me along with Gage. Filling me up and chasing out anything that isn't the two of them.

"It's a good thing you're dripping for us already, little fox," Knox says in that voice that sounds like gravel.

He reaches down and touches my pussy right around the place where Gage has me split open on his cock, gathering the slick evidence of my arousal on his hand as his brother keeps slamming into me.

I can hear the wet sounds of Knox using my arousal to slick his cock, and then he spreads my ass with one hand, exposing my back hole.

My stomach clenches in anticipation. I expect him to just shove himself inside me, but he doesn't.

He takes it slow—or slow for Knox, anyway—and that’s good since he’s so fucking big. Just the pierced head of his cock breaching my ass makes me suck in a breath, and I’m practically clawing at Gage’s shoulders while I work to adjust to the intrusion.

“There you go,” Knox breathes, and he sounds wound tight, like he needs this as much as I do. “You’re doing so fucking well, taking our cocks like you were made for them. We’ll go easy on you, baby. Don’t worry.”

I need that, because his shaft is so massive I feel like he could break me with it. Even as my body stretches to accommodate him, I can feel how thick he is, and he alternates between his cock and his fingers, working me open with barely restrained patience.

And it’s still fucking intense when he finally starts to push into me in earnest. The pain of the stretch keeps me on edge, and I hiss as Knox’s dick slides into me inch by inch.

Knox exhales like the breath has been punched out of him, and the hand he has on my ass tightens enough that I’m pretty sure I’m going to have finger shaped marks left behind when he’s done.

“You’re so fucking tight,” he grunts. “Jesus fuck.”

My body reacts to being so full of them both, throbbing with a mix of agony and ecstasy that goes right to my head. Every nerve in my body is humming, and I lean into that feeling because it’s so much better than the numbness.

Knox is stretching my ass, thrusting in slowly, and Gage starts to match his pace. The two of them move in tandem inside me, and my mouth falls open on a long, low moan.

It’s so much. The friction, the heat, the incredible, overwhelming *fullness*. It builds and builds inside me, burning at my center. When one of them pulls back, the other pushes in, and I’m caught between them, pinned and impaled, taking it in both holes like there’s nothing else that matters.

I can hear my own voice echoing in the bathroom, the desperate whimpers and moans of pleasure that mix with their harsh breathing and grunts.

“Fuck,” Gage hisses between his teeth. “Fuck, River.”

“Gage,” I moan back, and hearing his name like that seems to light something inside him. He starts fucking me harder, faster. He bounces me back against Knox, making the tattooed man bury his cock even deeper in my ass.

My body pulses, my heart racing and my pussy spasming like it wants to milk Gage of everything he has. I know I'm close. I can feel that electric heat growing, pulling me tighter and tighter until I'm on the verge of snapping apart.

"Please," I moan, almost sobbing, and I don't even know what I'm begging for. They're both so deep inside me that there's nowhere else to go, and they trade off slamming into me hard enough that I'm rocked by the force of it all.

When my orgasm hits me, it's hot and intense. I have to bite down hard on my lip to keep from screaming out, and Gage holds onto me tighter, cursing under his breath at the vise grip my pussy has on his cock at that point.

My legs are tight around his waist, and I rock against him, riding out the waves of pleasure that keep threatening to drag me under.

Gage isn't far behind. His thrusts get erratic, and he slams into me one more time before he comes too, filling me up with his load.

My chest heaves as I try to catch my breath, but the fact that Knox is still buried in my ass makes that hard. The aftershocks of my orgasm ripple through me, and I whimper softly when Gage pulls out of me. I'm sensitive enough that just that motion makes my pussy clench.

"Good girl," he pants softly. "You're so fucking good."

He starts unwinding my legs from around his waist, and I let him maneuver me how he wants, too blissed out from the intense release to do much to help or hinder him.

His green eyes are burning with lust even though he just came, and he and Knox set me down on my feet and then bend me forward over the sink.

Gage steps back out of the way, leaving the two of us there like that in front of the sink. Knox is still buried in my ass, and I'm still trying hard to catch my breath.

Knox doesn't give me the time though. He starts moving in my ass again, fucking me with long, deep strokes that I can feel all the way through my body.

His hands are so big, holding on to my hips, and with how tall he is, it's a good thing he has a hold on me. I'm already basically on the balls of my feet where I'm bent over the sink, and each hard thrust rocks me up even farther. I would definitely have already lost my balance if he didn't have me in hand.

“Look at yourself,” Gage commands in a low voice, and I glance up at the mirror, obeying his order without even thinking.

I can see myself in the reflection, pale-skinned with red-rimmed eyes, and Knox behind me. I can see Gage too, standing just off to the side, his gaze locked on the sight Knox and I make together.

Just knowing he’s watching like that sends another flash of heat through me, and it makes Knox’s thrusts feel all the more intense. I meet Gage’s eyes in the mirror, watching him watch me get fucked hard and dirty.

“Oh god,” I gasp out, tightening my grip on the porcelain of the sink and holding on as Knox starts really going at it, his hips slapping against my ass so hard that my flesh jiggles.

“You’re perfect,” Gage tells me. “You’re so good. Taking our cocks like a fucking queen. Taking Knox in your ass like that. Can you feel him? All the way inside you?”

“Yes,” I practically sob. “I can feel it. He’s so deep. Fuck.”

“I wish you could see what you look like right now,” he says. “The way you’re taking him. How open you are. You’re so fucking good for letting him in like this. There’s never been anyone as perfect for us as you.”

I tremble under his praise and then buck back against Knox, forcing him in even deeper, just because I want that spike of pleasure when he bottoms out in me. Just because I want to see what Gage will say when I do it.

I’m not disappointed at all.

“That’s it, baby girl,” Gage practically purrs, heated pride in his voice. “Let him have you. Let him take you.”

I nod frantically because that’s what I want. I want to be lost in this, in both of them. I want them to have me and take me and make me feel good.

Knox grunts breathlessly from behind me, and he raises one hand and slaps my ass with it, driving another moan of pleasure from me.

“Please,” I choke out. “Fuck, Knox, please.”

“Don’t worry. I know what you need.”

His thrusts slow a little, and I want to tell him that’s *not* what I need, but then I hear the snick of the knife flicking open again. I don’t know what it says about me that the sound of it sends a wave of arousal straight down to my pussy, making it throb even harder and get even wetter.

With his free hand, Knox pushes my shirt up over my back, exposing the skin there. He keeps fucking me slowly, going balls deep with each

thrust, and I almost jump when I feel the cool metal of the blade touch my skin.

It's followed by a burning line of pain and then another and another as Knox carves into my back while he fucks me. The pain mingles with everything else, the pleasure that's been building and growing as Gage watches us.

"Are you gonna come?" Gage asks, catching my attention again.

I nod desperately, and his green eyes burn. His features look harshly beautiful in the dim light of the bathroom. "That's our girl. Come for us. Let me see you choke Knox's dick with your tight little ass."

That's enough to push me over the edge again, all of the sensations building to their breaking point, impossible to ignore or fight against. I come hard, moaning Knox's name as I fall apart again.

I shake through it, and Knox tosses the knife down and keeps going, grabbing my hips and slamming himself deep into me for a few more strokes. Then he's coming undone too, cursing under his breath as he comes in my ass.

As the aftershocks of overwhelming pleasure begin to subside, I cling to the edge of the sink, trying to remember how to breathe. My chest heaves, and I drag in breath after ragged breath, my body still trembling from head to toe.

A tidal wave of emotion comes rushing back in as the orgasm fades, making my already weak legs wobble even more as dozens of feelings hit me all at once.

The numbness is gone, at least, washed away by the onslaught of sensations I just experienced.

There's so much pain lodged in my chest, sharp and aching, cutting deeper every time I take a breath... but it's not the only thing I feel. Now it sits alongside the molten contentment that comes from being well fucked, and the warmth that surrounds me from the fact that Gage and Knox are here with me, their presence filling up the small room.

And at least I can feel at all. I no longer feel like I'm being suffocated by some invisible weight.

Knox pulls out of my ass after a moment, and I wince at the sudden emptiness and the soreness that's left behind. I can feel myself dripping with their cum, and at least that's something else I can feel too.

Knox turns on the tap and grabs some paper towels from the holder on the wall so he can wet them. He's almost gentle when he starts to clean me up, running the damp paper over my ass and then between my legs.

"Made a mess of you," he mutters, half to himself probably, but I can hear the grin in his voice. He fucking loves it.

He nudges my arm, prompting me to turn around so he can get more of the mess, and as I do, I see what he carved into my back with his knife. It wasn't just random slices for the hell of it.

There's a word written there, the raised, swollen cuts stark against the rest of my skin.

Ours.

My heart beats a little faster at the sight of it, at the reminder. I remember snatches of what Gage was saying to me before when I was so out of it and wrecked, about how they need me and can never let me go.

Knox seems to want that sentiment to be marked permanently on my skin so I can't forget it.

Gage moves forward and catches my chin again with his fingers, lifting my face up to his. His eyes are bright green like spring grass, sharp and intense as he scans my face and looks into my eyes like he's trying to read everything there. Trying to make sure I'm not slipping away again.

I don't know what he saw before, but now that I'm a little more clear-headed, I can see how strung out both of them are. They both look a bit haunted by how fucked up I was, and there's something almost desperate in the way Gage looks at me now, like he doesn't want to see any traces of that numbness again.

I hold his gaze, letting him see it all—the pain that's there, stabbing at the heart of me, and the ragged edges that might not ever get smoothed out. But it's better than being hollow, better than just being a ghost in life, watching everything through a layer of glass and fog.

Whatever Gage sees now, it must be enough. He nods, dragging his fingertips down the line of my jaw.

"I told you, baby girl. We can't let you go."

RIVER

KNOX AND GAGE lead me out of the bathroom, one of them in front and the other behind me, like they want to make sure no one can even look at me.

Gage nods to the bartender as we walk past, and I have a vague memory of being slumped over that bar, ordering drink after drink and barely feeling the burn of it. Apparently, I really was fucking out of it.

There's a moment where we pause, and Gage narrows his eyes, but then reaches into an inner jacket pocket and pulls out a stack of cash. He slides it over the bar to the bartender, who looks at the money and then back up at Gage like he's almost afraid the stack will bite him if he reaches for it. Or Gage might.

"You don't deserve it," Gage tells him, and the venom in his voice is quiet but still deadly. "But this is for you to keep your fucking mouth shut about all of this. If you don't say shit about what happened here tonight, then you'll be fine."

He holds the bartender's gaze, and the implication is pretty clear.

"No problem," the bartender says, scrambling to grab the cash.

Gage nods, and we walk out of the bar.

The night air feels cool on my heated skin, and I realize it's probably damn near close to dawn at this point. There's dew on everything, and even though the sky is still dark, it has that hazy quality that means the first rays of morning aren't that far away.

"So, I need the car," Knox says, stretching his arms overhead and cracking something in his back. He gives Gage a significant look, and Gage just nods again.

"We'll get a cab home. Be thorough," he says.

Knox rolls his eyes and catches the keys when Gage tosses them to him. I glance between them, not sure what's going on.

"Why do you need the car?" I ask Knox. Surely it's too late or early or something for them to already be doing work.

Knox tips my face up to his and kisses me, lingering for just a bit before he pulls back. Some of that haunted look is gone from his face, but not completely.

"Gotta bury a body," he says. "The usual."

The smirk that tugs at his lips makes me think it's a joke at first, but then a memory from earlier in the night hits me. Some asshole talking to me at the bar, leaning too close and not taking my silence as the "no, fuck off" that it should have been. I remember the smell of cheap booze on his breath, but it barely affected me then. I was so numb to everything around me.

Then I remember being in that booth, swimming through the haze of being drunk and being numb and all the darkness that was trying to keep me down. His hands were on me, I'm pretty sure, sliding under my clothes, touching me. Normally, I would have kicked his ass myself, from the second he started getting touchy, but I was beyond fucked up at that point.

That must be who Knox is talking about.

They came in and saw him touching me, and Knox killed him.

It does something to me to know that. It drives home the point Gage made earlier about how they can't let me go. A reminder of everything we've become to each other.

A new emotion rises in my chest, edging out the smallest bit of the burning pain that still sits there. It's warm, but not burning, and sharp, but not in a way that's meant to cut. It's just undeniable and impossible to ignore.

I'm not alone.

The two of them came and found me, tracked me down somehow, when it probably would have been easier to just let me go. And now Knox is off to bury a body.

For me.

It's a lot to take in, but it makes me feel better.

With one last grin, Knox disappears, heading off to where they parked the car. Gage finishes typing something into his phone—calling for the cab, I guess—and we stand close together to wait for it.

It's quiet out now. It's the time of early-ass morning where everyone has given up for the night and crawled back to their holes and their homes to grab a little sleep before they get back to whatever shit they were up to before. Gage puts his arm around me, pulling me in closer to him, and even though it's not that chilly outside, it feels nice to tuck myself in close to him and lean my head on his shoulder.

I don't have to prop myself up because he's got me, and that's a good feeling.

It doesn't take long for the cab to pull up, and Gage maneuvers me toward it, opening the door and letting me slide across the backseat before he gets in after me.

The cabby glances at me in the rearview mirror, curiosity in his eyes, but that's nipped in the bud when Gage shoots him a death glare and pulls me closer. It's a silent warning, and the man never looks at me again.

Our driver keeps his eyes firmly on the road as we make our way back to the house, and when we get there and hop out, he barely looks up from his steering wheel when Gage pays him.

The front door opens before we even get to it, and Ash is standing there, looking disheveled and relieved. He's still in his sleep clothes, but that doesn't stop him from coming onto the front step and pulling me into a hug as soon as I get close enough.

He smells like Ash, warm and a little bit spicy, and I melt into the hug, grateful for it after the night I've had.

"You're in so much trouble, young lady," he says. It comes out teasing, but I can hear the relief in his voice all the same.

"I know," I mumble into his shoulder. He just hugs me a little bit tighter and then pulls away so he can see my face. I'm not sure what he's looking for, but he clearly finds it, because he nods once and then steps back.

Priest has been hanging back, and I see him there in the shadow of the entry way. His face is half obscured by the darkness, but I can see the look he's wearing clear as day.

There's that same tortured, tight expression from when they got me back from Julian. Anguish clouding his pale eyes, taut muscles that speak to the tension he's carrying. I know what he must be feeling. That same pain and worry and impending loss that he felt the last time I was gone without any notice.

"I'm sorry," I whisper.

The words are for all of them, since I know they were all worried and fucked up over me just leaving. But I say them to Priest, because he's the one wearing the most haunted expression.

That gets him to move from where he's been rooted to the spot, and he pulls me fully into the house and into a crushing hug. His arms feel good around me, holding me close to him, and I can feel him shaking against me. Those fine tremors wracking his body, and I can't tell if it's relief at having me back or leftover from the anxiety he must have been suffering through before.

For good measure, I say it again, softer and just for him. "I'm sorry."

Priest shakes his head, still enveloping me with his body. "You don't have to be sorry," he murmurs roughly. "I know how this feels. How the loss tries to destroy you."

I nod against his shoulder, and he wraps his arms even tighter around me, like he needs some time to really convince himself that I'm there and alive and alright.

As alright as I can be, anyway.

Ash and Gage give us space, and Priest holds on to me for a long time. It's nice to be here in his arms, warm and safe and not alone. All the pain and shitty feelings are still there, lurking under the surface, but Priest's arms seem to block them out a bit.

Eventually, he lets me go, and we break apart. Some of the pain is clearing from his eyes, and the sharp lines of his face don't look like he's barely holding himself together anymore. He looks more like himself than the husk of worry he looked like before, and that settles something inside me.

"You need to eat," Gage says.

I open my mouth to tell him I'm not hungry, but he pins me with a look that makes it clear he wasn't asking.

"It's still early for breakfast, but you gotta have something," Ash chimes in, slinging an arm around my shoulder and steering me into the kitchen.

Priest and Gage follow, and I give up on even thinking about arguing. I can tell when they're serious about something, and they're right. It has been almost a day since I've had anything to eat. Breakfast from before the "wedding" feels very far away. Like it happened in a different lifetime and possibly to someone else.

I don't know how I can be the same person who walked into that church, confident we were going to pull off our plan.

"What do you want to eat?" Ash asks. He deposits me in a chair at the table and goes to the stove. "Pancakes? French toast?"

Ordinarily, I'd be happy to eat that and to watch the production Ash probably makes of making breakfast. But now just thinking about having syrup and a lot of food makes my stomach turn.

"Something light," Priest says, speaking before I can. "Toast. Some fruit."

Ash glances at me, and I nod.

"Your wish, my command," he says.

He's still a flurry of movement around the kitchen, loading bread into the toaster, pulling out butter and jam. He slices up an apple and flips the knife in his hand, catching it by the handle.

It's interesting that I know him well enough now to know that it's not even him showing off so much as him working off the nervous energy of waking up to find me gone.

Even though Ash is doing the cooking, Gage and Priest don't leave the kitchen. They hover protectively, like they want to be here, just in case something happens.

I don't try to send them away, even though they must all be tired. It's not like they'd listen anyway.

Gage makes coffee, and Priest gets down two glasses from the cabinet. He fills one with water and the other with orange juice and puts them in front of me.

I drink the water quickly and gratefully. My mouth feels cottony and dry from drinking all the booze and then throwing up all the booze, and the water is cold and delicious. I'm probably also dehydrated from... everything.

The juice, I take slower, and Ash presents me with a plate a few minutes later. Four pieces of toast, buttered just how I like them, and the cut up fruit. I bypass the jam and nibble on the toast and fruit, finishing about half the plate before I can't eat anymore.

"It's good enough," Gage says with a little nod and then snags the rest of my toast for himself. "Are you going to try to get more sleep?"

"I don't know." Part of me is afraid to close my eyes again, knowing what I'll see when I do. I don't want to dream Hannah's death on a loop

again, even if I can feel the tiredness pulling at me. “I’m going to shower first.”

He nods, and they watch as I get up and head upstairs to my room. Surprisingly, none of them follow me up.

I stand in my room for a second, just breathing through everything. I don’t even really remember leaving the bed earlier, or getting dressed or any of it. I was in such a fucking haze, just going through the motions, doing whatever felt like it would help at the time.

My clothes are a mess, wrinkled and stained with booze and cum and dirt and grime from the bar. I strip them off and notice that my shirt is bloodstained too, from where Knox carved into my skin in the bathroom.

The dirty clothes go into a pile on the floor, and I move into the bathroom, cranking the water in the shower until steam fills the room.

I hiss when I get in and that hot water hits the cuts on my back and the stitches in my arm. I’d almost forgotten about that one.

But the pain is good, so I don’t flinch away from it. It’s another reminder that I can feel. That I’m still here.

I take my time, washing up slowly. Bloody water swirls down the drain when I rinse off, and then I lather my washcloth and start trying to clean the night from my skin.

After a bit, the door to the bathroom opens, and I peek around the shower curtain to see Ash coming in.

“I’m not gonna leave again,” I tell him. And I mean that. He probably came or was sent by the other guys to keep an eye on me, like I need a guard on me twenty-four-seven or something now. I was fucked up in the head before and not really thinking straight, but I don’t plan to do that again.

Ash smiles, although it’s not really the one I’m used to. It’s sad at the edges, and doesn’t light up his amber eyes the way it normally does.

“I know,” he says. “I don’t think you’re going to run again. I just... want to be near you. If that’s okay.”

I suck in a sharp breath. The simple honesty in his words breaks me a little, making my chest ache. The truth is, I want to be near him too. I don’t want to be alone with this.

So I push the shower curtain aside even more and gesture for him to join me.

His smile gets a little brighter at that, like maybe he was worried I was going to send him away or something. I watch as he strips down and sets his glasses on the sink. He's always nice to look at, and that hasn't changed, but now I'm more grateful for his company than anything else.

Ash wraps his arms around me once he's in the shower with me, and I pull the curtain closed again.

He holds me tight, just like Priest did before, and we stand there under the spray.

ASH

AFTER WAKING up and thinking she was just gone, it's a goddamn relief to have River in my arms like this. At first, she just stands there, letting me hold on to her, but then she lifts her arms and wraps them around me right back, accepting the hug and leaning into it.

I can feel her shaking against me, and I know it's not from being cold. There's probably so much in her right now. So much pain and confusion and anger. I wish I could fix things for her, make it all better, but I know it doesn't work like that.

I can't even imagine her pain. I've lost people before, family members mostly, but none of them were people I cared about. None of them really mattered. My only real family is in this house, and if any one of them died, it would kill me too, I'm pretty sure. I don't know how I'd handle it, but it probably wouldn't be pretty.

So the fact that River is still going, still forging ahead somehow, speaks to what an incredibly strong spirit she has. Nothing gets her down for long, and that's fucking amazing.

"You wanna know a secret?" I ask her, reaching up to stroke one hand down the back of her head, tangling my fingers through her wet silver hair.

"What?" she murmurs back. The sound is almost lost beneath the hiss of the shower, and I can feel it more than I can hear it.

"One of the things I liked most about you from the first minute I met you was how strong you are."

She snorts at that. "From the *first* minute you met me? I was chained to a wall then."

“Maybe. But you had already managed to work yourself free from the chains and were just biding your time, right? Then you head-butted me and tried to escape.” I smile at the memory of that. “You were ready to kick my ass on those stairs, like you didn’t give a single fuck. I knew right then and there that you were the toughest woman I’d ever met.”

She doesn’t respond to that, but she doesn’t pull away either. I keep stroking her wet hair, the shower water turning it a deep gray instead of the bright silver it usually is. I can feel her relaxing against me bit by bit, so maybe my words are helping somewhat, at least.

“I wish you didn’t have to be so strong,” I tell her. “I wish the world hadn’t made that your only option. But I’m glad as fuck that if that’s the case, you’re strong enough to handle it. I’m glad none of this shit has consumed you.”

The shaking has stopped, and she lets out a small, soft sigh, resting her head against my chest.

“I don’t know what to do now,” she admits. “I’m just... I feel lost. I had vengeance on my mind before, but now what? I make another list? It didn’t even work the first time. It didn’t get rid of the demons, and now there are only more of them.”

She shudders against me, and her voice cracks a little when she speaks again. “I can’t bring Hannah back. No matter what I do. There’s not going to be another chance. It’s just... over.”

She sounds so lost and so vulnerable. Like she’s afraid of drowning under all of this and is reaching out a hand to be helped.

It makes anger burn in my chest, fierce and hot. Of the four Kings, I have the reputation for being the easy-going one. I’m not as tightly wound as Gage or Priest, not as bloodthirsty as Knox. But I fucking hate Julian Maduro more than anyone I’ve ever despised before. Even more than I hate my mother for all the shit she put me through when I was just a kid, pimping me out to the rich women in the neighborhood next to ours.

I think about what Julian has done, what he robbed River of, and I want to destroy him. I want him fucked up and hurt and alone, the way he’s made River feel. Only multiplied by like a hundred, because that’s what the motherfucker deserves.

He deserves to burn and to suffer and to know the reason why.

But it’s not on me to do that to him. He didn’t take away someone I loved.

That revenge is for River to claim.

“Maybe you don’t need a list this time,” I tell her. “Maybe you should just burn it all down. Tear Julian’s whole fucking life apart from the roots up.”

She lifts her head and looks at me, curiosity in her eyes. It’s nice to see that. To see something other than the pain and misery that has to be pressing on her.

“He deserves to die for what he did, but that’s too easy. So you don’t just kill him,” I say. “You destroy him and his whole operation. Make sure no one can pick up where he left off, like he did when his father died. Just tear the whole fucking thing apart.” I grin at her, reaching up to brush a water soaked lock of hair back from her face. “*Then* you kill him. When he’s already at his lowest.”

A hint of a spark glints in her eyes at that, the old River reappearing for just a second. It’s a flash, but it’s all I need to know that she’s still in there. Still fighting.

River chews on her lip like she’s thinking it over. Then she sighs.

“At the very least, I have to get Cody out. I owe Hannah that much. She was willing to stay with Julian for as long as it took to make sure he didn’t have a chance to fuck that kid up, so I’ll honor that. I won’t let Hannah’s little boy be raised by somebody like Julian.”

“That’s fair,” I agree. “I can’t see Julian Maduro being some warm and loving dad. What will you do once you get the kid out?”

“I have no fucking idea,” River admits. “I don’t... I don’t know how to feel about him. Cody, I mean. When I look at him, I see Lorenzo. I see Julian. I see another Maduro just waiting to grow up and use women as his pawns and puppets. But that’s not all there is. He has pieces of Hannah in him too. She wouldn’t let him grow up to be a monster, and it mattered to her, so I have to try to help him.”

I nod and shrug a shoulder. “If it helps, all of us had shitty parents. I mean, I told you about my mom and what she did to me. But we managed to come out of it okay—or okay enough that we each became something better. We weren’t defined by our parents and their shit.”

I can see her considering that, taking it all in. Finally, she nods, glancing up at me again.

“You’re right. My dad was a piece of shit, and my mom died when I was too young to really remember her or know what kind of parent she

was.”

River’s skin is wet but warm when I reach up and cup her cheek, brushing my thumb over her cheekbone. There’s a small bruise forming there, and it’s a toss-up at this point what it’s even from. It’s been a hell of a day or so.

“See?” I tell her. “Despite all that, you turned out to be incredible.”

Her gaze softens at my words, but there’s a half grin on her face. “Yeah, but none of us are exactly great examples of people who turned out ‘good,’ you know?”

I laugh. “Okay, fair point. Maybe we’re not good. But we’re bad to the right people. That counts in my book.”

The water sputters a little, but even though we’ve been standing here for so long, it doesn’t start to go cold. We’re still wrapped up in the steam and the heat of it, like we’re in our own little sauna together. I pull River closer again, and she tucks her cheek against my chest, letting out a soft sigh. It sounds almost like contentment, but maybe that’s wishful thinking. At the very least, she doesn’t seem as lost as she did before.

I’ll take that.

I hold her while the water beats down around us, both of us naked, skin to skin.

It’s funny. I’m so used to physical touch, to having naked women in my arms. It’s basically a part of me at this point, the way it feels to have that softness against me. To know how to touch them and where.

But this isn’t about sex. It’s just about River.

We might both be naked, and she might be one of the sexiest women I’ve ever known, but in this moment, I’m not even thinking about any of that. All that’s on my mind is helping her feel better and letting her know I’m here for her.

And for me, that means a whole hell of a lot.

RIVER

ASH FEELS solid and warm against me while I cling to him. Some of it is the heat from the shower, but some of it is just him. He's warm and alive, and I can feel the steady rhythm of his heart beating under my cheek where it's pressed against his chest.

It feels good to hold him and have his arms around me, but eventually we finally break apart.

He grins at me and pushes wet hair out of his face before reaching for my shampoo. He lathers his hands and then does a little motion with his finger, urging me to turn around so my back is to him.

I do, and he starts washing my hair, using his dexterous fingers to massage my scalp while he works the floral scented lather into my hair.

For once, he's not talking, not making jokes, not flirting. He doesn't grope me or try to coax me into anything other than this. It seems like he just wants to take care of me, and I'm too tired at this point to put up a fuss about it.

I was doing just fine before he came in, so I could do this myself, but I can't even find it in me to point that out. Some of it is the numbness that I've been trying to outrun creeping back in, but mostly it's just the exhaustion.

I slept a little before I went wandering, but it wasn't anything even close to being restful. More like just being unconscious for a little bit with no actual sleep involved. I can feel the heaviness of the day before pulling at me, and I'm just worn out.

Ash seems to know that, or at least he can tell that the last of my energy seems to be fading. He's careful with me, rinsing the shampoo from my

hair, but tipping my head back so it doesn't run into my eyes.

He's thorough, and when he runs his hands over my body, it's mostly to check and make sure I'm clean and washed off than to try to cop a feel.

Once he's satisfied, we get out of the shower and stand in the steamy bathroom. Ash grabs a towel and starts drying me off, urging me to lift my arms and taking care of my front before he steps behind me.

I'd almost forgotten about the message Knox carved into my back, but I hear Ash snort with amusement as he looks at it.

"Let me guess," he asks. "Knox wanted to make an impression?"

I shrug a little. "He's like that."

It doesn't really bother me, and it doesn't seem like it bothers Ash either. After all, he's included in what it means for me to be theirs.

"The man has a future in body art, clearly," he teases, and he's more careful as he dries me off around the cuts.

I chuckle softly, and Ash digs through my medicine cabinet for a moment before coming back with an ointment to put on the fresh cuts so they'll heal well.

"He's not wrong, anyway," he adds quietly, his fingers tracing the letters Knox left behind. "You are ours."

The words hit me all over again, wrapping around me just like they did when I realized what Knox carved into me. That feeling of belonging, of being a part of something.

Of knowing I'm not alone.

I'm hurting and a little lost, and I know I'll never be the same person I was before I watched my sister die for what felt like the second time, just as helpless to protect her and bring her back as I was before. But I'm not alone. There are four men who will listen to me and hold me. Who'll fight by my side and never try to change who I am.

"I know," I tell Ash softly, and it feels good to just say that.

We leave the bathroom, and Ash grabs the clothes he was wearing before and starts getting dressed. I ignore the piles of dirty clothes on the floor and pull on fresh ones, wanting to keep feeling clean.

My bedroom door is still half cracked open, and I head toward it, intending to go back downstairs.

"River," Ash says, stopping me. "You need to get some rest. You've barely slept at all."

"I know," I repeat. "But I don't want to sleep yet."

Maybe it's stupid, because I can feel the exhaustion and grief tugging at me, weighing me down, making me want to collapse where I stand and give in to it.

But I won't. I can't.

Not yet.

"River," he says again, and he puts his hands on his hips, giving me a serious expression. "You can't run yourself ragged. You're going to need to rest eventually."

"I will. Just not now. I'm not ready to..." I shake my head. "Not now."

He sighs, and we face off in my bedroom, looking at each other across the distance between us. Ash doesn't look upset, just concerned.

"River." He says my name a third time.

"Ash," I shoot back, not looking away.

Either he doesn't want to argue, or he can see I'm not going to back down and takes the stubbornness as a good sign, because after a moment, he sighs and gives in. He motions for me to walk through the door and then follows me down the stairs and into the kitchen.

Gage, Knox, and Priest are all gathered around the table, and the clock on the stove says it's just after seven in the morning, which explains why I'm so fucking tired.

They all look up when we walk in, but before anyone can say anything, Priest gets up and comes over to me.

There's still a little of that haunted look on his face, and his sharp blue eyes are heavy with worry and pain.

He tugs me into his arms, and I let him, knowing that he needs this.

He clearly understands how fucked up I felt after Hannah's death, but I know I fucked him up by leaving. I know what that means to him and how he worries when he can't keep me safe.

Priest breathes me in for a second, holding me close. He buries his face in the crook of my neck, and I can feel his lips moving against my skin, even if I can't make out what he's saying. His arms are tight around me, and there's a palpable possessiveness in it, as if he'd rip apart anyone who tried to take me away from him.

When he finally lifts his head, he pulls back a little and looks me over. I'm not sure what he's looking for, but his eyes scan my face until he's satisfied. Then he leans down and kisses me, full of feeling.

I kiss him back, hands braced against his chest, and it pushes a bit of the numbness away.

We eventually surface for air, and Priest sweeps his thumbs over my cheeks and then steps away.

No words passed between us, but we didn't need them. He knows how I'm feeling, and I know he understands how hard it is. There's nothing we really need to say out loud.

When I look back at the table, Ash is sitting down, stealing pieces of bacon from Knox's plate. All four of the Kings turn their attention to me, like they're waiting to see if I have anything to say.

And as it turns out, I do.

"I'm going to destroy Julian," I tell them, running with Ash's idea from back in the shower. "I'm not just going to cross his name off a list, the way I did with his father and the others. I want to wreck him. I want to tear his life apart watch him twist himself into pieces about it. Then I'll kill him."

Knox barks a laugh and grins brightly at me. "I fucking love it," he says. "Hell yes. It's what he deserves. Hell, he deserves worse, but this is so goddamn good."

Gage clears his throat, and we all glance at him. He's usually the voice of reason, the one who puts the brakes on crazy plans and makes us think about the consequences of things.

There's a determined set to his mouth, so I don't think he's going to tell me no, and even if he did, I probably wouldn't listen. But I wait to see what he's going to say all the same.

He tugs at his lip, like he's thinking it all over.

"He deserves it," Gage says finally. "That and worse. Nothing you could do to him would be a step too far after everything."

"That's what I'm saying," Knox puts in.

"*But*," Gage says, emphasizing that word. "We have to think about everything that could be coming. We have to play it smart and be prepared."

"What do you mean, what could be coming?" I ask him.

"We fucked up the wedding. Not even the way we intended to, but now he might know that we planned to fuck him over in the first place. He could come after us for that."

"He killed her sister," Priest says flatly. "I'm pretty sure that makes up for whatever we did to him. He got his revenge."

It hurts to hear it put that way, like killing Hannah was just a move on a chessboard, a little bit of revenge for us making things harder for him. But I know what Priest means.

“Also, Julian might not even know we had a plan in the first place,” Ash points out, chewing on a piece of bacon.

“He saw us trying to escape,” I tell him. “He accused me of orchestrating the attack, but I denied it.”

“Did he believe you?” Gage asks, his eyes narrowing.

My skin prickles as if spiders are crawling over my body, but I force myself to replay that last confrontation with Julian in my head. He was furious with me for trying to get my sister out while the cartel members were shooting up the church, but I do think he believed me when I said we hadn’t planned on them showing up—because it was the truth.

“Yeah.” I nod slowly. “I think he did. The cartel attack was real, so as far as he knows, Hannah and I were just taking advantage of an unexpected opportunity.”

Just talking about Hannah and everything that happened makes bile rise in my throat, and for a second, everything goes hazy like I’m going to pass out again. But I force it back and make myself focus and stay standing. I have to be strong and deal with this. It’s not like I can just never talk about Hannah again, or think about what happened. If I’m going to make Julian pay for it, it’ll be at the forefront of my mind the whole time.

I drag in a deep breath and steady myself. I can be strong for Hannah.

“That’s good.” Ash nods, giving me an encouraging look. “If Julian doesn’t know that we planned to double-cross him even before the wedding, it will make all of this easier.”

“What do we know about the asshole?” Knox asks. “He owns that boxing gym. What else?”

“That’s his main legit business,” Gage says. “Like the club is for us. We can go after that and destroy it somehow, but most of his income is from illegal sources.”

“Do we have any idea what all he has his fingers in?” Priest wants to know.

“I’ve seen him go to a few places,” I say, speaking up. “When I was tailing him before.”

That seems like a long time ago now. Following Julian around Detroit, watching him take meetings and make deals and whatever else. Like life is

split into before and after and everything before Hannah's death might as well have happened to a different person.

"We can make some assumptions from the places, probably," Gage says. "We'll have to figure out what shit he's got going on so we can figure out how to take it down."

"Oh," I say, grimacing as I remember something else. "He's also fucking his damn sister. So we can use that against him too."

Ash shudders, and the rest of them look visibly disgusted by that. Before he killed Hannah, that was pretty high on the list of the worst things about Julian fucking Maduro, but now it's just a drop in the bucket. Just one more thing to use to ruin him.

Gage nods. "We'll use that when the time comes. I think we have enough to get started, at least. We can look into the gym more, find out how it operates and who goes there. River, make a list of everywhere you saw Julian go and anyone you saw him with. We can check it against what we know about the city and maybe it'll give us some leads. In the meantime, we can find out what else he has going on. If he has too many irons in the fire, there might be some loose ends we can tug on. See what comes unraveled in the process."

He sounds confident, and all the others are nodding along. It's a good plan, and we have something to go on to get started, at least.

Gage's voice is strong and deep and soothing, but as he's talking, I can't fight the exhaustion that's been pulling at me since the shower. Things start to go blurry around the edges, and the sound of his voice starts to get farther away, as if he's talking through a tunnel instead of right at the kitchen table.

My body feels heavy, like I could drop right then and there in the kitchen, and I reach out to steady myself against the counter, leaning on it for support.

I'm too tired to fight it, and trying to shove it back doesn't help. My force of will can't keep the exhaustion at bay.

All of the guys notice, of course. Gage stops talking and pins me with a look, and Priest and Ash are out of their chairs before anyone has time to say anything.

Ash grabs my arm, offering additional support, and Priest scans my face again. I know he's going to see how worn out I am, and he's going to make me go to bed.

He looks me over and then looks back to Gage without a word. But clearly they don't need to talk.

"That's enough for now," Gage says firmly.

I open my mouth, not even planning to argue, but before I can get a word out, Knox folds his arms and gives me his own stern look.

"Don't make me throw you over my shoulder and carry you upstairs," he says. "Because I will. And you know I'll enjoy the fuck out of it."

"He will," Ash agrees, shrugging one shoulder. "Sorry, killer. He's just a big caveman at heart. And none of us will stop him."

Priest looks back to me, and he doesn't say anything. But he doesn't have to. I know if I try to tell them I'm fine and don't need to rest, they'll make good on letting Knox cart me off.

I can see the possessiveness and protectiveness in all of their faces, the worry that makes them want to take care of me—even if that means forcing me to take care of myself. There's nothing I can do to convince them it's not needed, and honestly, I'm too tired to even try.

"Fine," I agree, nodding and leaning into Ash's hold on me. "You're right."

"Whoa. Write that down," Ash says, giving me a lopsided grin. "She said we were right about something. This is a historic day."

Gage sighs and shakes his head, and I step away from Ash and Priest and head out of the kitchen before Knox can scoop me up.

The exhaustion is all the way down to my bones now, threatening to pull me under before I even get to the stairs, but I keep going. When I reach the second level of the house and start making my way to my room, I realize there are footsteps following behind me.

I don't have to turn around and see his face to know that it's Priest. I can feel his presence behind me, and I know he's the only one so good at projecting his feelings without saying anything.

He closes the door to my bedroom once we step inside, and when I flop onto the bed, he lies down beside me and pulls me into his arms.

I go gratefully, letting his familiar scent and warmth mix with the tiredness, finally giving in when it pulls me down into sleep.

RIVER

I'M BACK in the alley again.

Julian stands there in front of me, anger and hate on his face. He opens his mouth to curse me, to tell me he should have killed me when he had the chance the first time—but when he speaks, it's not his voice I hear.

Instead, it's his father's voice.

Lorenzo Maduro, whose voice I heard so many times when he held us in captivity that I could pick it out of a crowd immediately.

"Come here then, pretty."

Julian's face is a mask of frustration and spite, but the words are slippery. Oily with fake comfort and affection. A trap in every sense of the word.

Hannah is behind me, but then all of a sudden, she's not. All of a sudden, she's on her knees between me and Julian. She's not the mother and strong woman I got to know before this wedding. Instead she's just a kid again, her arms wrapped around herself while she shakes and cries.

"I said, come here," Julian says in Lorenzo's voice. He reaches for her, and something visceral in me cries out to not let him touch her. I try to reach forward, to move and block him from getting to her, but I can't. It's like I'm locked in place.

I look down, and there's nothing holding me to the spot, but then suddenly I feel the phantom feeling of chains around my wrists and ankles.

"No," I manage to croak out. "No, leave her alone!"

Julian looks up at me, his sneer still in place.

"You shouldn't have gotten involved in my business!" he snaps, and there's a split second flash of relief to hear he sounds like himself again. I

never thought I'd want that.

My heart races in my chest, and I reach for Hannah again. This time, I can move, but as soon as my hand goes to touch her shoulder, it phases through it, like she's not even there.

She turns to me with wide, terrified eyes, opening her mouth to say something, but before she can, she jolts hard, struck in the side by something.

"Hannah!" I scream. It's my voice, but it sounds younger, more scared than angry. It sounds like me at sixteen, and suddenly we're not in the alley anymore.

The dream shifts, and I'm alone in a room. I'm not tied down, but my body is sore and worn out. My wrists are scraped raw from fighting against restraints. I know the door to the room is locked, but I throw myself at it anyway.

From beyond the door, I can hear Hannah crying. The choked off sobs that mean she's trying to hold the sound back, so I won't hear it and worry.

I beat my hands against the door.

"Stop it!" I scream. "Leave her alone!"

No one seems to hear me.

Or if they do, they sure as fuck don't care.

I don't know what to do, but I know I have to do something. I can't let them hurt her. I have to—

BANG!

The gunshot is loud, piercing my eardrums. And then there's silence. I frown, trying to make sense of it, trying to think what could possibly be happening.

The room fades around me, and I'm back in the alley again. Hannah's on the ground, blood seeping from her side, mouth opening and closing as she gasps for air.

It's the scene from the wedding again, but Julian and Cody aren't there this time.

Instead, it's the other men. Lorenzo, Ivan, and the rest of them, in a circle around Hannah's body. They lean in around her, like they're going to touch her, and I lunge forward, feral and furious.

"Don't you fucking dare!" I scream, already swinging, ready to beat them back with my bare hands if I have to.

But just like when I went to touch Hannah, my hands go right through them.

They all start laughing, and the sound is grating and cruel. For a split second, the alley blurs and almost looks like the house they kept us in. Lorenzo's face shifts between being his own and being Julian's. Hannah is both young and grown up, but always bleeding.

It's so fucking much.

It's overwhelming, and my heart feels like it's going to beat out of my chest. The cruel laughter gets louder and louder, and when I look down at Hannah, her mouth is moving, but I don't have a hope of understanding what she's saying. I can't hear her over the laughter and the heavy thud of my own heart.

I put my hands over my ears, feeling so fucking helpless. Hannah is dying, and there's nothing I can do. I can't touch the men who hurt her. I can't do anything.

I can never fucking do anything.

My eyes snap open, a strangled sound getting caught in my throat.

I'm in my bedroom, lying on my back in bed. My body is drenched in sweat, and my cheeks hurt from how hard I've been clenching my jaw. Just like in the dream, my heart is pounding so hard that my chest aches, and I can hear the sound in my own head, drowning out almost everything else.

Immediately, strong arms tighten around me. There's a second where I feel like I should fight against the hold before I realize that I know those arms.

They're strong, thick, and covered in tattoos. They definitely belong to Knox.

When I turn my head to the right, there he is, curled up in bed facing me. He's not asleep, and he quirks a little smile at me when I look at him.

I can't return it just yet, but the relief that floods me is like a balm after the horror of that nightmare.

Someone shifts on my other side, and I know it's Priest, still in the bed where he was when I fell asleep.

Gage and Ash are in the room too, Ash sitting cross legged on the floor, fiddling with something in his lap, and Gage in the desk chair, looking at something on his phone.

Even the dog is there, curled up at the foot of the bed with his head resting on my ankle. That can't be comfortable, but Jack Sparrow looks like

he's happy to just be there with all of us.

It hits me all over again that I'm not alone. Not with this or with anything else, and gradually that starts to calm me down. My heart rate slows, and some of the tension starts to bleed out of my body.

Gage catches my eye, looking up from whatever he was reading.

"Are you okay?" he asks, his voice pitched low to be soft and soothing or whatever. It actually does help.

He doesn't press me for information or ask what I was dreaming about, and I like that. No one in this room is a stranger to nightmares. Probably not even Dog, who lived his life in an alley by a dumpster before he attached himself to me and became my unofficially adopted pet.

"Yes," I tell Gage. "I'm okay."

My voice comes out raspy and hoarse, and my answer probably isn't even a little bit convincing, but I don't want to get into it. I don't want to try to describe the shit I saw in my dream, because then I'll have to relive it all over again.

I just want to put it behind me, so I take a deep breath and try to let it all go.

"What time is it?" I ask. The light from the windows is all golden, but it doesn't feel like I was out for that long. Probably because nightmares aren't fucking restful at all.

"After four," Gage replies. "You were out for most of the day."

"Fuck." I reach up and rub at my face. "I didn't mean to sleep that long."

"You needed it," Priest says. He's close enough that his lips tickle the skin of my neck, and he slides one hand down my side.

"I know, but we have shit to do," I tell him. "I'm not going to fuck over Julian in my sleep."

Knox snorts at that. "That's what you have us for, little fox. We did research while you were knocked out."

"We?" Ash asks, looking up at him with a raised eyebrow. "Is that your new nickname for me?"

Knox rolls his eyes. "Fine. Gage and Ash did research. I sharpened my knives. You know, just in case."

It hits me once again that they're on board with my plan and want to help me every step of the way. It's like a mantra that repeats in my head, helping to beat back the pain and grief and nightmares.

I'm not alone.

I'm not alone.

I'm not alone.

“Sharpening knives definitely counts as a useful activity,” I tell Knox, who grins at me. Then I shift my attention to Gage and Ash. “What did you find out?”

“Some interesting things about our friend Julian,” Gage says, and the word *friend* is laced with so much hate that I can almost taste it. “His main business, on the illegal end anyway, is trafficking cocaine. Detroit’s a hot city for it, and Julian controls a decent-sized chunk of the traffic here.”

“Explains a lot about what he probably would have wanted to use our club for,” Ash says. “If we’d gone through with the whole ‘holy matrimony’ bit with Knox and his sister.”

“Fucking disgusting,” Knox mutters, pulling me closer like I’m some kind of balm against the thought of marrying Natalie Maduro. And honestly, I’m fine with that. I hated the thought of him being with that witch even more than he did.

“I’m just saying. If he’s dealing out cocaine to smaller gangs and the mid-level dealers, then the club would have been perfect for smuggling things through.”

“Or laundering money for him,” Priest chimes in. “It had a lot of benefits.”

“For him,” I say. “Not so many for you guys.”

But we’ve already been down the path of why they were willing to do it in the first place, and I know we don’t need to rehash it, so I move on. “What do we need to know now?” I ask them.

“Where he’s getting his supply,” Gage says. “Who he’s buying from. And who he’s selling to. If we can fuck up both sides of his business, that’ll make the whole thing grind to a halt.”

“How do we do that?” I’ve done some meddling in people’s businesses before, but I’ve never tried to bring a whole operation down like this. Usually I was just there to kill a guy and then move on.

“We have to follow his money,” Priest tells me, and I can still feel his lips moving against my skin. “It’s the best way to track it down. Money never lies, and it’ll help us learn more.”

“There’s another thing,” Ash adds. “Julian’s apparently been trying to level up.”

“As a drug dealer?” I ask, sitting up enough to see him better.

He shakes his head. “No, in the legit world. In society and politics. He’s been trying to kiss the asses of some of the wealthiest players in Detroit. People like Sebastian Raines, Alec Beckham, and Jeffery Warren.”

I frown, turning those names over in my head. I know them by reputation, just like anyone else who does business in Detroit. They’re wealthy as fuck, moving in the kinds of circles that do whatever they want because they have the money to make almost anything happen.

It’s interesting that Julian is trying to cozy up to people like that. Climbing the social ladder and gaining more power on the legit side of things makes sense in a way, but it begs the question of what he wants to do with it.

“I guess it gives us another way to bring him down,” I say with a little shrug. “That sister fucking murderer isn’t getting any higher up in society if I have anything to say about it.”

Knox laughs and drags me back down so he can kiss me firmly on the mouth. His eyes are bright with amusement and something that’s probably bloodlust. His shaggy hair is a mess, and he looks a little feral, but it works for him. Like it always does. Once again, I can only be glad that he didn’t have to end up marrying Natalie after all.

“It’s hot when you get all ready to fuck someone’s life up,” he says, hands roaming over my body aimlessly.

“I’ve been ready for that since you met me,” I point out.

He just grins wider. “Maybe that’s why I’ve been hot for you since day one.”

I laugh a little, and it feels good. It feels good to have a plan and to have them with me and to know that we have a path to doing what needs to be done.

I feel better after sleeping too. So I pull myself out of bed and go get dressed, not even minding that all the men are there, clustered in the room. They’ve all seen me naked before anyway, so feeling their eyes on me when I pull my shirt over my head and swap it for a new one is no big deal.

They all watch me as I move around the room, putting dirty clothes in the hamper and neatening up a little. I grab a bottle of nail polish and shake it, eyeing the color. It’s a shimmery, color shifting purple, and it feels right for the moment.

My old polish is chipped all to hell, battered and fucked up from the wedding and the church and everything that went down. Kind of like me, it didn't make it out in one piece.

But I can sit down and take all the old polish off, cleaning my nails until there's no trace of the old color any more. It's not so easy to do that with the memories from that alley, but in a way, rubbing off the old polish helps wash away some of the pain that still clings to me.

Swiping on neat, even coats of the new color helps even more. I try to let it make me a new person.

A better, stronger person. One who can do what needs to be done for Hannah.

Gage, Ash, Priest, and Knox just watch me as I do it. They seem to understand that this is one of my little rituals, and they're quiet, lost in their own thoughts and giving me the space to do what I need to do.

Once I put away the little bottle and start blowing on my nails to dry them faster, Knox and Priest move to get up from the bed.

"We should get to work," Gage says, getting up and stretching his arms over his head. "We have a lot of ground to cover and some leads to track down."

The men move like a well-oiled machine, and this might be the first time they're going after someone like Julian in the name of someone else, someone who they didn't even really know, but it's definitely not the first time they've destroyed someone. They all know how this goes.

"We need more information," Gage continues. "Anything we can find. River, you're with me."

I'm used to working alone when it comes to things like this, but I know I don't want to be alone now. So I nod and grab my shoes and jacket, following him down the stairs to the car.

We go to meet a few of the contacts the guys keep—informants and people they've worked with before when they need information.

I don't need Gage to tell me that we have to be careful and quiet about all this. The last thing we need is Julian finding out that we've been poking around in his affairs. Either he'll get spooked and start shutting shit down, or he'll retaliate before we have enough to really stick it to him.

And neither of those will have the satisfying end that Hannah deserves after everything that fucker put her through.

We pull up to a motel, just off the highway, and get out of the car. Gage takes the lead, and I'm happy to let him. Instead of going through the front, we head around to the back and meet one of the housekeeping staff who's on a smoke break.

As soon as he sees Gage, he straightens up and stubs out the cigarette against the side of the building.

I let Gage do most of the talking. He knows how to handle this kind of thing, and the informant already knows him anyway. Plus, I'm still fucked up inside. When I close my eyes, I can still see Hannah falling and then laying there, never getting up again. I can feel her blood on my hands and see her mouth moving as she tries to say our little mantra to me one last time. The pain is raw and ragged around the edges, and it feels good to have something to distract from it, but I know that's not the same as healing it.

If I let it, it'll creep back in time and time again, get too big for me to handle. I'm trying to soldier through and get shit done, and I want to be here doing this, but I'm glad that Gage is taking point since my head is still a mess.

Gage says the name of who we're looking into, and the informant, wearing a name tag that says Frisco, does a low whistle.

"Big name," he says, glancing around like he wants to make sure there's no one there to overhear us.

Gage nods. "It's not small. But it is important. What do you know?"

Frisco shrugs. "Not much. Honest. I know the name and reputation. Know he's big in the drug scene around here, but that's all I've got off-hand. I can do some digging though. Maybe get you some more."

"Good," Gage says, nodding again. "And I don't need to tell you what happens if this gets traced back to us, do I?"

Frisco shakes his head, sending dark hair flopping across his forehead. "Nope. I know. My lips are sealed and all that."

"Good," Gage says again. "Reach out if you find anything."

We get back in the car and head to another location. This time a restaurant that I'm not familiar with. We go through the kitchen to the back and talk to a dishwasher, thankfully alone in the kitchen, up to her elbows in hot, soapy water.

Just like Frisco, she doesn't know much about Julian that we don't already know, but promises to keep an ear out for anything that she can find out.

“They’ll get us more information,” Gage says as we head back to the car one last time. “Those two are our best for stuff like this.”

I guess that makes sense when I think about it. People who work in service are always ignored, and they have front row seats to people’s conversations. Plus, Gage seems confident about it, which is good enough for me.

Gage starts the car, and I light a cigarette, rolling down the window so I can blow smoke out as we drive.

“Do you mind making one more stop?” he asks, glancing over at me.

“No, that’s fine,” I tell him. “Another informant?”

He shakes his head. “No, this is more of a... personal stop.”

That sparks my curiosity.

“Sure,” I say, trying to pay attention as he drives to where we’re going.

I recognize the slum as soon as we pull up to it. It’s the first place I ever went with Gage, unless being dragged into the guys’ basement while I was knocked out counts. Back when we were looking for information about Ivan, when I started to wonder more about Gage than I wanted to.

I remember Meredith, the old woman who seemed to know a little bit of everything, and who greeted Gage like he was family. I also remember that she basically *is* family to him, since Gage told me all about how she was there for him when he didn’t have anyone else after his mom died, leaving him with his piece of shit father.

It makes me even more curious about why we’re here, and I follow Gage up the stairs to Meredith’s floor. He knocks, and she calls out for him to come in, so we step inside.

The place looks about the same as last time, dimly lit and rundown, but cozy in a way. Meredith is in her chair, and she smiles crookedly when Gage gets close enough for her to be certain it’s him.

“Ah. I thought it was you,” she says, beckoning him forward. “You finally remembered I exist?”

“As if I could forget,” Gage replies. His tone is flippant, but there’s fondness underneath it that I can hear now that I know what I’m listening for.

Meredith reaches out and takes his hand, squeezing it before letting him go. “Who have you brought?” she asks, turning in my direction.

“River,” Gage says, drawing me forward. “You remember her from last time we were here?”

She smiles. “The girl asking about Ivan. I remember. You still following this knucklehead around?”

Gage snorts, and I can’t help but smile. “It looks like it,” I tell her. “He’s not so bad.”

“No, he’s not. He’s a good man when it comes down to it. Just gets in a lot of trouble.”

“I get in a lot of trouble too,” I say. “So it works out.”

She laughs at that, and Gage smiles. It’s a softer smile than his usual one, sweeter, and it’s so clear to see how much he cares for this woman.

“Who do you need dirt on today?” Meredith asks, giving her attention back to Gage.

“No business today, Mer,” he replies. “Happy Birthday.”

As he speaks, he pulls out a large wad of cash wrapped in a band and passes it over to her.

She takes it in her wrinkled hands and feels it, thumbing through the bills without looking at them, since she’s mostly blind from what I remember. Then she sighs and glances back up in his direction, smiling a little.

“You don’t have to do this every year, you know. I’m not starving up here.”

“I gotta look out for my best girl,” Gage says, stepping back a little like he thinks she’s going to try to hand the money back. “You know that.”

Just watching them together makes my chest ache a little. It’s a side of him that no one sees often, a side that doesn’t come out often.

There’s none of that simmering anger or disdain that he usually has reason to wear, and instead he’s smiling and teasing and open. I like this side of him just as much as his harsh, gruff side. Then again, they’re all part of the same side, in a way. He’s so gruff and controlling and dominant because he loves so fucking fiercely.

He’s constantly trying to protect what he loves, and the people in his heart are prone to trouble, just like he is.

“If you’re going to go around being this generous to old women, then you at least have to stay for dinner,” Meredith is saying. “Those are the rules.”

Gage glances at me, and I can tell from the look on his face that he’s ready to gently decline. Either because he thinks I’m not up for it so soon

after... everything, or that we have to keep working on our plans to take down Julian.

It would probably be easier to leave, but I don't want to do that. Instead, I smile at him and then look to Meredith. "We'd love to stay for dinner."

There's something about being in this woman's home that's soothing to me. It feels like family, in a weird way, even though I hardly know Meredith. But it comforts me. Watching Gage interact with her, seeing how familiar they are with each other, it soothes something rough and ragged inside me, and I need that right now.

"Good," Meredith says. "Good, good. Let me get something going then."

"Let me help you," Gage says, coming to her side as she starts to lift herself up and out of the chair.

She waves him away though, getting up easily enough and holding on to the chair as she moves toward the small kitchen.

"I've got it," she says. "What do you think I do while you're off conquering the world? Sit in that chair and lounge around all day? I can manage dinner, Gage."

There's no bitterness in her tone, just fond teasing, and Gage smiles as he shakes his head and watches her make her way to the kitchen.

He's ready to help her if she needs it, but she manages fine, moving around confidently, opening the fridge and the cabinets as she puts dinner together.

Soon the little apartment is filled with the scent of chicken and vegetables, simple and reheated from a grocery store container.

But it doesn't really matter that the meal is simple. We sit down at the table with our plates and big plastic cups of diet coke, and it feels like a family meal.

"These used to be Gage's favorite," Meredith says, lifting her cup. It's bright green, and whatever design used to be on it is now faded and chipping away after years of washing. "He'd sit on the floor in front of the TV with a big cup in his hands and drink sodas all day. Ended up bouncing off the walls half the time from the sugar, but it always made him happy."

"That sounds adorable," I say, shooting Gage a teasing smile. He rolls his eyes and takes a bite of chicken, but he doesn't look embarrassed at all.

"Meredith always had soda," he says. "I didn't get that a lot as a kid."

I remember what he told me about his childhood, and how he would come here when things were really bad at home. It's a nice image, the thought of a young Gage, sitting in front of the TV having a treat to get away from how shitty his family life was. At least he had that.

"He was always nice to have around," Meredith continues. "He'd go to the store for me and come back with bags and bags of stuff. I had to remind him a few times that people couldn't live off cheese puffs and coke, but he was a big help, you know? I was already too old to go up and down the stairs with those big bags by then."

"Too old or too lazy?" Gage teases, giving her that fond smile all over again. He doesn't seem embarrassed that she's telling these stories about him at all, and it's nice that he doesn't mind me knowing.

It's proof that we've come a long way since the whole "no talking about our pasts" pact that we made way back at the beginning.

"What's the difference?" Meredith shoots back, cackling a little. "Either way, better to make the one with the young legs and strong arms do the lifting and climbing. It was nice to have the help and the company."

"The company was good," Gage agrees, nodding and finishing off his food.

Meredith smiles at him, and there's so much familiar sweetness in it. So much love.

The rest of the meal is the same, pretty much. She tells more stories about the things Gage liked as a kid, and how he would offer to spend the night at her place to make sure no one broke in or anything.

"I half thought maybe he just didn't want to go home, but someone bashed in the windows in one of the first floor apartments, so he just really did want to keep me safe."

"He's like that," I reply with a little smile, glancing over at Gage.

We finish up eating, and even though Meredith tells him more than once that he doesn't have to, Gage insists on clearing the table and doing the dishes. He moves around her kitchen with the same ease that he has when he's clearing up at home.

"There," he says, when he's finished, wiping his hands on a towel. "Now we can go."

"You're a stubborn thing," Meredith replies, shaking her head.

"I wonder where I got that from," he fires back.

She shakes her head again, but a smile pulls at her mouth when he leans in to hug her.

“Don’t be a stranger,” she murmurs.

“I’ll try not to be. There’s just a lot going on right now. Happy birthday again.”

He steps back, and Meredith looks toward me, opening her arms. I only hesitate for a second or two before moving in closer to her, to give her a loose hug. She leans in, patting me on the back.

“I can tell he cares about you,” Meredith almost whispers, saying it for my ears only. “And that you care about him too. That’s good. He needs someone strong to look after him when I can’t.”

She lets me go and steps back, and a feeling of warmth washes over me. Clearly, Meredith approves, and that means something to me. Aside from the rest of the guys, this woman is all Gage has in terms of family, so I want her to know he’s being cared for.

I nod, then follow Gage out of the apartment and down the stairs.

It’s quiet in the car for the first part of the drive back, but it’s not strained or sad, really. Just pensive and a bit somber. When I look over at Gage, his fingers are relaxed on the steering wheel, and for once, he’s not clenching his jaw or looking like he’s about to go off on somebody.

“How long have you been doing that?” I ask him. “Taking care of Meredith. Giving her birthday money.”

He shrugs a shoulder, keeping his gaze on the road.

“Ever since I left, really.” One side of his mouth quirks up in a little smile. “Even when I couldn’t really afford it.”

That fits with what I know about Gage, and I like the thought of it. He didn’t leave her behind when he left, and he kept trying to help her and support her, even before it was as easy as it was now. It just goes along with how much he cares about the people in his heart. How he’s willing to do anything he can for them.

“Have you ever tried to get her out of there?” I ask.

“Plenty of times,” he says. “Over the years, I’ve given her more than enough money that she could have left already and moved into some place much nicer. But that’s not how she is. She doesn’t even keep all the money. She spreads it around to the other tenants and helps them out. There are people she cares about there. People she’s helped as much as she helped me.

She's not going to leave them behind, and I can't argue with her about it, because I get that."

"Yeah," I say softly. "I get it too."

Gage reaches across the center console and rests his hand on my leg, squeezing a little. I can feel the warmth of his palm through my pants, and the gesture is possessive and affectionate at the same time.

Neither of us says anything, but he lets his hand linger there.

And in the end, that says a lot.

KNOX

I DRUM my fingers on the steering wheel as I head back home from hunting down leads. It's not too late yet, still early evening, and something like anxiety is jumping under my skin.

I'm anxious to get back home for some reason. I don't know if River and Gage will be back yet, but I want to see River. I thought I was addicted to her before, but now it's something bigger than that.

Not addiction.

Obsession.

Seeing that fucker feeling her up at the bar, seeing River so broken and fucked up... it made me see red. She was just slumped there, clearly going through some shit, and that fucker decided to take advantage of her. Like she didn't even matter. Like she was just a piece of meat for him to paw at because he was horny or whatever.

Looking back on it, I wish I'd made him suffer more. He fucking deserved it. He deserved to have that shit drawn out so he could feel maybe even a fraction of the pain that River was in then. But at the time, I was too anxious to get back to River and make sure she was okay, so I took care of that asshole quick.

There's that itch under my skin that means the beast inside me is pacing in its cage. I want to take more motherfuckers out. Burn the whole damn world down if it would make River feel better. Hunting down leads and shit is all well and good, but I want some action. I want to do something, bring her some heads on a platter if it'll help.

But I know that part is going to come eventually. This is all part of a bigger plan, but there's murder at the end of it, so I can live with that. As

long as someone kills Julian, it's okay.

I pull up to the house, and my mood brightens when I see Gage's car in the driveway.

That means she's here.

River is in the kitchen with the other three Kings. Priest is at the kitchen table with his chair pulled out so River can perch in his lap. She looks better than she did when we found her at that bar, although she still seems run down and tired.

But she's not giving up. That's the thing that always draws me back to her time and time again.

She *never* gives up.

Priest is running his hands over her sides while she sits there, clearly still needing to have her close after almost losing her. I get that, but he's not the only one who almost lost her, so he can share her with the rest of us. I walk over and pluck her up from his lap, setting her on the counter like she weighs nothing.

Priest doesn't argue, and I shoot him a little grin. "My turn now."

River just snorts, rolling her eyes.

I step between her legs and bury my face in the silvery hair that cascades down the crook of her neck, inhaling her like some kind of druggie getting a fix. She smells like the floral shit she uses to wash her hair, and also that undercurrent of something sweet and indefinable that's just... *her*.

She tilts her head to the side, letting me do whatever I want, and my cock jumps a little in my pants, getting hard. It used to be a fight to get her to accept this kind of affection and possessiveness, but now she's welcoming it and relaxing into it, and that's hot as fuck to me.

She slides a hand down my chest, not really heading anywhere, just touching me back, and I give a low, pleased rumble in my chest. The anxiety that was hopping under my skin is calming down now, and I feel my shoulders relaxing even as my cock decides that relaxing is for chumps.

"How did it go?" Gage asks, leaning against the kitchen island with his arms folded.

I pull back from River's neck so I can speak to him but keep one hand at her waist, my fingers dipping under the hem of her shirt because I need to be touching her in some way.

“Got some good info,” I tell him. While the others were hunting for information about Julian, I went to see what happened in the aftermath of the shootout at the church. “Looks like all the cartel fuckers who pulled up on us are dead. They probably didn’t know what they were walking into and how many dangerous people would be at the church that day. They expected it to be a massacre, but...”

I shrug.

“But they were outnumbered by all the guests with guns pretty quickly?” Ash puts in.

“Seems like it.”

“Anything about Julian?” Gage wants to know.

I trail my fingers down River’s side, and she shivers against me but doesn’t pull away. “Doesn’t seem like he’s making any moves against us,” I say.

“Not even me?” River breaks in.

“You’re part of us,” I tell her, leaning in to nuzzle at her neck again for a second. “At least no obvious moves, you know. I guess since he’s trying to advance in ‘civilized’ society,” I make heavy air quotes with my free hand. “He’s probably trying to brush the whole wedding incident under the rug. Guess it doesn’t look too good when cartel members show up to shoot up your sister’s wedding or whatever.”

Gage hums under his breath, and I can practically hear him turning all that information over in his head. That’s what he does.

“So the cartel is off our backs, then?” Ash asks. “I mean, if I lost most of my people in one attack, I’d back the fuck down from that fight.”

“I think we can probably assume they won’t be fucking with us any time soon, at least,” Gage agrees. “Both times they’ve come after River, they’ve lost men. It’s probably not worth it to them anymore.”

“You’re probably right. But we should keep our guard up anyway,” Priest says. “In the unlikely event they do come after us again, I don’t want them to catch us by surprise again.”

He tightens his fingers into a fist, and I know he’s thinking about the dude we chased down who shot at River outside the house and then died before he could give us anything.

“Agreed.” Gage nods, his dark hair glinting. “Julian is the bigger priority, but we need to stay alert to *any* possible threats.”

I grin at him, giving him my monster's smile. "Julian's going to get his, and if the cartel decides to start more shit, they can get in line to get theirs too."

Before Gage can respond to that, there's a knock at the front door. The room goes silent immediately, all of us going still as we tilt our heads like predators listening for a sound on the wind. It's not too late for visitors yet, I guess, so it could be nothing. But we're all on edge anyway, considering all that's happened lately. We don't get a lot of unexpected guests around here.

"I'll get it," Ash says, casting his gaze around at the rest of us. His tone is light, but his expression is serious.

He strides out of the room, and none of us move as we listen to the muffled sounds of him greeting someone at the door. He's only gone for a minute or two before he comes back into the kitchen with a now familiar face trailing behind him.

Mitch Carter, the FBI agent.

Ash gives us all a look that we don't need words to interpret. Time to switch into "covering our asses mode" for whatever this fucker wants to ask us about.

River gets down off the counter, and I give her some space, even though I don't want to. Fuck this guy for coming in and thinking he can interrupt what we had going on.

We've met this FBI guy a couple times, and I don't like him. He's broad-shouldered like I am, but not as big, and he's older than me by at least a decade, with a few lines around his eyes. His sandy brown hair is cut short and styled carefully, as if he wants everything from his clothes to his haircut to let people know he means business.

"I don't mean to barge in so late," Carter says, glancing around at all of us.

Gage just arches an eyebrow but doesn't say anything, making it pretty clear that if he hadn't meant to barge in on us, he wouldn't have done it.

"It's not a problem," Ash chimes in, flashing his charming smile. "What can we help you with, Agent Carter?"

"I'm following up on a shooting that happened at a church yesterday," the older man says. He describes a few details about the incident, including when and where it happened, then lifts an eyebrow slightly. "You were there when it happened, right?"

Gage nods. "We were."

He leaves it at that, and he and Carter stare at each other for a long moment, both waiting for the other one to say something more than that. But Gage doesn't budge, so Carter's the one who has to speak up if he wants more information.

"What was your business there?"

"A wedding," Gage replies. "Same as everyone else who was there."

"I see. And do you know anything about the attack that happened?" Carter looks away from Gage to Ash.

"I know it was fucked up," Ash says. "I mean, who attacks a wedding, right?"

"That's what I'm hoping to find out—who was behind the attack. Any information you can give me will help me on that path."

Ash shrugs a shoulder. "No idea. One minute, we're sitting there, waiting for the vows to start, and the next minute, there are gunshots and men in black running around. Some of them were masked, so it was hard to see their faces, and we weren't really trying to see if we knew any of them, you know? Too busy trying not to get shot in the head."

Carter looks at him for a long second and then glances over at Priest. "And you don't have any idea why someone would've wanted to attack this wedding?"

Priest gives Carter his best blank stare. "Why does anyone do anything?" he asks. "I could make some guesses, but that's not really helpful, is it?"

It's clear that Carter doesn't really believe us, and he keeps looking around at all of us gathered in the kitchen like he thinks one of us will break and spill our guts for him or something. Everyone's doing their best neutral face, and it seems like he understands he's not going to get much out of us.

"You know," he says. "It's interesting that you all seem to have a habit of being in the places where dead bodies end up."

I almost snort out loud but hold it back. I don't need Gage to glare at me to know he wouldn't like that, but this guy has no idea how many dead bodies have ended up in our path.

"It's a dangerous city," Gage offers with a little shrug. "It's hard to be safe all the time, apparently."

Carter makes a face, but he can't deny that. "Fine," he says. "What time did you all arrive at the church?"

“A little before the service started,” Gage answers. “We were some of the first there.”

“And what time did you leave?”

Now Gage does snort, and he gives Carter a look. “I couldn’t tell you. I wasn’t checking the time when it came to trying to get everyone out in one piece.”

“That’s a fair point,” Carter says. He reaches up to scratch at his nose, which is a little crooked, like it’s been broken at some point. “And were you all together through the whole service?”

“For the most part.”

“For the most part?”

“We sat together, but Knox had a bigger role than the rest of us, so…” Gage shrugs again. “He was on his own for a bit.”

I grin, trying to land somewhere between Ash’s charming smile and my usual scary one. No idea if it works, but whatever.

“But I was standing up in front of all the guests, so it’s not like I slipped off into the shadows or something,” I add.

If Carter is unnerved by my smile, he hides it pretty well and just jots something down.

“Fine,” he says again.

He flips the notebook closed and glances over at River, which changes the atmosphere in the room just a bit.

None of us like him having his eyes on her.

He looks her over, and she stands still, staring right back at him. I wonder what he sees. She looks better than she did when we got her home from the church, but the exhaustion and grief are still there, weighing her down. Her spark is back a little bit, but it’s not as bright as it usually is.

I have a couple seconds to wonder what Carter’s going to make of that before he speaks again.

“You’re injured,” he says, nodding to the stitches in River’s arm. “Are you alright?”

River just nods, and I fight the urge to pull her behind me and rip this fucker’s head off for even looking at her.

“We ID’d a lot of bodies at the scene,” Carter continues. “And I know one of them was your sister. I’m sorry for your loss.”

“Thank you,” River says, but I can feel her stiffen beside me.

Protective, possessive instincts rise inside me, and suddenly, keeping River from this guy's view isn't enough. He's bringing up painful shit for her, probably trying to leverage it so he can solve this case or what-the-fuck-ever. Like her feelings don't matter when it comes to his agenda.

I hate that, and in this moment, I hate him.

I want to punch him right in his stupid fucking face, or grab his head and bash it against the kitchen island until he can't ask any more stupid questions.

Carter's eyes stay locked on River, and he's basically talking only to her now.

"I just want to help," he says. "I want to find the people who did this. But I can't do that if you all don't help me."

The tension in the room goes up another couple of notches. It's probably only really noticeable to the five of us because we're that attuned to each other, but we're all tense now. It's not that we don't trust River, we just don't like this asshole getting close to her or talking to her at all. He doesn't have the fucking right.

"I don't know what you mean," River says. "We told you what we know."

"I know there's something bigger going on here," Carter insists. "And if you know anything that could point me in the right direction, then it would get me closer to figuring out who's responsible for this."

"I'm sorry." River shakes her head stubbornly, her face carefully blank. "I don't have any names for you."

Her answer hangs in the air for a long moment—long enough for it to grow uncomfortable. I know what the FBI agent is doing, letting the silence drag out in the hopes that she'll blurt something just to break it. But River is smarter than that, and although she can be impulsive just like me, she's good at holding her ground. She's not the type to cave to stupid mind games like this.

After another beat, Carter finally nods and steps back.

"Alright. I'm sorry for taking up so much of your evening then. I'll be on my way. Thanks for your time." He turns to leave the kitchen, but then stops and glances over his shoulder. "By the way, you should have your stitches looked at by a professional. They're sloppy."

With those parting words, he strides from the room.

Ash follows him out of the kitchen, walking him back to the front door to make sure he leaves and doesn't poke around in our shit.

"Fucker!" I explode as I hear the car start up in the driveway. "Calling my goddamn stitches sloppy. I should rip his fucking head off."

"You're not going to do that," River says, almost laughing a little. She catches my arm and pulls me back, stopping me from going after him.

"She's right, Knox," Gage says. "No killing FBI agents. If we can help it."

It doesn't sit right with me to let him just get away with saying shit like that and looking at River and just being the way he is, but I guess Gage has a point. I scowl for a second and then sigh, turning to leave the kitchen.

"Where are you going?" Ash asks, passing me as he comes back into the kitchen.

"I'm going to go sharpen something," I mutter and storm off down to the basement.

RIVER

I WATCH KNOX stride out of the kitchen, and none of us even flinch when the basement door slams.

Gage sighs and rubs at his forehead. “We have to be careful with the FBI poking around. But at least pretty much everyone at the wedding will have a vested interest in not helping the feds, since they’ve all got their hands in illegal shit.”

I nod, leaning against the counter.

“I wonder how much Carter actually knows about what went down,” Priest says. “Or if he was just trying to trap us into a confession.”

“I don’t think he has many details,” Gage replies. “He’s probably got the bodies of the cartel members, but it’s not like he can pin that back on us. They could have been after anyone at that wedding. Everyone there has something to hide.”

“Benefits of having the guest list be almost exclusively mob bosses and drug pushers,” Ash puts in. “We’re pretty far from the worst ones who were there.”

I’m really only half listening to their conversation, and as it moves on to other subjects, I slip out of the kitchen to go find Knox.

It’s not hard, seeing as how he slammed the basement door so hard it rattled the house, so I head down the stairs, following the sound of something being slashed apart and Knox’s grunts.

When I enter the basement room, there’s a large burlap sack suspended in the center of it, and Knox has a massive knife in one hand. He hacks at the sack with angry precision, hitting the spots that would probably be the

vital organs if it was a person. The burlap is clearly something he doesn't need anymore, just a vessel to take his aggression out on in this moment.

I smirk at him, folding my arms and leaning against the counter off to the side. "I thought you came down here to sharpen things," I tease him. "This looks like the opposite of that."

"I gotta get the knife dull first," he grunts out, breathing hard as he slashes at the sack one more time.

I chuckle at that and glance around the basement. A few cabinets are open, and I look at all the stuff down here. "I can't believe how much shit you have. How many different tools."

He pauses his attack on the sack long enough to look over at me, and his grin is a little feral. "You wouldn't ask an artist to paint with only a few colors. I can't limit myself or my imagination. You never know when you might need a new tool."

I smile back at him, drawn to the feral part of him like always. Today, I find myself feeling a little more violent than usual, all the pain inside me coming out in the need to destroy. The need to hurt those who hurt me.

I pick up a hook from the table and hold it up so he can see it. "Show me," I say simply.

Knox's grin widens, like he's found his fucking soul mate. He stops hacking at the sack and comes over to me, taking the hook from my hand.

It's silver, and decently sized. The hook part would fit in the palm of my hand, and there's a handle on it, made of the same metal as the hook.

When Knox takes it, I can see that I was holding it wrong. He puts the hook between his index and middle fingers so that the handle part is against his palm, held in place by his thumb and the rest of his fingers when he curls them into a fist.

"This one's nasty," he says, and his voice drops down lower. I can feel the heat of him as he moves in closer, and smell the scent of sweat and blood that always seems to cling to Knox. "The hook is sharpened, right? But you can't really tell. It looks like something you'd stab through, maybe to hang someone up or just cause them pain. And I do that, but that's not all." He drags the point of the hook down my chest, and I can feel how sharp it is. "Once it's stabbed into somebody, it's stuck there. If you wanted to pull it out, you'd have to rip through their flesh to get it, and that hurts even more. There are a lot of sensitive places on the human body that you can fuck up with something like this."

I shiver against him, turned on by the feel of the cold, sharp metal running over my skin, and the idea of what he's saying. I picture using it on Julian, having him chained to the wall in his own basement while I take the hook into his sensitive bits.

"More," I tell Knox, sounding just a little breathless. "Show me more."

The tall, tattooed man lights up at the request, his boyish grin at odds with his appearance and the deadly weapon in his hand. He puts the hook down and grabs a long poker next. It looks like something you would use to tend a fireplace with, long and metal with a wooden handle.

"Do you brand people with that?" I ask him.

He shakes his head. "Nah, that's too easy. That's what they expect when they see something like this. But I'm not setting a fire down here to heat it up to the right temperature, and I've got electric shit if I want to hurt somebody that way. It's fun to fuck with their heads though. You pull this out, and they think you're going to burn them, so they're bracing for that, but then you flip it up on them. Just swing it," He demonstrates, swinging the poker almost like it's a bat. "And break some bones."

I wince, imagining the feeling of that heavy metal rod slamming into someone's leg or arm or back. "Ouch."

"Yup. That's the idea," Knox tells me.

He puts the poker down and picks up a little box. Flipping it toward me, he opens the lid, and I look inside to see an array of differently sized fish hooks.

I don't need to ask to know what he does with those. The hooks on the end are sharp and barbed, and I've seen enough nature shows on TV to know how they work. Putting them into a person is another one of those "causing agony on the way in and the way out" kind of things.

"You can't really kill somebody with these," Knox says. "But you can make them wish they were dead. If it's somebody who really needs to suffer, sometimes I dip the hooks in hot sauce or lemon juice first. Just to really make it burn."

"How do you decide?" I ask him. "If you want someone to die quickly or if you want to draw it out and just fuck with them?"

Knox shrugs. "Depends on Gage sometimes. What he wants done with the person. If we just want information, then I just hurt them until they'll tell me anything I want to know, and probably some stuff I don't too. Their credit card numbers, their social security shit. *Anything*, just to make the

pain stop. If they're fucked either way, then sometimes I draw it out anyway, really make them realize what they did before I kill them. That part's usually just for me."

"What would you do if you wanted or needed to kill them quick?" I ask him.

"There are a lot of places on a person where they'll bleed out quick," he says. He puts his hands on me, touching the places where I remember the major arteries and shit are located. "If it needs to be quick and neat, then you can always snap the neck or suffocate someone. Things that don't leave a mark."

"When you killed your uncle, was it slow or quick?"

"It was quick." Knox grimaces. "Probably better than the fucker deserved, but I got what I needed anyway."

I tip my head to the side, studying him. Tattoos crawl over nearly every inch of his exposed skin except for his face, and his shoulders are as broad as a linebacker's. He's got a little scruff on his jaw, and it makes him look wild and dangerous.

"What was it that you needed?" I ask.

"I saw the fear in his eyes." Knox purses his lips, his expression taking on a faraway quality as if he's reliving something from his past. "I saw that he knew he was about to die, and I know he knew why. And then I killed him, and he died with that fear burning in his veins."

My jaw clenches, and I ball up my hand into a fist at my side. "That's what I want for Julian," I admit, my voice harsh with the force of my emotions. "I want to pick his life apart piece by piece and make sure he realizes exactly what he's lost before I kill him."

Knox doesn't say anything, just looks at me, but I know he's listening, and I know he understands.

So I keep talking, letting everything that's been building up spill out of me.

"Hannah's dead, and I feel so... guilty. She died protecting me. She jumped in front of that bullet, that had my name on it, and now she's dead. I was supposed to protect her, and I didn't."

Knox's face gets more serious, and he puts the tools in his hand down, setting them aside.

"You can't hold that guilt inside you," he says. "Everything you've done for the past five years has been to avenge Hannah, and then you tried to get

her out when you found out she was alive. She knew that. You did your best for her, and no one could ask for more.”

I swallow hard and look down at the concrete floor. It’s dark in places, probably from old blood stains that were hastily cleaned up. I fix my eyes on one patch of concrete and try to focus on that and not the darkness that wants to creep in around me.

As if Knox can see it taking hold again, he suddenly picks me up and puts me on the counter. I don’t fight it, letting him move me where he wants to.

“Hey,” he says, tipping my chin up with two of his rough fingers so I’m looking at him. “Tell me some good memories about Hannah. Whatever you can think of off the top of your head.”

I blink at him for a second, surprised by the request.

Knox isn’t usually the one for the heart to hearts and touchy feely stuff, but I guess it shows how much he cares that he wants to help chase some of this darkness away. We can’t kill anybody right now, so maybe this is the next best thing for the moment.

I open my mouth, and I don’t even have to think hard about something to talk about. It just comes out automatically.

“Hannah loved climbing trees,” I tell him. “She was freakishly good at it too. Like some kind of spider monkey or something. There was this huge tree in the park by our house, and Hannah would just shimmy up it like it was nothing. And I’d stand there at the bottom, just terrified. I was scared of heights, and even more scared of falling. But it was like Hannah didn’t even notice how high up she was. It never bothered her.”

Even just talking about it, I can picture standing at the base of that tree, watching Hannah move faster than anyone should have been able to in a tree, going from limb to limb, higher and higher.

“One day we were at the park, and I was standing there at the bottom like usual, and Hannah told me she wanted me to see the view. I said no immediately because I couldn’t even imagine trying to get that high. But she wouldn’t let me chicken out. She helped me climb this massive tree, and we went up so high it was like we could touch the clouds. We could see so much of Detroit from up there, and it looked a lot less shitty than it did from the ground. It looked beautiful.”

I get lost in that memory for a moment, thinking about the feeling of the bark, rough under my hands, and the way my heart hammered in my chest,

going a mile a minute while we climbed. Hannah's voice, just a little breathless from the climb, telling me I could do it, telling me it was all going to be worth it. She'd reach out and take my hand when I faltered, putting it on the next branch up and showing me how to make my way higher. There was wind in my face, and we could see for what felt like miles.

It takes me a bit to shake myself out of the memory, and then I glance back up at Knox. "Why did you want to know?"

He grins. "Because you have to hold on to those good memories just as hard as the bad ones. They exist too. Right alongside the bad. They're yours as much as all the awful, shitty ones are."

I raise an eyebrow at him, surprised by the depth and insightfulness of the statement.

"Wow. That's very Zen of you," I tease. "You're like a psychotic, murderous Winnie the Pooh."

Knox grins wider, and his eyes flash with heat. "So what I'm hearing is that you want me to walk around with no pants on. That can be arranged."

A laugh bursts out of me, and the weight on my chest lightens a little.

Knox leans in and kisses me, sliding his hands down my body before letting go of me to reach for his pants. I can feel him undoing his button and fly, clearly prepared to make good on that threat to go pantsless, and it makes me chuckle into the kiss.

I lean into it, craving that closeness with him, chasing the firmness and the heat of his body.

He growls under his breath, abandoning his pants once they're open, grabbing at me to haul me closer. My ass slides a bit on the table, and I let him move me, eager to get as close to him as I can.

The heat starts to build between us, and when Knox presses his tongue against my lips, I let him slide it between them, tangling my tongue with his.

But before we can lose ourselves in the inferno building between us, I hear the telltale sound of footsteps on the stairs.

Knox's hungry growl turns into one of frustration, and he reaches over and picks up a knife from the counter, throwing it toward the door just as it opens. The blade hits with a thud, embedding a couple of inches into the wood, and I look over to see Ash rolling his eyes.

He doesn't seem bothered by the fact that a knife flew toward his head as soon as he entered the room, like he knows Knox missed on purpose.

"Sorry to interrupt," he says, sounding anything but. "But one of our informants came through. We've got info on who Julian's biggest buyer is in his drug operation."

RIVER

ASH'S NEWS changes the mood instantly.

Good. I'm eager to get moving on this, to start pulling Julian's life apart. The longer it takes, the more antsy I'm going to get. He has to pay for what he did.

I separate from Knox, and Knox pulls his pants back up, doing up his fly and button. We all head back upstairs to join Gage and Priest in the living room.

The dog comes in behind us, and he stops by me to whine for head pets and then goes over to settle down at Priest's feet.

"Benedict Arnold," Ash says to the dog, shaking his head. "I gave you some bacon the other day, and this is how you repay me? By choosing Priest over me?"

Apparently that's the dog's newest name. He thumps his tail against the floor, either because he doesn't mind the name at all or because he's just happy to be there. He does seem to favor Priest over all the other guys, which is funny considering how standoffish Priest was with him when I first got here.

"Really, Ash?" Gage comments from the center of the room where he's standing. "You're jealous of a dog?"

"I'm not jealous. I'm just saying if someone gave me some bacon, maybe I'd want to sit at their feet instead of someone else's. But that's fine, Benny." He addresses the last bit to the dog. "I'm not hurt. I don't care."

I snort with amusement, and Priest just rolls his eyes and reaches down to scratch behind Benny's ears. The harshly beautiful blond man looks better than he did earlier today. More rested and less fucked up from me

running off. His eyes don't have that heaviness to them anymore, but it's clear that petting the dog is as much for Priest's comfort as it is for the dog's enjoyment.

Gage clears his throat, trying to get things back on track. "So we've got the name of Julian's biggest buyer in his drug business. It's a man named Cyrus Porter."

"What do we know about him?" Knox asks, folding his arms and leaning against the wall.

"He owns a nightclub in Detroit, but his main business is the illegal shit."

"Like us," Ash says.

"And Julian," I add.

"Right," Gage agrees. "He's one of the biggest drug dealers in the city, and he gets his supply from Julian."

"So... we need to make sure he stops buying from Julian, right?" Knox says. "There's an easy way to do that. He can't buy any of Julian's shit if he's dead."

It's a good point. Losing his main buyer would definitely throw a wrench in Julian's business and send him scrambling. And it's not like we'd even have to undercut Julian or try to convince this Cyrus guy to go buy from someone else. Killing him takes him out of the supply chain permanently.

"So let's do it," I say without hesitation, looking around at all of them. "Let's go take him out."

Gage tugs at his lip and then holds up a hand. "No. We have to be smarter about this. We can't just go kill this guy ourselves. We have to make sure our fingerprints are far away from any of this shit until it's all done. If Julian realizes it's us before we're ready, it'll blow everything."

I frown, agitation stirring within me, but then I nod—because he's right. I hate having to wait, having to draw this out even more. Especially when there's that itchy energy burning under my skin to get this ball rolling now. To make Julian pay immediately, so he can't have a single moment more of comfort. If I have to suffer because of what he did, then I want him to be suffering too.

But things have to be done a certain way. I get that. We can't let Julian know or even suspect that it's us, and with the FBI nosing around, that's even more reason to not be reckless.

I drag in a deep breath and then let it out slowly. “Right. You’re right.”
“So then, what?” I ask Gage. “How do we kill Cyrus?”

Ash grins at me, answering the question instead. “We’ll just need to convince someone else to do it.”

A COUPLE OF DAYS PASS, and the guys and I settle into deep planning mode. Taking out Julian’s main buyer is an important step in the plan to fuck up his life from the inside out, so it has to be done right.

We look into Cyrus, learning more about him and his business, and the more we learn, the more eager I get to see him dead.

His club is more of a sex club than a dancing and drinking club, and from what I can tell, it seems like a lot of the women who work there are treated badly.

There was definitely a moment where I might have felt a little bit bad that he has to die because he’s caught between us and Julian, but once I realized he’s a piece of shit, I stopped caring.

Fuck this asshole. He deserves exactly what’s coming to him.

The guys keep digging into other aspects of Julian’s life, since this is just the first step in destroying him, but we try to focus the most on the first task to make sure it gets done right. We can’t afford to fuck it up this early in the game.

In addition to his shitty club, we find out that he’s got a rival on the streets of Detroit—someone he’s clashed with before, another drug dealer named Apollo Cabrera. They’ve been fighting over territory for years, having skirmishes here and there. There’s a lot of bad blood between them.

It’s perfect.

From there, our strategy comes together pretty smoothly, and just under a week after we first got the lead on Cyrus, it’s time to make our move.

The last bit of light is fading from the evening sky as I move around my room, getting ready for what we have planned.

I stub out my cigarette and close the window I cracked open, waving my hands to dry the polish on my nails that last little bit. They’re painted black in honor of the occasion tonight. It seems fitting.

Plus, the color goes with my outfit for the night.

Once the polish is fully dry, I get dressed quickly, pulling on the slinky top and tight black pants, then adding a long-sleeved black shirt on top of it. The finishing touch is twisting my long silver hair up on top of my head and putting it under a cap.

My door creaks open, and I turn my head to see Ash coming in.

His gaze lands on me immediately, and he looks me up and down and then back up again, letting his attention drag slowly over my body.

“Damn. You look hot,” he drawls with a grin.

I roll my eyes at him. “I did a second ago, but you missed that. Now I’m just covered in black.”

“You always look hot to me,” Ash says, waggling his eyebrows at me in an over the top fashion.

I just shake my head and go back to putting my shoes on. It’s classic Ash, flirty even when there’s nothing really flirt-worthy going on, but I like it. I always believe him when he says shit like that, which makes it better.

“You ready to go?” he asks me, his tone turning a bit more serious.

I nod and follow him downstairs to where the others are already gathered, geared up and ready. We’re all in head-to-toe black, dressed in tactical gear for this mission.

I can kind of see what Ash meant about it being hot when I see all four of them gathered together, ready for action. They all look sexy as fuck when they’re dressed to the nines in expensive suits and shit, but they look damn good like this too.

Moving as a unit, we pile into the car and make our way toward Cyrus’s club.

Priest drives this time, since Gage is busy in the passenger seat. He calls their hacker friend Harv and has him turn off the cameras in the parking garage under the club. This part of our plan has all been pre-arranged, even though there seems to be a little sass from the hacker that makes Gage roll his eyes and Ash snort with amusement.

Once we know for sure that the cameras are out, we drive into the garage.

“There’s his car,” Gage says, pointing to a sleek black car with a low profile parked in a special reserved spot. “Cyrus will be inside the club.”

“This is my time to shine,” Ash murmurs.

He tosses me a wink and slides out of our car once Priest parks. We get out to watch his back, but I mostly let the guys handle keeping an eye on

things, while I keep an eye on Ash.

His skills with his hands come in useful here, and he pulls a little metal tool out of his pocket and crouches down by the driver's side of the car.

It takes a few seconds of wiggling and squinting his eyes, but then the lock pops on the door, and he pulls it open. No one claps, but he sweeps a grand bow anyway, making me roll my eyes.

Still, I can't help but smile. He's skilled as hell at this, and that's damn sexy.

Priest gives a satisfied nod and steps past him, moving in to do his part of this plan. He slides into the driver's seat and fiddles with things for a bit, hot-wiring the car to get it to start.

"I could have done the hot-wiring," Ash says, half talking to Priest and half talking to me. "But I didn't want to outshine our boy Priest here. He has to have his part too."

The blond man just grunts. A second later, the engine revs to life.

"Get in," he says shortly, and we all do, getting in the car and then peeling out of the garage.

Priest drives like he's got a purpose, taking us to another part of Detroit, and my stomach clenches with anticipation. The car slows down when we near our destination, and we all scan the street, looking for our marks.

There are a few people out tonight, walking along, making deals in dark corners or hurrying on their way to somewhere else. But we're looking for someone specific, and we have to be sure.

"There," Knox says after a few seconds. He jerks his chin up ahead. Two men are on the street, away from anyone one else. I've never seen them before, but Gage nods.

"Apollo, and I think his second in command. Perfect."

"Perfect," Knox echoes, grinning in his unhinged way. He pulls his gun and cracks the window enough to do what he needs to do.

We drive by the two men, and as we pass them, Knox shoots.

RIVER

APOLLO'S second in command goes down, crumpling to the pavement. I can't see the spill of blood, but I can imagine it, standing out against the sidewalk even in the dark. Apollo reacts, yelling something we can't make out and starting to run toward the car.

Knox fires off a couple shots at him, and then we peel out, driving away in a squeal of tires and the smoke of burning rubber.

Someone, probably Apollo, fires a few shots after us, but Priest expertly veers a little to one side, and the bullets graze against the back and side of the car, doing most of their damage to the car's paint job.

"Did you miss Apollo?" Ash asks, twisting in his seat to try to look behind us and get a better view.

"Of course I fucking did," Knox replies, rolling his eyes. "I know how to aim a gun. I hit what I want and miss what I want. He's fine."

Ash keeps looking, even as we get farther away. "And he definitely saw the car, right? Before we sped off like bats outta hell?"

"Yeah," Gage says. "I saw him take a good look. He must've recognized it. He knows what Cyrus drives; I'd put money on it."

"Good." Ash nods, seemingly satisfied, and settles into his seat properly.

I can tell he's nervous about all the moving parts of our plan coming together, and I don't blame him. The last time we tried to pull off a plan on this scale, it blew up in our faces. Just thinking about it makes me swallow hard, and I push that thought away for now because we have bigger things to focus on.

I'm just as nervous as Ash is though, and it helps that Ash is right there, asking the questions that I want to.

"Back to the club," Gage murmurs to Priest, and he nods, even though we all knew that part already. We all know the plan backward and forward at this point, but that doesn't help soothe the growing feeling of nerves in the car.

We're all tense and on alert, and it's impossible to relax because we've only done the first part of the plan. It's not over yet.

Priest drives the car back into the garage, parking it where it was in the special reserved spot. We all get out and strip out of our tactical gear, shoving it into the trunk of the car we first came in.

Now we all just look like regular club goers out for a night of enjoyment.

"Shame about the paint job getting all fucked up," Ash says, giving Cyrus's car a once over before we head out of the garage. "It's a nice car."

"Don't sweat it," Knox replies, slinging an arm around his shoulder. "It's not like Cyrus will be alive much longer to have any feelings about it one way or the other."

Gage contacts the hacker to tell him to turn the cameras back on, and we head through the garage and into the club, following the sounds of music and partying that lead us in.

My first glimpse of Cyrus's club isn't that different from the first time I was at Sin and Salvation, the club the guys own and run. I was on a mission then too, so there's the same level of anticipation in the air. The music is loud with a thumping beat, the bass-line of the hip hop song echoing like a heartbeat through the whole club.

The lights are dim enough that it's hard to make out individual faces, which I guess works in people's favor if they don't want people to know they're visiting a sex club for whatever reasons. Along the walls, the lights are colored, changing from blue to pink to red to purple in time with the rhythm of the song.

People are dancing in the center, a mass of people grinding and gyrating against each other, and there are women in cages along the wall, dressed in barely anything and grinding along to the beat.

It's clear this isn't just a club you come to for drinks and dancing. The air of sex and other carnal things is thick, even though in this main part of the club it isn't as overt.

I know from the research we did that there are private rooms in the back where things get a lot more x-rated, but it's still sexier than your average club in this place.

Gage puts a hand on my shoulder to get my attention over the loud music and jerks his head toward the bar. We move as a unit, me and the guys, and we make our way over, scoping the place out as we go.

"Cyrus," Priest says, and he's close enough that even though his voice is soft, I can hear it. He nods ahead of us, and we all look up to see Cyrus behind a roped off area, sitting at a booth in the VIP section.

There are a few bodyguards near him, big guys who are clearly armed, and there's a pretty blonde woman in a skimpy outfit in the booth with him. The way she's bent over at the waist with her head in Cyrus's lap, bobbing up and down, makes it pretty obvious she's giving him a blowjob.

Perks of being the owner, I guess. Just getting his dick sucked right there in the open.

Cyrus doesn't look like anything special from this distance. I wouldn't have been able to pick him out of a line up if someone asked me who I thought was the one running the sex club and buying drugs from Julian Maduro. He's got a buzzed head and is wearing a blazer and dark colored slacks. He could be anyone, and soon he'll be dead.

The five of us settle at the bar, and when the bartender comes over, we order a round of drinks. They come out quickly, and then the man moves down to the next round of people, making drinks fast. People shuffle up alongside us, getting their drinks before heading back to the dancefloor or back to the back so they can do whatever they came here for.

Most of them barely spare us a glance, although a few pause to take us in. The guys get as many looks as I do, though no one really lingers to talk to them. If the guys checking me out want to talk to me, they don't, probably because of the way the four of my guys are flanked around me. It just doesn't seem smart.

But one idiot doesn't seem to get the message, and he manages to insert himself between me and Priest, leaning on the bar with a grin.

"I've never seen you here before," he says. I can smell the alcohol on his breath, and the way he's looking at me makes my skin crawl. Aside from the fact that he smells like he's been drinking his way through the night, he's nothing special. Black hair, blue eyes, and a rumpled t-shirt with a faded slogan on the front. He's someone I wouldn't give the time of day if

I met him on my own, and he doesn't seem like a threat aside from the fact that he can't tell when someone doesn't want to talk to him.

"Let's pretend you didn't see me now," I tell him, putting as much disgust in my words as I can, hoping he'll get the message and fuck off.

Of course, he doesn't. I don't know if it's the booze giving him confidence and stupidity in equal measure, or if he's just naturally a fucking dumbass.

Either way, he reaches out and puts a hand on my arm. "Don't be like that," he says. "We could get to know each other better. You know they have these rooms in the back of the club—"

His hand travels while he talks, going from my arm and heading toward my chest. He doesn't get there, and his proposition is cut off by Knox grabbing his wrist and yanking his hand off me.

He twists the guy's wrist hard enough that it makes him groan in pain, and gives him a death glare, daring him with his eyes to start some shit.

"Sorry," the guy says, and when Knox releases him, he slinks away, disappearing into the crowd.

"Fucking asshole," Knox snarls. "If we weren't here on a job, I would've fucked that guy up way worse."

"I know," I tell Knox, patting his shoulder with a smile.

Gage gives him a look that says if we weren't here on a job, he might have let Knox fuck that guy up the way he wanted to, and that seems to be good enough for him for the moment.

We sip our drinks, waiting and keeping an eye on Cyrus.

The longer we wait, the more the tension and nerves climb in me. We had it all planned out, lined up and plotted down to the last detail. But nothing's happening.

Fuck.

Did we miscalculate? Did our chess pieces not line up right?

Something should have happened by now, and I feel the anxious restlessness like tingles under my skin as I stand there.

Next to me, Knox is tapping his foot and cracking his knuckles. A sure sign that he's getting antsy too. We can't let Cyrus leave the club tonight. For this plan to work, he needs to die, and we all know that.

Knox's hand twitches, and I can imagine he's thinking about doing it himself. Would Gage let him? His point about us needing to be clean on this still stands, but we can't let Cyrus get away.

It's not an ideal situation, and the longer we sit there with nothing happening, the more the tension ratchets up.

Over by the door of the club, there's a small commotion, and that catches my attention for a second. People start to part like the Red Sea, getting out of the way of a group of men who come striding into the club on a mission.

I recognize the one at the front as Apollo, and a feeling of relief washes over me. Thank fuck.

They move fast through the throngs of people, making a beeline for the VIP area and Cyrus.

Cyrus's guard is way the hell down. He's got his head tipped back against the booth, and his dick in a woman's mouth. He doesn't see it coming, and even his bodyguards are too slow.

They got too complacent, and it's all Apollo needs.

He walks right up to the roped off area, pulls out his gun, and shoots Cyrus right in the head.

GAGE

CHAOS ERUPTS at the end of that gunshot.

The woman who was sucking Cyrus off screams, a high, terrified sound, and she jerks back and scrambles away from the now dead man. There are flecks of his blood in her blonde hair, and dotting her bare shoulders, and she looks horrified.

Cyrus's guards finally snap to action, yelling and pulling their own weapons to fire on Apollo and his crew. Apollo's men fire back.

It only takes a few gunshots before people start to realize something is going down. They start running from the bar and the dance floor, crowding and stampeding as they flee toward the exits.

People are running and screaming, trying to get out, and it's a mess. A mess we need to slip out in.

I don't wait to see if Apollo lives or dies in the fight, or even what else goes down here. The part we needed to happen—Cyrus getting killed—is done. Nothing else really matters.

"That's our cue," I tell the guys, raising my voice just enough to be heard over the screaming and the music. I grab River's arm and drag her away from the bar, shoving my way through the crowd so we can get to the doors.

Knox and Priest take up on either side, and Ash guards our back. The five of us move like a unit, shuffling people out of our way so we can get through the crush of people faster.

Now that we know Cyrus is dead, I just want to get River out of here in one piece.

It takes a bit, but we make it through the chaos and out of the club. It's immediately quieter, and I can hear myself think again. But there's no time to stand around enjoying the night air.

We hustle down to the parking garage and get into the car, driving off.

I'm back in the driver's seat, and everyone's quiet as I take us away from the club. I can feel some of the tension finally bleeding out of my shoulders, and that's echoed by the tension leaving the car as I drive. We're all less tightly wound than we were before, now that we know the plan worked.

I let out a slow, controlled breath, and glance into the rearview mirror to get a glimpse of River.

She's in her usual spot, between Ash and Knox in the back, and I can't quite read her face. All I can hope is that this put her in a better place than she was before and not a worse one. There was a lot of shooting and death, and I can imagine that made her think of her sister being shot. But I hope this helps her see that we can actually achieve our goal and tear Julian down. We're one step closer now, and we can all feel that.

The drive back to the house feels shorter than the drive to the club, and we're all relieved to walk back inside in one piece when we get there. No mishaps, no tragedies tonight.

Dog greets us by barking and leaping around our feet like he can tell that we were victorious tonight.

"Aww, you're happy people died tonight, aren't you?" Ash says, scratching the dog under the chin and rubbing his ears. "You're a little murder happy beast, huh? Aren't you, Manson?"

"After the serial killer? Really?" River says, shaking her head. She pats the dog on the head, and I roll my eyes.

The animal really needs a real name and a fucking collar, since it's obvious he's not going anywhere now. He's been here as long as River has, and since we don't plan to be done with her any time soon, I guess the same goes for the dog.

But the thought is fleeting as I focus on River again.

She stands up and looks at me, and I take a step closer to her.

"Are you alright?" I ask. It's the question I've been wanting to ask her since we got back into the car after the club, but it seemed better to wait until we were home to actually ask it.

River looks at me strangely, something obviously going on in her head. There's a second where I wonder if she's going to say anything, and then she smiles.

She reaches down and peels off her top, looking me right in the eye when she says, "Fuck me."

I can feel the other three reacting, each of them attuned to her and turned on instantly, just from the sight of her body and her bold ass words.

It hits me too, and my cock starts hardening in my pants.

We all move toward her, but Ash reaches her first. He pulls her into a deep kiss, practically bending her backward at first. River makes a soft noise of pleasure into it, and the rest of us gather around them, watching.

When Ash pulls back finally, there's a grin on his face and his eyes are heated. "What brought this on?"

River shakes her head, looking a little dazed. "Because I..."

She trails off, swallowing hard. Her blue eyes are dilated, her cheeks flushed, and her silver hair wild. The outfit she wore to the club hugs her curves perfectly, and she looks fucking stunning right now, her chest rising and falling fast with each breath.

"You what?" I press, my voice dropping to a low growl.

"I need you."

I can hear the raw truth in her voice, heightened by the adrenaline that must be coursing through her system, and it makes my cock pulse.

Moving almost like a single unit, we all surround her. I slide into the place Ash vacates, grabbing River and kissing her hard. She tastes like heat and passion, like the victory of pulling off our plan tonight, even though we were all worried about it. There's pride and relief there, and I chase that flavor and kissing her like I want to devour her.

She gasps into my mouth, and I pull back enough to see that Knox has his hand fisted in her hair, tugging hard on the strands. He keeps her in place for me, letting me ravage her mouth with mine, and I take my fill, kissing her and nipping at her lips.

River arches against us, her body seeking out more, and she only has to ask in that way to get what she wants.

Ash reaches down and starts playing with her nipples, the little silver rings in them glinting in the overhead light. He tugs on the piercings, grinning when she whines low in her throat at what must be a pleasurable

kind of pain. He tugs harder, and she gasps, rubbing against me in search of more stimulation.

By now, we all know what she likes. That edge of pain and pleasure, her limits pushed just enough that she loses herself in it.

She's caught between us, me at her front, Knox at her back, Ash and Priest to the sides, touching and teasing and working her up until she's putty for us. Right where she clearly wants to be.

Knox reaches around with his free hand and starts slipping a hand into her pants. It's a feat, considering how tight they are, but where there's a will, Knox always finds a way. I help him, unzipping them and making more room, and Knox smirks, working his hand down so he can cup her pussy.

He rubs her slowly, and River pushes her hips out, grinding against his palm with a desperate little noise. Knox grins and leans in so his mouth is right by her ear, pulling her hair harder to make sure he has her attention.

"Who does this pussy belong to?" he growls out, low enough to affect River, but loud enough that we can all hear it.

River's eyes flare wide, and I can tell that possessive gesture turned her on something fierce. The dark blue of her eyes is getting swallowed up by the pitch black of her lust and desire, and it's a good look on her.

She swallows hard, and when she speaks, her voice is raspy with need. "It's yours," she says, arching as Ash keeps toying with her nipples. "Fuck. Please."

Those words hit me in a tender place, making the heat and arousal flare even hotter. My cock is rock hard in my pants, pressing insistently against the front of my fly, but I ignore it for now, instead dropping to my knees in front of River.

I get rid of her shoes, then tug her pants and panties down and toss them away, exposing her sweet pussy to all of us.

Knox smirks and spreads her open, showing off her soaking wet folds and the pretty pink hole that's so damn tempting. He slides two fingers into her, and River moans like she can't decide if it hurts or feels good, but judging from the way her hips buck forward to get more, I'm leaning toward it feeling good.

And I can't hold myself back anymore. Just the sight of it makes my mouth water, and I lean forward, following the scent of her arousal until I can taste the source.

“Oh shit,” River gasps out. She twists and writhes from all the stimulation, bucking against my mouth and Knox’s fingers. Ash keeps playing with her tits, and I can hear her and Priest kissing deeply, both of them groaning and sighing into each other’s mouths.

It all turns me on even more.

I’ve never shared a woman with my brothers before—never before River—but somehow, this fucking works. None of us are into each other that way, but we’re close enough that we don’t have any hang ups about getting close like this.

And hearing and feeling what all four of us do to River? How much we turn her on, and how needy we make her?

I fucking love that.

While Knox buries his fingers in her time and time again, I focus on eating her out. I suck at her clit until I can feel her trembling against me, and her moans of pleasure are muffled by Priest kissing her.

She can’t go anywhere with Knox holding on to her hair the way he is, and Ash keeps her on that line between too much pain and too much pleasure, using his talented hands to their best effect.

This close to her, it’s like I can feel the pleasure rising, can taste it against my tongue as she spirals closer and closer to falling apart. River is so wet, and I lap up everything she gives me, savoring the sweet sharp tang of her and diving back in for more again and again.

She sets one hand on the top of my head, but doesn’t try to push me for more, mostly just tries to steady herself.

All four of us are working hard, wanting to drive her to her climax, but by some unspoken agreement, we don’t give her what she wants.

It would be so easy to push her over the edge and make her come undone for us, but we hold back, edging her, backing off right before she comes. It’s a slow, sweet kind of torture, and River’s moans get more and more desperate, sounding like music to my ears.

I lap at her pussy and she bursts into another growing crescendo of moans, letting us know how close she is to coming. And then we all back off again. I pull back, licking my lips, watching the others take their turns in torturing her as they pull away too, leaving her frustrated and needy.

“Fuck you, you assholes,” she rasps out, and it’s clear she’s not angry, just turned on at her limit.

Knox laughs because of course he does. He nuzzles against her neck and circles his pointer finger around the entrance of her pussy, not dipping in, just leaving it there to tease her with. When she groans a little plea for more, he laughs again.

“Fuck you?” he teases. “I thought you said ‘fuck me.’”

“I did!” River whines. “But you’re all being such goddamn teases.”

Priest smirks at that and tempts her back into another kiss, one hand coming up to cup her cheek. “Do you want to come?” he asks against her mouth.

River nods, too turned on and pushed past the brink to argue that she’s already made that clear.

“Beg for it,” Priest says. “Maybe we’ll be nice.”

“Please,” she gasps out. “Please, please, please. I need you. I want to come for you, please.”

It’s fucking amazing how good she makes that sound, and I growl under my breath, heart pounding and cock throbbing just from the begging.

She’s always so prideful, always so headstrong and resilient, even when things are going to shit around her. There was a time when she’d rather have cut her own hand off than beg any of us for anything, but this is a sign of how much things have changed between us.

Now she’s here, caught in the middle, begging to come for us. Because we pushed her to that brink and she begged us to do it.

There’s another unspoken agreement that none of us can deny her when she makes it sound so good.

We give her what she wants, what she needs so badly. I dive back down to keep eating her out, swirling my tongue, dipping in and out of her folds and running up to her clit. Knox plunges his fingers back into her, adding a third now that she’s wet and needy, the sound of it echoing in the room with her moans of pleasure.

I can’t see Ash or Priest, but judging from the way River sounds, they’re both adding to it in their own ways, giving River all she can handle, pushing her toward her orgasm.

When I can tell she’s wound as tightly as she can go, I graze my teeth over her clit, teasing that sensitive bundle of nerves with just an edge of pain to go with everything else, and that’s enough.

She goes stiff between us, body pulled tight. And then she practically screams, letting it all go as the pleasure erupts through her.

I can feel every shudder of it, every tremor that wracks her body, and I eagerly lap up every drop that she gushes on my tongue.

It seems to go on forever, the aftershocks hitting her in waves, and I know I'll never get enough of this woman.

But I'd be happy to die trying.

RIVER

MY KNEES BUCKLE, and it's a good thing all the guys are already right there to steady me. I feel lightheaded and floaty, but in the best way, and it takes me a second to get my balance, even with Knox, Ash, and Priest holding on to me.

"I guess we're just really fucking good at making you weak in the knees," Knox jokes, waggling his eyebrows. I can hear the shit-eating grin in his voice, and I roll my eyes at the comment.

Even so, another aftershock of my orgasm goes through me, and it makes me shiver.

Gage stands up, catching my attention then.

His eyes are dark with arousal, and his chin is wet with my release. He licks his lips slowly and then steps back, looking me up and down.

A slow smirk spreads across his face, making him look even more handsome and sexy than he usually does. There's something sly in that look, almost like he's plotting something, and it sends a thrill through me.

"You're so fucking wet for us," he says, his voice strained with desire. "And you're gorgeous like this. Wet and shaking, barely finished coming once and already wanting to go again. Don't you?"

I nod because my mouth is suddenly too dry to make words come out. I can still feel the lingering sensations of my first orgasm, but Gage is right.

I do want to come again for them.

Gage is hard in his pants. I can see the tent there where the bulge of his cock presses against the front of his jeans. It occurs to me to reach for him, to try to tempt him to fuck me, but the look on his face says he has other plans.

“Get on the couch,” he says, and it comes out like a command, sharp and impossible to ignore. “On your hands and knees.”

I lick my lips, my heart rate kicking up a notch. That tone is so fucking sexy, like he knows I’m going to obey him before I’ve even done anything yet, or he’ll know the reason why. There might have been a time when that would make me want to rage against him even more, but right now it just makes me want to do what he says.

So I do.

All eyes are on me, and I’m too turned on, too lost in all of these men to care about anything other than getting more of them. I move to the couch and get on my hands and knees like Gage said, and they all cluster in a bit closer, taking me in.

Their eyes rake over my body, and none of them are touching me yet, but it feels like they are. Like there’s physical weight to their gazes on me.

“Ash,” Gage says, glancing at him. “Do you want her ass?”

Ash groans immediately and nods. “Hell yeah I do. Who wouldn’t?”

“Then take it.”

I shudder with desire at the exchange. It’s not like Gage has more claim to me than the others, and it’s not like he’s offering up what’s ‘his’ to the other men. He’s just doing what he always does. Filling that role he always does. The leader, the one who takes control.

The others are so used to it by this point that they fall into it, letting him direct and taking pleasure in it, if Ash’s reaction is any indication.

The couch dips behind me as Ash gets onto it, and the others get even closer, settling into the chairs in the living room, watching the show.

My heart is pounding now, and I feel like they must be able to hear it. Maybe that’s just adding to the ambiance of the whole thing, turning them on even more to know I’m so fucking affected by all this.

Ash leans over, pressing his body along mine. I can feel the heat of him seeping through my skin, feel how hard he is where his cock rubs against my ass through his jeans.

“They’re all watching you?” he murmurs in my ear, and the feeling of his breath tickling my ear makes me shiver again. “Let’s give them a show, huh?”

I barely have time to nod in agreement before Ash is moving again. He pulls back and runs his hands over my ass, giving it a little pinch that makes me squeak in surprise.

He laughs, and it's a rich sound, warm and touchable.

His fingers are gentle as he starts working me open slowly. I can hear him spit into his own hand, and then there's wetness as he uses that to slick the slide of that first finger into my ass.

"Oh, fuck," I gasp out, trying not to shove myself back onto his fingers and take more, even though my body is tingling with need all over again.

"You like that, don't you?" Gage asks. I glance over at him, and he's watching intently. His green eyes seem to bore right through me, like he can already see the answer to the question but wants to hear me say it anyway.

"Yeah," I manage, and it comes out on a moan because Ash twists his finger in such a way that sparks heat inside me. "It feels good."

Knox snorts, leaning forward in his chair to get a good look. "Yeah, you love taking it in that perfect ass. We know it."

I whimper a bit, and Ash adds another finger.

My body is pulsing in time with the way he touches me, my clit practically throbbing with the need to be touched.

"You're still so wet, aren't you?" Priest wants to know.

His voice is softer, more contemplative, but his eyes burn with the same heat as the others' when I glance over at him.

"Yes," I moan, nodding.

"Touch yourself," Priest says. "Let us see how much you like this."

I don't need to be told twice. I shift my weight so I'm held up by one hand and work my other hand between my legs. My pussy is still soaked, and I moan as soon as my fingers touch the sensitive flesh there.

My clit practically hums for attention, and I take it slow, circling it with my finger before I give in and touch it.

A long, whimpering groan spills from my lips, amplified by what Ash is doing behind me. He's got two fingers knuckle-deep inside me, but it feels like more.

Every nerve ending is alight with pleasure, and every time he moves those fingers in and out, it just sparks more sensation, turning my spine into a sort of live wire of heat and electric pleasure.

"Fuck," I gasp, grinding back against Ash's hand and down onto my own.

"How does it feel?" Gage asks. I can hear how compromised he is, and I glance over to see that he has his own cock out now, stroking it slowly.

Priest and Knox aren't far behind, working their pants open with muted curses.

I get distracted for a second, watching their hard dicks, my mouth watering just from the sight of them.

"River." Gage says it more sharply this time, catching my attention. I look to him, and he lifts an eyebrow. "I asked you a question. How does it feel?"

"Good," I tell him. "It feels so fucking good. I need—" I break off when Ash adds a third finger to the mix, dropping my head down and trying to focus on breathing.

"Aw," Ash teases. "I cut you off. Go on. Tell Gage what you need."

He twists his fingers inside me, and the groan that comes out of my mouth is loud and long and desperate.

"Please," I pant. "I need more. Fuck. Please."

"Shit," Priest swears under his breath. He grips his cock harder, like he's trying to keep himself from spilling too soon, even though that hasn't been an issue for him since I've known him. But it speaks to how turned on he is by this sight.

Ash pulls his fingers free, and I whimper with disappointment, fingering my clit harder to make up for the loss.

I don't have to wait long before I can feel the fleshy head of Ash's cock pressing against my ass. I'm open enough that he can slide into me with only some resistance, but he still takes it slow, making sure I can feel every single inch of him as he presses inside.

I moan, and it's a deep, guttural sound that's almost punched out of me, and by the time Ash is balls deep inside, I'm panting and shaking, already edging closer to falling apart.

"Gorgeous," Gage murmurs, working his cock in one hand. "Fucking gorgeous. You look so goddamn perfect like this, River."

They're all watching me, turned on and keyed up, and I fight to breathe through the arousal that feels like it's choking me with its intensity.

Ash fucks my ass, picking up the pace once I'm better adjusted, and I whine low in my throat, working my pussy with my hand. It feels good, but I start thinking about how much better it would feel if I had something else in me.

Almost as if he's been reading my mind, Gage glances to Knox. "I think she still needs more," he says casually. Like he's talking about a take-out

order or something. “Do you want her pussy?”

“Fuck,” Knox swears, hot and intense. “Fuck yeah.”

Gage makes a “go ahead” gesture toward me, and Knox hurries up from his own chair, like the only thing that had been keeping him there was needing permission or something.

And now that he has it, he clearly plans to take what’s his.

“We’re going to have to move,” Ash says, sounding breathless.

There’s not a whole lot I can do to help with that, but he takes the lead easily enough, shifting our positions so that Knox can lie down on the couch and I can straddle him.

Ash puts a hand on my back, pushing me down more, and I go where he moves me, so pliant now because I want their dicks in me.

I feel empty without them, but there’s not long to wait.

Ash kneels behind me on the couch, and he pulls me back enough that he can work his cock back into my ass easily enough. Then Knox’s hands come up and smooth down my thighs for a bit, before he grabs his dick and lines it up with my pussy, sliding in.

I’m wet enough that even his size is no issue, and he slips right in, filling me up.

For a second, it’s like I forget how to breathe. My head spins, and I can’t stop thinking about the fact that I have two of them inside me. I’ve only felt this once before, and it’s just as intense. I’m so fucking full, the two of them filling me so completely.

Ash runs his hand over the carved letters on my back, which are still tender, and I shiver at the way that feels. His touch there is gentle, but then he gets to the curve of my ass and he spanks me hard, making me burn with even more arousal.

I feel like I’m on fire with it, shaking and shuddering, lost to anything and everything but how fucking good this feels.

Knox thrusts up into me, filling my pussy thick and hard, and I nearly scream from the jolt of pleasure that rushes up my spine. I’m caught between the two of them as they find their rhythm, pushing and pulling at my body, thrusting into me and pulling out, keeping me constantly on the edge. When one of them pulls back, the other one pushes in, and there’s no relief from it. Not that I’d want any.

It’s like how they work together outside of sex, but amplified here because we all want this so bad.

And still, Gage's eyes are on me. He watches it all happen like a benevolent overseer, taking it all in.

Priest watches too, cock in hand, alternating between stroking himself slowly and gripping his dick hard. His breathing is shaky, and his pale eyes are blown wide and dark with lust.

"Priest," Gage says, getting his attention.

Priest doesn't tear his eyes away, but he hums in acknowledgement.

Gage chuckles, and I can hear that it's breathless. "Do you want her mouth?" he asks.

It's the only hole I have left. The only thing not currently full of one of their cocks, and the thought of having Priest in my mouth makes it water immediately.

"Yes," Priest replies, his voice thick and low and husky.

I want it too. I'm fucking hungry for his cock, and I swallow hard as Priest gets up to come over to the couch.

I meet Gage's eyes as Priest moves, and it takes me a few tries to find my voice. "What about you?" I ask him.

He smirks, leaning back in his chair. "I'm going to watch my brothers fuck you until you scream," he tells me. "And I'm going to love every second of it."

I can hear in his voice that it's true. There's no jealousy there, no feeling of being left out. He's orchestrated the perfect show for himself, and he plans to sit back and enjoy it.

That's more than fine with me.

I lick my lips and look up when Priest is in front of me. His cock is in his hand, flushed and hard, a bead of precum at the tip. He looks as hungry for this as I feel, and I open my mouth for him, not making him wait at all.

Priest feeds me his cock, using his hand to guide it into my mouth. His head tips back once he's all the way in, and he groans softly.

"Fuck, you feel incredible," he says. "You always feel like this. You always drive me crazy."

I'm pinned between Ash and Knox, and my mouth is full of Priest's cock, making me air tight. I look over at Gage, letting him see everything this is doing to me. I have no idea what I look like right now, but I can imagine it's a good sight for him. Stuffed with his brothers' dicks and still eager for more.

Heat burns in his eyes, and he strokes himself hard for a bit and then squeezes his cock, like he can barely hold back.

I want to watch him, but there's so much going on that wants to steal my attention. Ash in my ass, Knox fucking up into my pussy with that rough abandon he always has when we're together.

Priest's cock is thick and hard in my mouth, and I bob my head, sucking him down even more. I love how hard he is for me, the way he grunts harshly and works his hips so he can thrust deeper into my mouth.

He tastes clean and warm, and there's a near steady drip of his precum on my tongue, flooding my senses with the taste of him.

We still haven't actually fucked, but I love it every time he lets go with me. Every time he lets himself take what he wants.

The four of us fuck like that, while Gage watches, and the living room is thick with the scent of sex and the sound of them thrusting into me and our moans and grunts of pleasure.

I feel like I'm about to lose my mind with how good it feels. How much it is. They all keep moving, working me in tandem, never stepping on each other's toes. It's a well-oiled machine with me in the center, half drunk on their cocks and the buzz of arousal and pleasure that feels like it's never going to end.

"Goddamn," Ash pants from behind me, and I half wish I could turn my head to see him. To watch him as he fucks into my ass over and over again. "I'm close."

"Already?" Knox asks, but he's just as breathless and his voice is just as strained. "I know her ass is tight, but damn."

"Fuck off," Ash snaps back, but there's no heat in it.

They're both close, and I'm not far behind them. All of the heat and the pleasure and the sensation keep building. Building higher and higher until it's the only thing I can feel. My body is buzzing, humming with it, and I know it won't take too much more to push me over the edge.

Ash reaches around and finds my clit, running his fingers through the sticky mess of my pussy and teasing that bundle of nerves with his clever hand.

"You're close, aren't you?" he asks me, and I make a muffled sound around Priest's cock, choking down more of it and grinding back against him.

"Come on," Ash urges. "Come for us. One more time, pretty girl."

I whine loudly, and his fingers press down against my clit, sparking that inferno that's been threatening to spill over. It hits me hard, and I can't do anything but obey what he said, crying out around my mouthful of dick, and shaking hard as I fall apart.

It feels like it's never going to stop, wave after wave of intense pleasure hitting me, dragging me under and forcing me to feel it.

My orgasm sets off Ash and Knox, and I can feel them when they come, thrusting into me erratically, filling me up.

Their thrusts start to slow, and I redouble my efforts on Priest's cock, sucking him down, bobbing my head and taking him as deep into my throat as I can.

"Fuck, River," he gasps out, tangling his fingers in my hair. I can feel the tension in his body, how desperate he is to come and how close he is to the edge.

He uses that grip on my hair to start fucking my face, holding me in place and thrusting his hips hard and fast. He's chasing his pleasure, and I give myself over to him entirely, letting him take what he needs.

With a roar of pleasure, he comes down my throat, and I swallow it all, tasting in it how good he feels.

I lick his cock as I pull off him, and then lick my lips, chasing every last drop of cum that he spilled into me. My chest heaves as I pant for breath, and Priest and the others start to move away, leaving me alone on the couch.

When I look over, Gage is still seated, his jaw clenched, working his cock with one hand.

"Gage," I pant out, and my voice is raspy from having Priest's cock halfway down my throat. "Please."

"Please what?" he growls, staring right at me. It's like he can see everything. Everything I want, everything I need from him.

"Come here. Come closer," I tell him. "I need to feel you too."

I watch as he swallows hard and comes toward me, still working his cock with one hand. There's a steady drip of precum, and his eyes are glazed over with the desire he clearly feels.

"Is this what you want?" he asks me in that rough voice. "You want me to mark what's ours? So you can't forget who you belong to?"

I nod eagerly, still so fucking turned on even though I just came hard twice.

“Give me your tits,” Gage growls, and I arch my back for him, my chest rising and falling fast as my nipples harden even more.

He stands over me, working his cock faster and faster. He closes his eyes in pleasure and then jerks them back open, like he doesn’t want to look away for a second. Like he doesn’t want to miss any of this.

“Fuck,” he hisses, and I moan in response, wanting him to come. Wanting to feel it when he does.

Finally, he gives in, splattering me with his cum. It hits my tits and my neck, painting me with the hot spurts of his release. I shiver as I’m covered in it, sparks dancing through me.

Gage stands there, breathing hard. He looks at me like I’m the hottest thing he’s ever seen, and that just makes it even better.

He leans down and drags a finger through the mess on my tits and then holds the finger to my mouth.

“Taste.”

I lick it up eagerly, the salty tang of him exploding on my tongue. I can’t help the hungry little noise that rises in my throat, and Gage’s smile is heated and fond.

“You like that, don’t you?” he asks, his gaze locked on me.

“Yes.”

He pulls his finger away from my mouth and drags it down my cheek, like he’s trying to mark me there too. Like he wants to mark and claim every part of me.

“Good girl. So fucking perfect.”

RIVER

I WAKE UP WITH A JOLT, the lingering traces of a nightmare fading away as I open my eyes.

Once again, arms come around me immediately. I don't know if I'll ever sleep alone again, but I don't think it will be any time soon if it ever happens. I don't mind that, though. The men don't exactly stop the nightmares from coming—nothing can do that—but they help bring me out of them quicker, reminding me that I'm not alone, and helping me fight off the darkness. I'm nothing but grateful for that.

"You're alright," Priest murmurs in my ear, and his voice is warm and edged with sleep roughness. I lean back against him, letting out a shuddering breath.

All the men get what I'm going through to some degree, and they all want to help and protect me. But Priest gets it in a way the others don't. A soul-deep understanding of the kind of pain I feel.

I wonder how many mornings he woke up like this. Heart in his throat, the remnants of horror lurking at the edges of his mind after a nightmare.

I turn in his arms, looking him over. He's sleep ruffled, hair a mess against the pillow. Somehow he still manages to be harshly beautiful, even like this. The morning sun glances off his cheekbones, making him look even more angular than usual, but still so fucking striking.

"Thank you," I whisper softly. He raises an eyebrow, and I clarify. "For being here."

"I always will be," he says just as softly. "Count on that." Something changes in his expression, and I keep watching him until he speaks again. "I didn't think I would ever feel anything for another woman after Jade. I

didn't think I could. I thought that part of me was broken beyond what anything or anyone could fix. And maybe it still is, but there's a whole new part of myself that I've found because of you."

I swallow hard, taking in the way he says that. It's not heavy with emotion, the way it might have been if someone else was saying it, but that's just Priest. I can tell he means it all the same, or he wouldn't have said it.

It hits me hard that I've affected him this way, and I end up rolling him onto his back, straddling him right then and there.

His eyes are bright in the early morning light, and I lean down and kiss him, unable to help myself. He just looks so damn tempting and appealing like this, trusting, caring, spread out under me.

He kisses me back, slow and deep, and I can feel him getting a little hard.

I don't push for more, though. Not yet. I just enjoy the noises he makes into the kiss. The way he groans softly when I push my tongue into his mouth, the way he arches up to meet me. The way he grips me so hard—I like when he lets go of his tight control. When his emotions break free, and they shoot up to like eleven, intense and powerful.

"You're incredible," he murmurs against my mouth, and I give him a little smile, nipping at his bottom lip playfully.

He laughs and grinds against me slowly, just because he wants to. Because he likes the way it feels, not because he's looking for it to go anywhere.

And that's fine. The closeness is good enough. After the way Priest kept me at arm's length for so long, being this close to him just feels fucking good.

We stay like that for a bit, kissing and touching, letting our hands wander just for the joy of touching sleep warm skin while we wake up.

The nightmare I had seems very far away now, and when we finally get up, I feel better.

We head downstairs, and the others are already gathered, moving around each other with that practiced ease in the kitchen.

Knox whistles tunelessly while he fries up bacon, flipping the spatula in his hand. He catches it easily and grins at Ash, who snorts and steals a piece of bacon from the pan, fingers grabbing it and withdrawing before Knox can stop him.

When we walk in, he smiles over at me. “We’ve got some good news. I did a little digging and found out that Apollo died in that attack last night too.”

“Was that part of the plan?” I ask, moving to make coffee. It wasn’t to my knowledge, but I was mostly focused on the part of it that got us one step closer to ruining Julian. Apollo served his purpose in that, so whether he lived or died wasn’t important.

“It’s just as well,” Ash says with a little shrug as he crunches into the piece of bacon. “His gang was ruthless and vicious. They’d go after soft targets, using them to send messages to the people who crossed them. Dragging innocent people into their turf wars, murdering and torturing them because they knew it would hurt the people who cared about them. Shit like that.”

It makes me think of Priest, and I glance over at him where he’s peeling a banana to slice into his bowl of cereal. That’s how Jade died, getting caught between him and a shitty gang who wanted to send a message. So I don’t feel bad at all now, knowing Apollo is dead right along with Cyrus.

“So the plan worked, then,” I say, leaning against the counter to sip my coffee.

“It did,” Gage replies. “The word on the street is that tensions flared up and Apollo attacked Cyrus. There were plenty of witnesses in the club, who’ll all agree that Apollo came in with his crew and killed Cyrus. Their rivalry is well known, so it won’t be surprising.”

I nod, turning that over in my head. Gangs try to take each other out all the time in this city. It’s just how things work when everyone is trying to be the biggest fish in a relatively small pond.

“There’s no way Julian would link that to us,” Gage continues. “Or even guess it was meant to fuck with him. But he’ll definitely feel it, since he just lost his biggest buyer.”

Savage happiness swells in my chest just thinking about that. “Good. So what’s next?”

“First, breakfast,” Knox says, plopping down at the kitchen table with his plate of food. “Then murder.”

“Not murder yet,” Gage tells him, shaking his head. “At least not without a plan. We’ve cut off one of Julian’s major buyers, but he still has other things we need to take. We need to cut off more so he’ll really feel it. It’ll take some digging to find out what the next step is.”

It sounds like more waiting, which isn't my favorite, but there's nothing for it. We can't rush it and risk fucking it up and tipping Julian off that we're coming for him.

But I'm still so eager for the next move.

UNFORTUNATELY, I was definitely right about there being more waiting. Planning our next strike on Julian is a bit more time consuming than the first hit we landed on him. There are several moving parts in our ultimate plan to destroy him, so we set about plugging away at several different things at once.

It makes me antsy to wait, though. Every time I have a bad dream about Hannah's death, I wake up with the knowledge that Julian hasn't suffered for it. Not yet. I want to finally end him. The high and satisfaction of what happened at the club is starting to fade, and I have to remind myself every day to be patient.

Several days after the hit at the club, I get up and press a kiss to my fingers and then press my fingers to the picture of Hannah. I look at it for a long moment, missing her so fiercely it aches.

It's worse now than the first time I thought she was dead. Then, I was filled with righteous fury, and I wanted to destroy everyone who had a hand in her death. But seeing her die a second time, even if it was the only real time she'd died, just hurt even more.

It was like getting her back and then having her ripped away. Some kind of cruel joke of the universe that stabs me every time I remember she's gone.

I let out a rough sigh and change my nail polish again, removing all the black from the night at the club and going with a metallic blue this time. Blue was one of Hannah's favorite colors, so it makes me feel a little closer to her.

Once my nails are dry, I get dressed and head downstairs to meet the guys.

Ash, Knox, and I go out, doing more digging into the inner workings of Julian's business shit.

They know the right people to talk to, and it's easier for me to go with them than wait at home, since seeing progress being made makes some of that antsy feeling go away. We're working hard at this and not just stagnating, even if it feels like it's not happening fast enough for me.

We talk to some of their informants, and Knox has a phone call with their hacker friend to see if there's anything he can do to get access to some of Julian's records. It doesn't sound promising from what I can gather from the one sided conversation I can hear, but it's something to think about.

"I gotta take a leak," Knox says when he hangs up the phone.

"Charming," Ash replies, sounding pained. "What a beautiful turn of phrase."

Knox rolls his eyes. "Sorry, lemme try again. Please, sir. I need to drain the piss from my—"

"Okay, okay!" Ash cuts him off, laughing and waving his hands. "We'll stop at the gas station. We could use a top off anyway, and I want snacks. That good with you?" He glances at me, and I shrug a shoulder.

"Sure. I like snacks."

Ash grins and we get back in the car and drive to the closest gas station. It's one of those stops on the highway that has gas pumps and a large convenience store, so people on long trips can stretch their legs and buy a lot of overpriced drinks.

Knox is out of the car in a hurry, going to the bathroom, and Ash and I take our time, walking through the aisles, checking out the snacks.

"What do you think about these donuts?" he asks, holding up a pack of them. "Good or trash?"

"Good trash," I tell him, grinning. "They're not mutually exclusive."

"See, this is why I like you. You're a genius."

Knox comes out of the bathroom, whistling a little, and he joins our snack debate, talking about the benefits of spicy snacks over cheesy ones with Ash in a loud voice.

I glance over to see if any of the other people in the store give a shit, and my eyes fall on Julian and Natalie Maduro, coming through the door.

In this instant, it's like time has screeched to a halt and all the air has been sucked out of the room. I don't pay much attention to Natalie, but my eyes are locked on Julian. There's a moment where he's overlaid in my mind with how he looked before, standing in that alley with fury twisting his features, his gun raised.

I'm in a shop, not an alley, but it's like I can hear Hannah's labored breathing and feel her blood coating my hands all over again.

Ash and Knox take notice of my sudden stiffness and look over, and they both go immediately tense when they see who has just walked in. Knox's stance shifts into one that makes it clear he's ready to throw down if it comes to that, and Ash moves like he's going to back him up.

Julian also looks wary, which is interesting. That smug swagger isn't present at the moment, and he walks slowly toward where we're standing.

Knox and Ash move to meet him halfway, and I follow them, my heart racing out of control in my chest.

Natalie flicks a disdainful glance at Knox, looking at him like he's worth less than the dirt beneath her shoes. He doesn't even react to her, all his focus on Julian.

"You know," Julian says, speaking first, and even though he's not making any sudden moves, his tone is dripping with condescension. "You're lucky I'm willing to let shit lie after what she did." He jerks his chin in my direction. "Trying to run off with Hannah."

I get even more tense just hearing him say that. Like he's worthy of speaking Hannah's fucking name after he murdered her. Everything in me is screaming to attack him right here and now. To launch myself at him and claw his fucking eyes out. Or tell him everything we're doing. How we're working to dismantle his business piece by piece and leave him with nothing and really rub his face in it. But I don't. I hold myself back with a shaky breath.

I have to play the long game with this if I want it to work.

But that leaves me with nothing to say to Julian. If I open my mouth, all the hate and anger will come spilling out, and he'll respond in some smarmy, jack ass way, and I'll have to kill him in this fucking convenience store. Either that or I'll just start screaming, venting all the pain I feel inside. So it's better if I just say nothing, and I bite down on my tongue to keep myself in check.

Ash and Knox take over, letting their anger and distaste for the asshole show, but they don't give anything away.

"I'd say you're pretty lucky too," Ash says dryly. "Considering you didn't even care about what was lost that day."

"I cared about the wedding," Julian snaps back. "Which didn't fucking happen."

“That’s not on us,” Knox snaps. “And if you wanna make something of it, then you can try.” He cracks his knuckles ominously, and Julian just sneers at him.

“I’m not going to get into this here. We’re square, as far as I’m concerned. I lost something I wanted, and so did you.” Julian looks at me again. “We can leave it at that.”

Comparing losing Hannah to missing out on being able to marry his sister to Knox is a pretty shitty move, and I bite my tongue even harder to keep from going off on him.

I already knew he didn’t respect Hannah at all, so it’s not like this is new information. Losing her doesn’t even matter to him. He still has their son, and that was all he wanted in the first place.

“You could at least pretend to give a shit, you know,” Ash says. “That your wife is dead. That’s what people usually do. They mourn, show up to the funeral and make some touching speech. It’s good for the act at least, since we all know you didn’t really care.”

Julian snorts. “Why would I waste my time with that?” he asks, sounding genuinely curious.

“Which part?”

“Any of it. There won’t be a funeral. I got what I needed from her—my son. Cody has been sent away to be looked after, and maybe without her influence softening him up and making him weak, he’ll actually grow up to be an heir I can be proud of. He was the only one who cared about her death, and he’s gone. After her betrayal, why would I bother with a funeral? Who else would even mourn her?”

Somehow, knowing he doesn’t care and hearing him say it so easily are two different things, and the latter snaps something inside me.

“Who would mourn her?” I demand, pushing my way past Ash and Knox to stand in front of them. “Who the fuck do you think you are to talk about her like that? You aren’t worth a single fucking second of her time or energy, and you treated her like she was trash. I should fucking—”

Before I can make the threat, Knox puts a hand on my shoulder, squeezing hard.

Ash steps closer and touches my back, trailing his hand down lower.

“Breathe,” he whispers so only I can hear it.

It’s enough to steady me for the split second I need to get control of myself. I drag in a deep, shuddering breath that feels like glass in my lungs,

and I let Knox pull me away from Julian and Natalie.

RIVER

WE HAD PLANNED to make a few more stops after the little gas station break, but after that encounter, we decide to just head home.

I sit in the back of the car, watching trees and buildings and other cars whip past, feeling like there are bees under my skin. It's like I can hear Julian's voice on a loop in my head, talking about how Hannah betrayed him and no one would mourn her.

It's true that she didn't have a lot of people left in her life, but I would mourn her. I mourn her every fucking day, and she deserves so much better than to just be forgotten.

Anger and sadness war for top position in my heart, and I just sit there, glaring out the window, wishing I could have punched Julian in his stupid fucking face at the very least.

"He's a piece of shit," Knox is saying from the passenger seat. Ash is driving because Knox is clearly almost as pissed as I am about what just happened. "Standing there all smug and shit like he's not the reason she's dead. Fucker. He doesn't deserve the air he fucking breathes. We're going to take him down, and I'm going to love every fucking second of it, but I wish we could have grabbed him right then. Just take him down to the basement for a little chat, that's all. He can have a chat with my fucking machete to his balls."

Hearing Knox going off makes me feel a little bit better, at least. And it's a nice thought in a fucked up way. Knox would definitely make him pay if he got the chance.

We get home and head inside, and I start to go upstairs, just needing to decompress from all that bullshit. Ash catches my wrist before I can leave

the entry way and looks at me.

I can see the concern in his eyes, and even though he doesn't say anything, I know what he wants to know.

"I'm okay," I tell him. "I'm not going to go anywhere, I just need to be alone for a little while."

Ash just nods and lets me go. He bites his lip, and I can see the worry playing over his face.

I meant what I said, though. I don't plan to go anywhere other than to my room. I don't want to try to run from these men or this thing between us. But I'm not okay.

I can feel that numbness and pain creeping in on me, threatening to drag me back to that cold, dark place I was in the night Hannah died.

Seeing Julian brought it all back. I've been seeing him in my nightmares for the last few days, but having him in front of me, in the flesh just made it all so much more real.

I keep thinking about what he said, how he killed Hannah and doesn't even fucking care, and that just guts me. I already knew it would be like that, but hearing it brings it into sharp relief.

I feel myself spiraling, giving in to the darkness and the grief that I've been doing better at holding back lately. So I dig my razor blade out of the drawer, gripping the cool metal hard in my hand.

It feels good just to hold it for a second, and then I drag it across my skin, letting the blade bite into my flesh. I haven't done this in a while, but the compulsion is rising again.

I need it. I need the grounding. I need to feel pain that isn't in my heart.

The door to my room opens, and Knox comes in unannounced.

I stop with the blade in my hand and look at him, but I don't bother to hide it, just like I didn't with Gage. It's too late now to try to pretend I'm not as fucked up as I am. They all know anyway. They've all seen my scars, the ones from other wounds and the ones I gave myself in their neat little lines. They've seen it all.

Knox doesn't say anything at first. He just comes over and sits beside me on the bed. He reaches over and takes the blade from my hand, turning it over and looking at it. When he speaks, his voice is uncharacteristically quiet.

"You could cut me instead if it would help," he says.

"It's not the same," I murmur back.

“I know. But I just don’t like to see you hurting.”

I roll my eyes. “You’ve hurt me plenty,” I tell him, gesturing to the still healing wound on my arm and the scars on my back from where he carved into me.

“That’s not what I mean,” Knox insists. “I don’t like to see you hurting in here.” He puts a hand on my chest.

My heart aches at that, feeling like it’s expanding and being squeezed at the same time. I don’t know what to do with these men sometimes—especially when they say shit like that. These brutal, dangerous men, who want so badly to protect me. To keep me whole when the world keeps trying to shatter me into a million jagged pieces.

I lean up and kiss him, resting my hand at the back of his head. It’s easier than trying to figure out how to say how much it means to me that they give a shit, and Knox will get the message.

He kisses me back, keeping his hand on my chest. It starts as just me trying to say thank you, but then it grows and deepens, turning more intense the way it always does between us.

His tongue plunges into my mouth, and I make a soft noise of pleasure at that, tangling my tongue with his. He slides that hand down from my chest to rest at my hip, dragging me in closer. Our lips clash against each other, like it’s a fight almost, teeth and tongues battling it out just for the thrill of it.

Knox pushes me on my back on the bed and moves to kneel over me, breathing hard. His eyes are intense and dark, just from the kiss, and there’s something feral but kind in the way he looks at me.

“I could cut *you*,” he offers, sounding raspy and turned on.

A little thrill of adrenaline goes through me at the thought of that, and I nod, mouth suddenly very dry.

Knox licks his lips and takes up the razor in his hand. It seems a lot smaller in his big hand than it does in mine, but he’s so skilled with a blade.

First, he uses it to cut down the front of my shirt, slicing through the fabric and not letting the cool metal touch my skin just yet. He peels the two sides of the shirt away from me and I shrug the ruined garment off, tossing it to the side. He works me the rest of the way out of my pants and then cuts my panties off, leaving me completely bare for him.

I shiver a little, just from the way he looks at me and how it feels to be naked under him while he’s dressed and wielding a razor blade.

With nothing else between us, he cuts my skin next. He follows the lines that are already on my thighs, adding to the neat lines there with small cuts.

Each time he drags that blade against my skin, it makes me feel something new. None of the slices are deep, but they give me just what I need, focusing all my attention on the here and now.

After a bit, he shifts off the bed so he can kneel between my legs and have a better angle. Blood wells up in the deeper cuts, and Knox dips his shaggy head down to lap up some of the blood that drips down the side of my thigh.

I shiver at the sensation of that. The heat of his tongue against my skin just adds to the burning warmth starting to grow inside me. I can tell I'm getting turned on by this, my body humming from the feeling.

Knox drags the razor down from the top of my thigh to the more sensitive skin of my inner thigh. He doesn't cut there, just drags the blade along the skin, and I make a soft noise, unable to hold it back.

Knox keeps teasing me, dragging that blade over the places that make me shudder and moan for him, and it just builds the heat inside me more and more. I get closer to coming, just from this, and it's harder to hold still while he makes those delicate cuts.

"Knox," I gasp out, his name sounding like a plea in and of itself. "Please. Fuck. Please."

I don't have to elaborate, since there's really only one thing I could be begging for when I'm this keyed up and desperate for him. My body hums and throbs with need, and my pussy is wet from having him so close to it.

"Shit," Knox swears. He drags his tongue over another of the cuts, lapping up the blood there and then makes his way to my pussy, giving in to what I want. What I need at this point.

My eyes practically roll back into my head when he finally puts his mouth on me, his tongue darting out to lick at my clit.

"Yes," I moan, hips arching up more like I want to get him deeper. "Right there, Knox. Please."

He hums in acknowledgement and starts sucking on my clit, sending wave after wave of pleasure cascading through me. Knox is as good with his mouth as he is with his hands, and it doesn't take long before I'm right there on the edge. My body convulses, and I writhe on the bed as my orgasm takes me, making me cry out sharply with how good it feels.

Blindly, I reach for Knox's hand, grabbing it for something to hold on to. But he still has the razor in that hand, and it bites into my palm as I grab it. The sharp pain spikes my pleasure even higher, and I gush as I come, an orgasm like I've never felt before rushing through me as I shake from the strength of it.

It takes me a few long minutes to remember how to breathe and to get my heart rate down to something that's less than a frantic gallop. I pant hard, and the tension finally drains from my body, that sick feeling of having seen Julian fading.

"You okay?" Knox asks, lifting his head from between my legs.

I nod weakly, still too overcome to speak just yet.

He slides his hands up my thigh and then takes my hand, inspecting the cut on my palm. It's deep, deeper than the others he gave me, and there's blood already welling up and trickling down my wrist. Knox frowns at it, poking at the edges.

"Shit. This is too deep," he tells me, glancing up at my face.

He was careful with the other cuts, making sure not to slice into me too deep, but this one was more accidental and I did it to myself, really.

There's a look on his face that I haven't really seen before, like he's worried he might have actually hurt me. It makes sense, considering he's usually so controlled when he's hurting me, and he knows what he's doing.

I pull him down into a kiss though, smearing blood in his hair as I hold the back of his head.

"It doesn't matter. I'm used to pain," I tell him when we part. "I had plenty of that before I met you guys, and no one can take that away."

Still holding his gaze, I release his hair and trail my fingers down his cheeks, smearing small streaks of blood in their wake. He leans into my hand, his eyelids drooping a little, and my heart squeezes at the unconscious affection of the gesture.

"You never have to worry about cutting me too deep or hurting me too much," I murmur. "Maybe it's fucked up, but I like the pain you give me. Because you give me something else too. Something that balances out the pain. Something that makes me feel whole."

Pleasure and pain.

Light and dark.

He helps me find both sides of myself.

PRIEST

I STAND in the upstairs hallway, one palm pressed to the wall beside me.

A few moments ago, I happened to be walking down the hall when I heard the cry from River's room. I've been with her enough times that I know it was the sound of her crying out in pleasure, crying out as she came apart. It made my heart beat faster, heat rushing through my veins.

I remember seeing her come up from the basement all those weeks ago, freshly fucked with a trail of blood running down her back and her shirt wadded up over her chest. I remember how affected I was even then, going to the shower and trying to jerk off before my cock went soft again.

My cock is half hard now, just from hearing her. Knox is with her, judging by the low sounds that I recognize as his voice, and part of me wants to go into her room and join them, to satisfy the ache in my balls and the craving in my soul.

I've come when touching her or being touched by her several times now, but I still haven't fucked her yet. I want to. So fucking badly.

But something is holding me back. I'm afraid I'll lose my erection or it will soften, and River will think it's her.

It's not her. It could never be her.

It's *me*.

I'm fucked up, and no matter how much I care about her and want her, that hasn't just vanished in a flash. Life doesn't work that way.

I reach down and palm my dick through my pants, rubbing myself for a few short strokes. There's a burst of pleasure in my veins, and I breathe through it, letting it wash over me for just a second.

Then I stride down the hall, refocusing on work. Focusing on what I can do for River.

I head downstairs and find Ash in the kitchen.

“How did it go this afternoon?” I ask him, going to the fridge to get a bottle of water.

Ash heaves a sigh, one elbow propped on the table, and his free hand flipping a card over and over. “It was going fine until we ran into Julian at the fucking gas station.”

My eyebrows raise at that and the anger in Ash’s voice. He’s usually the more mellow of the four of us, taking most things in stride with a flippant joke, but it’s clear he’s pissed as fuck about whatever happened with Julian.

“Knox is with River. She said she wanted to be alone, but...” He trails off with a shrug, and I nod.

“I know.”

I’m aware of both the fact that Knox is with River and that sometimes being alone with the kind of pain she’s feeling right now is the last thing a person actually needs.

“What did you guys find out while you were out?” I ask him.

Ash scowls at the table. “Not as much as we hoped to. Seeing Julian just kind of... fucked everything up. He was being a bastard, talking about how he’s not going to have a funeral for Hannah since no one would mourn her, and River went to a rough place. We had to stop her from hauling off and smacking him right there in the gas station.”

I nod, understanding that completely. I had my revenge on the people who killed Jade, but if I’d come across any of them just out and about, I don’t know if I’d have been able to stop myself from hurting them.

“I could go out with you,” I offer. “Since Knox is busy and Gage isn’t here. To get the info we need.”

We’ve been trying to find out when Julian’s next big shipment of drugs will be coming in, so we can disrupt the shipment somehow.

“Sure,” Ash replies, nodding. “Let’s do it.”

The two of us head out and meet with a guy who used to be a drug runner. Like everyone in that particular industry, he still keeps his ears to the ground about what’s going on. It’s hard to actually get out, even if you don’t do the work anymore.

There’s usually a price for that kind of information, since money always talks. Luckily, we can easily pay it.

He looks at us suspiciously for a bit, until the money comes out, then he seems like he's eager to talk.

"It's yours if you tell us what you know," I say.

"And we'll know if you're lying," Ash adds.

"I got no reason to lie," the runner tells us with a shrug. "Need the money more than I need to keep any secrets. I've seen stuff come in for Maduro before, and I know where he gets his shit from."

"Can you tell us when his next shipment is coming in? And what route it will take?" I ask.

He nods. "Yeah, sure. It's been about two weeks since he's gotten any supply if my timing's right. So it should be in the next two weeks or so. He's a big dealer, so he goes through shit pretty fast. He doesn't deal super locally, either. He's got it good enough that he can have shit coming in from wherever he wants, pretty much. But he usually goes to the same source, and his runners take one of three paths. Usually switching it up every once in a while."

"And you know what path the runner will be on this time?" Ash wants to know.

"Sure do. Been a minute since this one was used, and I'm cool with a friend of the guy who does the running." He gestures for us to lean in closer, and he starts describing the route the driver will take, and we both commit it to memory as best we can.

It's enough to go on for now, and it gives us a place to start.

With that information, we head home. Ash is in a better mood since we have something actionable to work on, something that will get us to the next stage of the plan.

I feel a little better too, but I keep thinking about what Ash said about running into Julian and how River was fucked up afterward.

I know, probably better than anyone, that we can't erase her pain. We can't bring her sister back or make it not hurt anymore that she's gone. But I want to do something. Something that will help in this time where we're still putting the pieces together for how to take out Julian.

I keep turning it over and over in my head. Julian's a fucking prick for saying that no one would mourn Hannah, especially in front of the one person who's mourning her the most. He might not want to do anything to celebrate Hannah's life, but that doesn't mean River doesn't want that.

Thinking about it that way gives me an idea.

“Ash. I think... we should do a memorial for Hannah. We don’t need a church or a casket or a funeral to honor her passing properly. Julian won’t do it, so we will. For River. Maybe it will give her some closure or peace. I don’t know.”

Ash glances over at me and grins. “That’s a great idea.” He hesitates, then adds, “You know, you’ve changed.”

“How do you mean?”

“Since River came into our lives, you’ve been... I dunno. More alive. More present than you were before. I’m glad to see you coming to life again.”

I don’t really have anything to say to that, so I just nod. He’s right, in his way. Things really have changed since River came along. She’s changed me for the better. She’s so deep under my skin that I couldn’t get her out if I tried.

And I like it, although a part of me fears it too.

Because if something ever happened to her, it would wreck me beyond repair.

RIVER

THE SHOWER WATER is hot as it beats down on my back and shoulders, soaking into my hair when I tip my head back.

Knox hung out with me a bit after I came down from coming, making sure I was really okay. I told him I was, and eventually he accepted that, leaving me to clean up and wash the day off me.

The water runs red a bit, and I hiss when it hits the cuts, sending trails of blood down my legs and swirling down the drain.

It felt incredible at the time, something I didn't even know I needed until Knox gave it to me, but now it stings under the water until I get used to the spray.

I wash up quickly and then get out, looking at myself in the mirror. There are neat little lines from Knox, still pink and raised with their freshness. When I turn to look at my back, I can just make out the healing scars from where Knox marked me. I look at the stitches in my arm, which I never got looked at by a real doctor.

They're a bit rough, and I'll probably have more of a scar than I would have otherwise, but I don't care. Honestly, I kind of like it. It's Knox marking me in another way.

I stand there, looking at my tattoos and scars. With nothing on, everything stands out in sharp relief. Some of the scars are self-inflicted, and obviously I got the tattoos myself, but a lot of the marks on me are from other people. From fights I had to scrape and claw my way out of. From being abused and hurt in ways no one could ever deserve. It's all left its mark on me, and I look so patched together at this point that I probably shouldn't even be standing.

But I am.

I'm still on my fucking feet.

And as I go up against pure evil, I'm determined to be the last one still standing.

I brush one hand over the mirror, dragging my fingers through the condensation on it from the shower. In my head, I can hear that question from Gage. The one he asked the night I killed Ivan St. James, before he fucked me over this counter, and again in that dive bar bathroom.

Are you ruined?

I shake my head. *No. No, I'm not.*

It's late evening and my stomach growls, reminding me that I didn't have lunch and it's getting past time for dinner. So I throw on some clothes and go downstairs, thinking about grabbing something to eat and then doing something productive to help with our mission, since I got sidetracked earlier.

As soon as I reach the bottom of the stairs though, I realize it's darker than it normally is down there. Several lights are off, and there's a warm glow flickering on the walls.

Frowning, I keep walking and step into the living room to find a bunch of candles set up on all the flat surfaces. All the guys are there too, candlelight flickering on their faces, and my footsteps slow.

"What's going on?" I ask, glancing around at them.

"We thought..." Priest starts. He seems unsure for a second, and then continues. "This is a memorial for Hannah. We thought you might want to do that."

My chest tightens, and emotions go barreling through me a mile a minute. Pain at the fact that she's gone and there needs to be a memorial at all. Anger about what Julian said, and how little he cared for someone as amazing as my sister. Warmth that the four of them put this together because they wanted to honor my sister and to make me happy.

I open my mouth to speak, but my throat is closed, blocked by the emotion in my chest.

Gage, perceptive as always to my emotions, takes a step closer to me. "Is this okay?" he asks. "We thought it would be a nice way to honor her, but we don't want to make you think about it if you don't want to."

I nod emphatically, tears starting to leak from my eyes as Gage smiles and takes my hand, bringing me further into the room.

It's lovely, just the five of us and the candlelight. And even though the four of them only really met her a couple of times, and were only able to see the real Hannah, the Hannah I knew and loved, that one time when she came to the house, I can tell their feelings in this moment are real.

Gage speaks first, as he usually does. He bows his head for a second, and I know he's not praying, but getting his thoughts together. "I didn't get to know Hannah as well as I would have liked to, but what I did see, I liked. I could tell she was resourceful, able to adapt. She was strong. A fighter, like her sister. She was in a bad situation, but she wasn't desperate to save her own skin. She was putting up with it for her son's sake, because of the depth of her love for him. Someone willing to sacrifice themselves for someone they love is always an amazing person."

I swallow hard at the steady way Gage talks about her. Because he's right. The depth of Hannah's love was... fathomless. I was always trying to protect her, but she did the same for me. She helped me and loved me and she looked out for Cody with the same strength.

Ash goes next, smiling a little as he speaks directly to Hannah, as if she's listening. "You were a light, when you were here. You walked into our house and River just lit up. It was so clear how much you loved her. How even through the anger you felt, you cared about her and wanted her to be happy. Five minutes of an argument was all I needed to hear to know how strong your bond was with her."

"And you were brave," Knox puts in. "People always think bravery has to be punching fuckers in the face and staring down guns and shit, but there's more to it than that. Julian's a piece of shit, but you stayed with him. You kept your head down, hoping that one day you could get you and your son away from him. And then in that alley, you didn't hesitate. You did what you knew you had to do, to keep what you loved safe. That's fucking beautiful."

Tears flow freely down my face as they talk, and I don't make any move to stop them. Hearing them speak about my sister this way is both painful and healing in a way. It hurts because she's gone, and she'll never get to know these men the way I do, but I know they would have loved her.

Priest is quiet for the longest time. When he finally looks up, his eyes are soft and a bit shiny, though that might just be a trick of the light.

"I wish we could have known you more," he says. "I wish we could have welcomed you here and kept you safe. But I promise that we will keep

your sister safe in your place. We'll give her a home, and we'll take care of her. We'll have her back through whatever comes her way, and she'll never have to be alone again. You gave your life to keep her safe, and we will honor that. Forever."

My heart aches, and Gage looks at me, a soft smile on his face.

"Did you want to say something?" he asks, and he doesn't say it, but I know none of them would think less of me if I couldn't manage to get any words out of my mouth.

But this could be the only chance I have to say what I want to say. Here in our living room, in this little memorial these men set up just for me.

So I take a deep breath and let it out slowly, swallowing past the emotion so I can find my voice. Just like I did when Knox asked before, I dig into the memories I have and think of the best moments I had with my sister.

"I remember being ten, when the ice cream truck came through our neighborhood. We didn't have any money for it, and dad wasn't home to ask. I think I'd had a bad day at school or something, because I was in a shit mood. You told me to wait in the driveway so the truck would stop, and then you ran down the street. The driver stopped, but I didn't know what to say to him because I didn't have any money. Then you came running back with three dollars in your hand, and we sat on the curb and ate ice cream before dinner like little rebels."

"Where did she get the money?" Ash asks softly.

I laugh at the memory. "From this kid down the block. She told him she'd do his homework that night if he gave her three bucks. And she did it."

The guys laugh at that, warm and appreciative.

"She was just... like that. Always willing to help, to do what she could to make things better for us. One time there was this massive storm, and the power went out in the middle of the night. Dad was asleep, and Hannah slipped out of bed and got all the flashlights and candles in the house and set them up in our room. We made a blanket fort and told stories to drown out the sound of the thunder and lightning. We were both afraid of storms, but she was willing to ignore that to make sure we weren't in the dark."

I wipe my eyes and drag in a deep breath. There was definitely a time when I would have been horrified to think of these guys, or anyone else for that matter, seeing me cry like this. But I know that my emotions are safe

with them, and I know they've felt loss and hurt the way I have, so it's not like it's something completely new to them.

I look at Knox and smile a little. "And you're right. She was so brave."

I recount the story about Hannah climbing trees and helping me get to the top of the tree in the park for the others, and they're all smiling by the time I'm done.

"She was quieter than I am sometimes, and people always thought that meant she was the meek one. But she wasn't. She was brave and strong. She stood up for the kids in school who got picked on for being weird or poor or whatever. She didn't take shit from anybody. That's why it was so weird to see her so cowed when it came to Julian. He talked to her like she was a stupid kid, and she let him do it. But it was all a part of a long game. For her son. It was always like that with her."

"She sounds amazing," Gage murmurs. "I can see why you love her so much. And why she loved you so much in return."

That starts the tears flowing again, and I just nod because it's true.

"For a while, we were all we had in the world," I tell them. "Our dad was a piece of shit, and we couldn't count on him for anything. So we had to count on each other. That was always enough. She was always enough."

I tell more stories about Hannah. About her learning how to cook something I wanted to try because we saw it on TV. About her walking to the library because she loved to read. About her adopting the stray cats of our neighborhood and leaving out little tins of canned chicken and fish for them and building boxes stuffed with blankets for them to curl up in during the winter.

I talk until my throat goes dry and I feel like I can't cry anymore. I feel wrung out, but not in a bad way. And the guys listen. They take it all in and sometimes ask questions, but for the most part, they just let me get it all out.

When I feel like I don't have anything else to say, I bow my head and drag in a shuddering breath. It feels like saying goodbye, but I guess that's what funerals and memorials are about. Letting the person go to their rest and all.

"I'll look out for Cody," I murmur. "I'll get him away from Julian, and I'll keep him safe. I'll teach him that there are people in the world who would move mountains to make sure he's safe and happy. Just like you did." I thought I was out of tears to cry, but more well in my eyes, dripping down my cheeks.

My lips tremble, but I force the words to keep coming. “I love you. So much. Always have, and I always will. Kill for you. Live for you. Die for you.”

In unison, the guys echo it back like a prayer. A benediction.

It feels like a release, and something in my chest loosens a little, the poisonous, numbing pain easing a bit.

RIVER

I'M DREAMING, like I always do.

I'm afraid, but not because anything scary is happening at the moment, but because I'm waiting for it to happen. Just like it always does.

I'm waiting for it to become a nightmare.

I see Hannah, and again, the fear rises up in me. But instead of being held captive, Hannah and I are free. We're walking in the light, with no walls around us. Nothing holding us back.

Hannah gestures for me to follow her, and I do. I'd follow her anywhere, and she knows that. She leads me to a tree, and after a bit I realize it's the same tree from my memory, the one I told Knox about.

It's just as tall as I remember, and I have to crane my neck to see the top of it, the greenery of the boughs blotting out the sun and the clouds in the sky.

When I look back at Hannah, she's already climbing the tree, and she turns her head and smiles at me, waving with one hand for me to follow her up.

I feel that tingle in my palms and stomach the way I did before, that fear of heights and fear of falling making itself known. But Hannah's there. She's climbed this tree plenty of times and nothing bad has happened. I can hear her, and I can't tell if she's speaking in the dream or if it's my memory of her in my mind.

"I know all the handholds, River. I've done this a million times."

There's so much confidence in her tone, and I trust her with my life, so I follow, putting my hands where she puts her hands, copying her movements exactly.

Her voice is breathless with exertion and excitement in my head.

“We’re almost there! You’re doing so good. Just a little higher.”

Her voice blocks out all the panic in me for a bit, and I let that happen, leaning into her encouragement until we get so high up I can feel the wind whipping at my cheeks.

We climb higher than seems possible, until we get to a spot high up in the branches. They’re thick enough still for us to sit on, so we do, hugging the trunk and looking out together.

Hannah doesn’t say anything, but it’s comforting to just sit here in this tree with her, far above the streets of Detroit.

I wake up, and for once it’s not in a jolt of panic, with a scream clawing at my throat.

Gage is next to me this time, and I let out a soft sigh. It’s been a few days since the memorial the guys put together, and even though I still have nightmares, I’m starting to have other dreams about my sister too.

Nicer ones, with a lot less death and pain.

I stretch slowly, the covers moving over my naked body as I do. Gage is also naked, and he reaches for me, tugging me closer possessively, still half asleep. He mumbles something into my hair, and I smile at his sleepy gibberish. His cock slides between my legs, morning hard and at attention, and I grind against him, egging him on.

Gage groans and rolls me over onto my back, kissing me deeply. There’s so much possessiveness in it. So much want. I kiss him back, pouring all of my feelings into it. It’s easy to get lost in that for a minute, just the two of us, our hands roaming over each other’s skin.

Then Ash’s voice comes through the door.

“We’ve gotta hit the road, you two,” he calls. “Gage, you better finish in two pumps like you normally do, or we’re gonna be behind schedule.”

Gage growls and reaches for the nightstand blindly, throwing my empty water cup at the door. Ash just laughs and walks away, leaving us alone.

The gorgeous man between my legs sighs and kisses me again, softer and slower this time, but also shorter.

“We’d better get up,” he says. “If I’m going to fuck you, I want to do it right, and we don’t have time for that right now.”

I lean up and kiss him one more time before he can pull away, and then we both roll out of bed.

Excitement and anticipation mix in my stomach as I hunt down clothes to put on. We know now what route the next shipment for Julian will be taking, and we know the general time frame. We've got to get to a spot on the route so we can wait there to sabotage the shipment. It's a ways away too, in the Ouachita Mountains.

Both of us get dressed, and I grab a few bottles of nail polish and shove them in the bag I've packed for the trip. We head downstairs together, and the others are already loading the car with the gear we're taking.

"What the fuck are you doing, Ash?" Knox asks, sounding exasperated. "Don't just pile the shit up like that. Have you never packed a car before?"

"Well excuse the fuck out of me for not having played dead body Tetris in a trunk before, Knox. If it all gets there, what does it matter?" I can hear the eye roll in Ash's voice.

Knox huffs with exasperation. "We gotta have room for the rest of it, dumb-ass. River's shit, Gage's shit. All this shit still next to the car."

"You do it, then."

"I will. Move."

Priest sighs as he walks outside with his own bag and seems to contemplate loading it himself before just putting it down next to the car for Knox to deal with.

Knox grumbles under his breath as he starts rearranging things in the trunk, and Priest is rolling his eyes when Gage and I come out.

"It's too early for this much bickering," he mutters.

"With those two?" Gage says. "It's never too early for them."

"Too early for the rest of us, then." Priest smiles at me, a small smile that actually reaches his eyes, and I lean up to kiss him on the cheek before approaching Knox with my bag.

"If I try to put this in the trunk will you have a fit?" I ask him, half teasing.

He rolls his eyes. "It's not a fit. I'm just saying it makes more sense to do it this way. Easier to unload, more space for shit."

It's funny because I never would have pegged Knox as the one to be the best at organizing, not when Gage is right there, but considering how orderly he keeps his 'tools of the trade' it makes a certain kind of sense.

Once everything is loaded to Knox's specifications, we pile into the car and hit the road.

It's weird to drive away and not see Hippo (the current name for the dog, given to him by Knox after he ate all of Knox's take out, right from the container) in the window, barking to send us off. But since we'll be gone for a bit, the bartender from Sin and Salvation is watching him.

I like that none of the guys even suggested putting the dog back on the street or doing anything but making sure he was taken care of. I'm pretty sure I even saw Ash sneaking some dog toys in the bag of stuff we brought over to the bartender's house when we dropped Hippo off.

It feels weirdly domestic to be going on a road trip with these guys, and I settle in the backseat with Ash and Priest.

Gage is driving, and as soon as we back out of the driveway and get onto the road, Ash puts on a whiny voice and asks "Are we there yet?"

Gage sighs, long and with feeling, and Knox laughs.

"Ash, I swear to fuck," Gage says.

"What, you'll turn this car around?" Ash quips back. "You won't stop at McDonald's and you'll make me eat the food we have at home?"

Knox just cackles, and Priest rests a hand on my leg, rubbing his thumb lightly over my knee. It's a small point of connection between us, but it feels nice.

"Let's focus for a bit, okay?" Gage says. "And go over what we know."

That makes Ash get serious, for the moment at least, and we all sit up a little bit straighter in our seats to go over the plan. We know that Julian is expecting a big shipment of drugs. We know the route.

"When do we expect the drug runner to reach the spot where we'll be intercepting him?"

"Four days, give or take," Knox says.

"Which gives us two days to reach the place, and a buffer of two days in case the runner is ahead of schedule," Gage adds.

I nod, fixing that in my mind. We have a plan, and it's a good plan. Gage is known for making good plans, and so far, everything has been going the way we want it to.

I gaze out the window, watching the buildings and houses of the city give way to the open highway. The signs start signaling exits for leaving Detroit, and I take a deep breath and then let it out.

In my mind, I can picture Julian's smug fucking smile when he saw me. I think of the razor I dragged over my skin afterward.

It's his turn now, to feel what it's like to die by a million cuts. This will be one more deep slice.

One step closer to our goal.

ASH

IT'S A LONG-ASS DRIVE, and it's kind of tedious. The company is good, but even that can't really take away the monotony of driving for this long without some kind of entertainment.

If we weren't on a schedule and doing something important, I'd be bugging Gage to stop at every single random tourist attraction we pass.

But I can't, since we don't have the time to waste. We need to make it to the spot we've chosen in two days, so it'll be a long two days of driving.

All in all, it's not so bad, though. I'm in the backseat with River, and she's dozing against my shoulder. She stirs when we hit a curve, and I smile and put my hands on her.

"Here," I murmur. "This will probably be more comfortable for you, beautiful."

She just gives a sleepy little noise of affirmation, and I help her to lie down more with her head in my lap. Her feet go in Priest's lap, and out of the corner of my eye, I can see him rest a hand on her ankle, rubbing it gently.

I look down at River's face, her features softened only slightly by sleep. Even when she's knocked out in the back of the car, I can see that determination on her face. In the set of her mouth, the way her eyebrows are drawn down. She doesn't look relaxed, she looks ready.

I like that about her. I have since the moment we met. I've never met anyone as strong and fucking stubborn as she is, except maybe Gage.

Nothing stands in her way for long, and it's hard to imagine a time when that won't be sexy as hell.

I reach down and play with her hair, letting the soft, silver strands run through my fingers. Just having her head in my lap gets my cock hard. Just the feel of her resting against me is enough to have me moving toward half-mast. River turns me on just by existing. She's just so fucking sexy to me.

I swallow hard and keep stroking her hair, letting the arousal ebb and flow through me. She's asleep, and we're in the car anyway, so it's not like there's room to do anything. But that's a thought, though. Gage driving, forced to keep his eyes on the road. Knox in the front seat, probably grumbling about not being able to touch her. And me and Priest back here, with River spread out for us...

Okay, that's definitely not helping the whole being turned on problem, and I try to shift my mind to something else as we keep driving. We've hit the stretch of interstate where there's just long miles of nothing but billboards and other cars.

We pass families in SUVs, loaded up with all their kids' assorted crap, cars hauling boats and other cars behind them. U-Hauls and moving vans and little sports cars that zip between the lanes, impatient with the flow of traffic.

Billboards whip by, advertising sex shops and restaurants and truck stops. A big one looms ahead with a picture of Jesus on it, weeping tears of blood. Just a few feet beyond that is another big one, advertising "XXX Hot Girls Tonight!"

I snort and shake my head at that, and River mumbles something in her sleep that I choose to believe is her agreeing with me about how stupid that is.

Eventually, we reach the small town where we've planned to stay for the night.

Gage spots a sign off the highway for a diner, and he pulls off on the exit. River slowly starts waking up, shifting and groaning as she moves to sit upright, rubbing at her eyes.

"How long was I out?" she asks.

"Couple hours," I tell her. "You didn't miss much, unless you like billboards for adult superstores."

"Oh, darn," she replies, her voice somehow raspy with sleep and completely deadpan at the same time. "I can't believe I missed that."

I snort with amusement, and Gage pulls into the diner.

It's a fucking revelation to pile out of the car and stretch our legs. There were a few stops to pee at rest areas and gas stations when we needed to top the car off, but there was always the looming thought that we were going to have to get right back in the car when we were done. Now at least we have a longer break ahead of us, and the promise of sleeping for the night soon.

"I'm fucking starving," Knox says, stretching his arms overhead and cracking his back in multiple places.

"You had six bags of chips three hours ago," Priest counters, closing his car door once River has scooted out.

"That's not food," Knox insists. "That's like. Salty cardboard. It's fluff. Distracts you from being hungry long enough that when you finally get a whiff of real food, you realize how damn hungry you are."

No one argues with him, half because I think we all realize he has a point with that. Instead we troop into the diner and I flash a smile at the harried looking waitress who tells us, "Sit anywhere, and I'll be right there."

We move to settle into a booth, and River ends up on my side between me and Knox. Knox immediately dives into the menu, muttering about putting chili on a burger, but I can't stop looking at River.

She looks so comfortable sitting there, hair tucked behind one ear and the sleeves of her hoodie pushed up. Her eyes scan the menu, but I know she knows I'm looking at her. She's observant like that. Clearly she just doesn't mind.

A few minutes go by and the waitress comes over. She wears what I recognize as a customer service smile, her lips curving upward but the rest of her expression remaining blank and bored. "Hi, I'm Kathy, and I'll be taking care of you tonight. What can I get for you? Drinks to start? Or are you ready to put it all in?"

"I'm ready," Knox says immediately.

We all roll our eyes at that.

"Yeah. We're ready," Gage confirms.

We put our orders in one by one, and Kathy writes them down quickly. She snaps her little notepad closed when we finish and hurries off to put the orders in.

As soon as she's gone, my attention snaps back to River. I'm still turned on from her having put her head in my lap in the car, and I can feel the

arousal beating through me, making me want to touch her. So I just go with it.

I slide my hand over her thigh under the table, moving upward to brush her pussy through her pants.

She shivers at the touch, and when she glances over at me, I grin at her, licking my lips. With practiced ease, I unzip her pants and push the denim out of the way enough that I can have enough access to what I want.

I work my hand into her panties, letting my nimble fingers find her clit and tease it lightly.

River sucks in a sharp breath, and that catches everyone else's attention. They're attuned enough to her by now that they notice her reaction, and that makes me smile even more. Good. I want them to know what's happening here.

I lean in closer, so I can put my lips right against her ear.

"You like this, don't you?" I whisper to her. "Getting touched in a public place. All the other Kings watching you, knowing you're getting so wet from having your clit rubbed."

She bites her lip, trying hard not to react, but it's clear she's having a hard time keeping a straight face.

"They already know," I whisper. "They know you're a pretty little slut who can't help getting turned on. They know you'd love it if we bent you over this table and took you right here and now."

A soft little whimper spills from her lips, and I smirk, pleased at that reaction.

I keep working her up, dipping my fingers into her pussy, pressing the heel of my hand against her clit to give her something to grind against if she wants to. And I know she wants to.

"Let them see," I tell her. "Let them see how much you want it, killer."

Knox is on her other side, and out of the corner of my eye, I can see his hand slide down River's back. After a second or two, she jerks, arching into my hand. She barely bites her lip in time to stifle the soft moan that wants to come out, and I can guess what just happened. Knox is fingering her asshole.

River tries to glare at us, but there's no heat behind it. We've all seen her angry before, and now she just looks horny and desperate.

I shoot her my winning smile in return.

Between the two of us, we have her squirming in her seat in no time. I wonder how good it feels to be in her position. Fingers probing her most delicate places, the heavy gazes of Gage and Priest from across the table, locked onto her, knowing exactly what's going on here. The threat of the waitress coming back or someone else in the diner figuring out what we're doing. There's a lot going on, and judging from the heated flush on River's cheeks, she's into all of it.

That just makes the heat beat through me even more, and as much as I love teasing her and working her up like this, I want more. I want her to come for us.

So we keep touching her. I circle her clit lightly with one finger, teasing her, making her arch her hips to try to get more sensation, then I plunge my fingers back into her pussy, fucking her with them with as much leverage as I can get.

Knox keeps his hand moving too, and River works herself back and forth, squirming on the fake leather seat of the booth.

Her breathing comes faster and faster, and I can tell she's getting close. She's trying to be subtle about it, but I know the signs, and she's right there on the edge already.

Before we can decide whether or not to push her over that edge, Kathy comes back with our food, so Knox and I both stop for a second. River makes a visible effort to pull herself together, but she's flushed and there's a light sheen of sweat on her face, making flyaway hairs stick to her forehead.

The waitress gives us a funny look as she drops the food in front of us, then leaves, off to deal with a table of demanding customers.

As soon as she's gone, I push my fingers as deep as they can go into River's pussy.

"You think she could tell?" I ask her, murmuring into her ear again. "You think she knew that you're just inches away from coming in your pants right here in this booth? That's what you want, isn't it? You want us to make you come so hard you forget how to breathe for a second. Right here in this shitty little diner off the highway."

Her whine is hard to hear, but I can almost feel it when it happens, like it vibrates through her body and into mine.

Knox is grinning his shit-eating grin, and I can tell he's having as much fun as I am. He dips his head close to her ear, and I can't make out what he

says to her, but he punctuates it with a nip to her earlobe that makes her shudder hard.

Even Gage, who is usually the most serious of the four of us, is watching with heat in his eyes and not telling me to stop fucking around like he usually would. River's his soft spot, and we all know it. Not that we can blame him because watching her try to hold it together while we tease her and work to make her fall apart is just hot to see. A person would have to have a heart of stone to not get turned on by the sight.

Over the top of River's head, Knox and I make eye contact. He smirks and I nod, and that's as good a signal as any. Together, we up the ante, working River up even more. I fuck her with my fingers as much as I can, pressing the heel of my hand into her clit. Judging from the way River's breathing changes, Knox has at least one finger in her ass, and he's making her feel just as good with it.

"Come on," I tell her. "Come for us."

Either the instruction or the touching or the combination of both is enough to make her obey almost instantly. She writhes from the pleasure, shaking in her seat, trying to keep it from being noticeable that she's coming undone right then and there. A few moans and curses slip out though, and it's a good show for the four of us.

It seems to go on forever, her orgasm crashing through her, but finally she's able to stop writhing and catch her breath. Then she immediately tries to glare at us again. It has the same non-effect as before, and I just grin back at her, pulling my fingers free and licking them clean slowly.

Her cheeks are still so flushed, and she shakes her head. "Well, I can't eat here now. Not after that."

I chuckle and shrug. "We can get the food boxed up to go. Knox has ass-finger anyway, so he needs to wash up before he eats."

"Fuck off," Knox shoots back, giving me the bird with his free hand.

"I'm serious," I tell him, half seriously. "That's not very sanitary."

River hisses, and I notice Knox hasn't moved his hand yet, so that makes me think he just pushed his finger into her even deeper. I chuckle, my cock pulsing as I waggle my brows at River.

Kathy comes back a moment later, a bored expression on her face.

"How is the food tasting?" she asks, then blinks as she registers that we haven't touched our meals at all. "Is everything okay?"

“Just fine,” Gage replies, using that practiced nonchalant tone. “But can we actually get everything to go?”

She shoots us another look, and it’s pretty clear she knows what just happened, or she has the gist of it, anyway. When she leaves to go get some to go boxes, I can’t help but laugh again.

I grab River’s jaw and turn her head to kiss her, not giving a single fuck what the waitress knows, or the rest of the diner, for that matter.

Let the whole fucking world know.

River is ours.

Ours to protect. Ours to worship.

Our fucking queen.

RIVER

“RIVER.”

There’s a warm, soft voice in my ear, and for a second, I think it’s a part of the dream I’m having. Whatever it was slips through my fingers when I try to hold on to it, and the voice says my name again.

I open my eyes and realize it’s Priest, shaking me slightly, waking me up from my nap. We had another long day of driving, and after getting tired of playing car games with Ash—considering he makes up half the rules and cheats most of the time—napping seemed like the best way to pass the time.

But now the car is stopped, and Priest has a hand on my shoulder.

“What’s up?” I mumble, trying to wake myself up.

“We’re here,” he says.

I rub my eyes and stretch a little, peering out the window to see where we are.

“Here” is a cabin in the woods, pretty rustic and remote. It’s not fancy, but it offers a good view of the highway that passes by in the distance. We made it to the Ouachita Mountains.

We get out of the car, and I stretch gratefully. Even with more room for this leg of the drive, being in one spot for so long isn’t the most comfortable. It was just me, Priest, and Knox in this car, while Gage and Ash were in the other one.

We picked up a second car for a few grand in cash a few hours ago in a small town we passed through. Like the cabin, it’s nothing fancy. But it’s big and it’s got good pickup, and that’s what we need.

I stretch my legs, looking around at the remote mountainous area we’re in. It’s quieter than the city, that’s for sure, and all the sounds are animals in

the trees and insects humming. There probably aren't other people around for miles, and after the long drive, it's a nice change of pace.

"Let's get this stuff unpacked and set up before we lose the light," Gage says, and we all spring into action, unloading the car.

We start bringing our bags into the cabin, and Knox takes the bag of surveillance stuff and starts setting that up. It's not super sophisticated, just a scope on a tripod pretty much. With the vantage point of our cabin, we can get a good view of the highway we think the runner will be coming down. So we'll stake out this spot, and then when we see him, we'll be ready to spring into action. Since we made good time on the drive, we should have plenty of time for our plan to go off without a hitch. Hopefully.

"I'll get dinner on," Ash says, and he heads into the kitchen to start unloading the groceries we bought on the way up. Pretty soon we can all hear him humming as he chops veggies and starts onions and garlic sautéing in a pan.

The smell of that chases out the lingering scent of dust and disuse that was hovering in the air, and Gage and Priest get to going through all the equipment we brought with us, getting things ready.

I move between all of them, trying to help where I can and checking in with them.

Ash grins at me whenever I come into the kitchen, and he holds out a spoon of red sauce for me to taste.

"What do you think?" he asks.

"Mm, it's good. Needs a little more salt though," I tell him, licking my lips.

He licks a bit of sauce off the spoon thoughtfully, then nods. "Good call. Thanks, killer."

"River, can you come hold this for a second?" Gage calls, and Ash shoos me out to go help them set up all of our shit.

After a little while, Ash calls us to the kitchen for dinner, and we all gather to eat. Someone has to stay on the scope at all times, so we plan to take turns with that. Knox says he'll take the first watch, between big mouthfuls of the pasta Ash made.

It's almost like being at home, sitting around the table with them, having a meal together, but there's something different about it. Maybe the fact that I know we're not in the city. That there aren't cars going up and

down the road every five minutes. Just peace and quiet and the sounds of nature.

“It’s nice up here,” I comment, feeling relaxed for the first time in a while. “I haven’t been out of the city in a long time.”

“We’ll take you on a real vacation,” Ash tells me. “When all this is over.”

I blink because that’s such a strange concept to me. The idea of having time, not grinding for some goal that needs to happen. Going on a vacation, just because I can, not because it ties in to a mission or a grudge or because I need to lie low for a while. But the idea of getting away with these four men and not having to constantly have my guard up sounds nice. It sounds like a good way to celebrate getting through this mess.

“You’d better,” I tell Ash, grinning at him from across the table.

ASIDE FROM THE fact that one of us is always glued to the scope, waiting for our mark to appear, the next two days almost do feel like a vacation.

We’re away from home, away from the city and all the stuff that goes on there. The guys don’t have to go into the club, and even though we’re here to further the plan to take Julian out, I’m not thinking about him as much as I would be knowing he’s right there in the same city.

It’s a nice little break, and we manage to have a good time, even though we’re here on a mission. We kill time by cooking and eating together, and each of the guys take turns making breakfasts, lunches, and dinners, showing off their skills.

Ash is a natural in the kitchen, and he turns it into almost like a show, flipping spatulas and knives and bottles of olive oil as he shows off his dexterity and cooking ability.

Knox is mostly the breakfast guy, and he turns out plates and plates of bacon, eggs, and toast, cooked perfectly every time. Priest and Gage are less fancy and more utilitarian. Their meals are filling and tasty, but it’s clear they just think of food as something to eat before getting back to work.

It’s interesting to get to see them like this, more relaxed almost than they usually are, even with the mission looming over all of our heads. It’s

like seeing a different side of them, learning more about them that I didn't know before.

Ash teases me about being a disaster in the kitchen, and I shrug and say I can do a few things. Eggs. Salads. Big pots of pasta with cheese on the top. Hannah was the one who handled making food in our house when our dad was gone.

Thinking about her puts a pang in my chest, but it's not the jagged ache that it used to be, so maybe that's a sign of healing. Who knows?

Aside from cooking, we also play a lot of strip poker. Priest is the best at it, surprising no one. His poker face is legendary, and it's impossible to call his bluffs. He manages to get Ash down to his socks more than once, and we all laugh at the sight of him sitting there with his cards covering his dick.

"You know," he complains. "I thought we were going to use this as a chance to get River naked."

Priest just shrugs, but his facial expression doesn't change. "There's still time for that. But you were being cocky about your skills earlier. You should stick to the magic tricks."

We laugh at that too, and Ash pouts, even though it's clear he's more amused than hurt. It's just a good time, and on more than one occasion us being naked in the living room of the cabin turns into us fucking in the living room of the cabin.

I ride Knox's cock right there while the others keep playing, or suck Priest off under the table since he wins more times than not.

Ash teaches me magic tricks and sleight of hand, and by the time the two days are almost up, I can manage to make a coin appear and disappear behind Knox's ear without even dropping it.

We're all waiting, but it's the best way to pass the time.

But then the two days we allotted are up, and there's still no sign of the drug runner.

All that good humor and relaxed feeling goes right out the window because it's hard not to freak out or think we made a terrible miscalculation somewhere. The atmosphere in the cabin gets tense, and we stay glued to the scope, sometimes in pairs, one of us looking through the scope while the other paces, trying to squint down at the highway.

I try not to let my mind spiral into all the ways this could have gone wrong and we could have fucked up, but it gets harder and harder to distract

myself the longer it takes for something to happen.

On the evening of the third day, I sit in the living room with Ash. We have a deck of cards between us, and I'm practicing a trick I've been working on. To be honest, I've been practicing it over and over again because it helps me to have something to focus on other than the waiting.

I do the trick, a little bit slower than Ash would have done it, but it goes off without a hitch, and Ash grins at me. "You're getting good," he says, and I grin back, pleased at the praise.

Ash takes the cards and goes to shuffle them so he can show off another trick, when we're interrupted by Priest's voice.

"I have a visual," he calls. "It's go time."

My heart lurches in my chest at that. This is it. Finally.

"Gear up," Gage says, coming into the cabin from where he'd been out front with Priest. "It's time to go."

KNOX

WE LEAVE THE CABIN TOGETHER, and I head immediately for the new car we picked up on the way here. The other Kings head toward the car we left home in, but River veers toward me, clearly planning to ride in the new car with me.

“I can handle it on my own,” I tell her. “This isn’t exactly the safe ride.”

“I know,” she says back, and determination flares in her eyes. “But I’m going with you. There’s no fucking way I wouldn’t.”

She’s got an expression on her face like she’s daring me to argue with her, and I glance over her head at the others, standing by the other car. They’ve got a spectrum of looks on their faces, varying between frustration and awe, and it makes me laugh under my breath.

I think I know better than all of them that we couldn’t really stop River if we tried. She’s always been a fucking force of nature, barreling into our lives like a hurricane and forcing us to keep up with her.

It makes my heart beat faster. My blood is already humming for action, and this kicks it up a notch, adding to the adrenaline surging through me.

I haul River in for a kiss, smashing my mouth into hers and devouring her for a second. It’s all we’ve got to spare, but it’ll have to be enough. When I pull back, the monster’s smile is on my face.

“I knew from the first minute I met you that you were as crazy as I am,” I tell her. “I fucking like that.”

She grins, and her dark blue eyes are bright with a wildness that calls to me in the best way.

River gets into the passenger side of the new car, and the others get in their car, and that’s that. We don’t have time to argue about who’s going

where, so it's decided.

We peel out real quick. With Priest on the scope, we had a pretty good view of the other car coming, so we had a bit of time, but we need to move fast to catch up with it.

We take the little side road that led to the cabin back to the highway and head in the direction the runner's car was driving.

I punch the gas, gunning it to catch up to the runner's car, which is a massive SUV.

I laugh as I feel that rush that comes with the speed and with knowing we're about to do this fucking thing. River's eyes are intent on the windshield, looking out at the road ahead of us, searching for the SUV.

It takes a couple of minutes, but then we see it up ahead, looming all big and black and ready for the taking.

The lights are off on our car, and we drive quickly toward the SUV. I hit the gas as I get near it, wrapping my fingers tight around the steering wheel. This whole thing is my shit, the stuff I love. It's dangerous to be speeding along like this, and I'm driving wildly, but with purpose and control. The car does what I want and only what I want, and I keep nudging it forward, my heart leaping every time the engine roars.

"Come on," I whisper under my breath and tap the back of the SUV with our car, trying to run it off the road.

The SUV swerves a little and then course corrects, and the driver lays on the horn for a second, like he's trying to warn me off. Like I'm some random ass driver on the road who got too close.

I grin that savage grin and gun it one more time, using our car's smaller size to get it up right alongside the SUV and start bearing to the right.

It swerves hard, and I drop back, but then the driver corrects again. "Fuck," I curse under my breath.

River's leaning forward in her seat, one hand wrapped tightly around the door handle. She licks her lips and glances over at me, and I smile back at her.

We're just getting started.

"Sit back," I tell her. "And make sure you're buckled in. Shit's about to get wild."

She just nods and checks her seatbelt before making a conscious effort to sit back further in her seat. The last thing I want is for her to get hurt in the middle of this, but she knows there's a chance, and she'd rather see this

through than try to wait somewhere where she'll be safe. Got to admire her for that.

One more time, I hit the gas and ram the SUV to the side, sending it veering off the road. I can't hear the driver, or even see him really, but I like to imagine he's cursing up a storm while he tries to get his shit together.

That last hit sends the message that someone's trying to fuck said shit up though, and the driver's side window rolls down. There's a split second where I see the gun before it starts firing, and I manage to slam on the brakes in time to avoid the bullets.

We stop in time, but the other car with Gage, Priest, and Ash in it almost barrels right into the back of us.

"Shit!" River curses, holding on to her seat.

"Warned you," I tell her, glancing over quickly to make sure she's alright. "Hold on."

Full sentences are out the window now, and I'm focused only on the SUV ahead of us. It starts to get farther away, putting on speed to get away from us since the driver knows something's up. But I've got it in my sights now. I'm like a shark with blood in the water, and I'm not letting up until this shit is done.

I slam on the gas and we shoot forward, creeping up past seventy, eighty, ninety miles an hour. The car squeals a little as I put it through its paces, but I don't let up. Not until I'm right on the runner's tail.

I jerk the wheel hard to the right, and we press into the side of the SUV at a hundred and something miles an hour. Even if the driver could correct in time, he doesn't have the space to play with, and the SUV goes veering off down the side of the road.

Up here in these mountains, there's not a lot between the road and the embankments, and the runner's going too fast to do anything about it. The SUV crashes over the side and rolls down the embankment with a screech of metal.

It's loud as fuck, and I hit the brakes, burning a little rubber as I bring us to a stop on the side of the road. The car Gage is driving is right behind us, and they stop too.

River and I pile out of the car, and when the other's join us, we all head down the embankment to see if the job is done.

I can tell River wants to run along, but she takes it slowly, picking her way down the rocky slope. We make it down to where the SUV ended up,

upside down and already smoking from the back.

Perfect. That means the drugs will be destroyed.

“Knox,” Gage says, and his voice seems loud in the quiet after the crash. “Make sure he’s dead.”

I nod and step closer to the vehicle. Before I even get to the door, the passenger side door is kicked open, and gunfire rings out.

“Fuck!” I hear Ash yell, and we dive for cover. Luckily, there are a shit ton of trees down here, so we have places to hide.

Dammit. This isn’t a part of the plan. The driver was supposed to die in the crash. We have to make sure he’s dead and doesn’t leave the scene, but we can’t shoot him. This whole thing has to look like an accident. Like he lost control up on these winding roads and died in the car crash, so there can’t be a fucking bullet hole in his head.

I can’t see the others or River, but I know what the new plan has to be. We have to keep this guy from escaping.

“Gage!” I call out, pitching my voice loud. “Sound off!”

“Here!” Gage calls back, sounding like he’s a little ways away. In the brush, I hear a stumble of footsteps, and then I see the driver. He’s walking through the trees with his gun out, head turning from side to side every time he hears a sound.

“Knox!” That’s Ash’s voice, from a little bit behind where I am. The driver swivels in that direction, and I hear him curse very softly. He walks in a slow circle, like he’s not sure which way to turn, and that’s exactly what I want.

He starts backing up, moving back toward the crash site. Then someone, probably Priest or River judging by the direction, snaps a heavy branch. That spooks the runner, and he whips back around, raising his gun.

He’s facing away from me now, and that’s all I need.

I run full tilt, bum rushing the guy. He hears me before I reach him and whirls around, managing to fire off a bullet before I tackle him to the ground.

“Shit,” he hisses, trying to fight me off. I’ve got size on my side though, and it’s not hard to keep him pinned down while he bucks and lashes out at me. His gun goes flying away, and he beats at me with his hands before I get mine around his head.

With a swift twist, I snap his neck, giving him an injury that could appear to have come from the crash if anyone gets nosy.

His body goes limp under me, and I let out a slow breath. Now that the job is done, my arm throbs a little, and I notice the bullet he fired off grazed me. But it's fine. Probably won't even need stitches.

I get up and start hauling the body back to the burning SUV and stuff him inside. I take a little time to arrange it where it would have been after the crash, and then nod, stepping back and closing the door.

It's starting to burn more now, black smoke reaching up to the darkening sky.

There are footsteps behind me, but I recognize them immediately. The others coming out of the trees and coming to join me. We fall back enough that we're not in danger and watch the SUV burn.

The sight of it speaks to the feral, psychotic part of my soul that always screams out for more when it comes to shit like this. More chaos, more chase, more death, more violence. I like watching the flickering flames of the car as it burns. Staring into the heat of it all and listening to the snap and crackle and groan as the fire eats away at the SUV. I spare a thought that maybe I don't work with fire enough. It's chaos and violence, the most bright, wild, and beautiful thing there is.

Then I look over at River, standing just a little ways away from me. I look at her blue eyes, shining in the firelight, and I have to admit I was wrong.

That's the most beautiful, wild thing there is.

RIVER

WE LEAVE the smoldering wreckage behind, going back to the cars so we can drive away. We collect our shit from the cabin and ditch the car we bought to start driving back to Detroit.

It's late by this time, but we don't want to waste any more time before getting back. No one brings it up, but there's an unspoken agreement that we'll just head back now.

"Make sure you've got everything," Ash says as we load up the car. "We're not coming back."

"Thanks, Dad," Priest says dryly, and we all laugh at the little joke. They're rare from Priest, but becoming a more frequent thing, which I like.

As we pile in and start driving away from the cabin, I think about what just happened. The chase, the fire, the way Knox took out the driver before he could get away. It was all so fucking satisfying, like checking another thing off the list.

When I had my list of six names, I was focused on avenging Hannah. I'm still focused on that now, but I'm aware of the broader implications of what I'm doing too. This isn't just about picking off some assholes who hurt me. I'm tearing down Julian's whole operation, which will help everyone who's ever suffered at his hands. Killing those drug dealers the other day felt good too.

The end game is Julian, but it's starting to feel pretty good to fight against the rottenness in Detroit too.

I drag in a deep breath and let it out slowly, feeling a little bit more of the pain that's been lodged in my heart slip away.

Priest reaches over and puts an arm around me, tucking me against his side.

“You should get some rest,” he murmurs, his voice a low rumble that I can feel as well as hear. “It’s late, and it’s a long drive.”

I hum an affirmative and settle in against him, letting my eyes close. It usually takes me longer to get comfortable or feel relaxed enough to sleep, but right now I feel safe in a way I haven’t in a long, long time.

WE MAKE good time heading back to the city, traveling even faster than we did on the way to the mountains. That means fewer stops, which makes us all a little restless and cramped, but it’s worth it when we finally pull into the driveway of the house. It’s started to feel like home in a way I never expected, and I’m so grateful to be back.

Once the car is stopped, I get out and groan as my knees and legs unbend for the first time in hours. I stretch them out and then stretch my sides, bending this way and that to shake the cramps from them.

Ash wolf whistles, giving me a long once over, and I roll my eyes at him.

The house is quiet and familiar, and after so long in the car, it feels damn good to just step inside.

“I need a shower,” I tell them, stretching my arms over my head. “I feel like I’ve got road trip grime all over me.”

“And yet, you’re still the hottest thing in the room,” Ash says, grinning. “I guess we should unpack the gear and shit. That’s the worst part of coming back from a trip.”

“Better to do it now than let it sit in the bags until we have to take another trip,” Priest points out.

Ash makes a face at him. “Is it, though? Because if it’s already in the bags, then we don’t have to repack it.”

Priest rolls his eyes and hauls Ash off to start unloading the car.

“I’ll go get the dog,” Gage replies. “Since I’m sure no one wants to get back in the car to go pick him up.”

“You’re the best,” I call out in a sing song voice as I head for the stairs because he’s absolutely right. The thought of getting back in the car after

just getting out of it is terrible. I hear Gage huff a laugh under his breath and then make my way to my room.

I strip off my clothes with a grateful sigh, rolling my shoulders and stretching out my arms and legs. The stiffness from being cooped up in the car is starting to fade, but it'll be even better when I get in the shower and the hot water can work its magic on my muscles.

My nail polish from the trip is chipped and not in the best shape, so I get a new color from the drawer, choosing a bright orange just because it feels right in the moment. I see the razor that I use to cut myself in the same drawer, and I stare at it for a long moment.

Actually, I don't have the impulse to use it right now, and that's a nice feeling. I know it's not like the urge will go away, but in this moment at least, I don't want it. I don't need it. And it occurs to me that maybe the next time I get that itching feeling under my skin that makes me want to cut, I can get Knox to help me again.

I'm not sure a psychologist would say that wanting him to mark me up is any better than wanting to mark myself up, but I think I'm pretty far beyond the help of any psychologist now anyway.

When I finally get into the shower, the hot water is definitely a revelation. I sigh with pleasure as it beats down on me, working out the kinks from sitting in the same spot for so long and sleeping in uncomfortable positions. I wash up quickly and then change my nail polish with smooth, practiced strokes, smoking a cigarette while I let the polish dry. I get dressed in clean clothes and then head downstairs to see if the guys are done with their shit yet.

I'm barely halfway down when I hear a chorus of happy barks that indicate the dog is back and pleased about it. I can definitely relate.

I head into the living room to greet him, and notice right away that he has a collar with a tag on. That's definitely new, and I kneel down to check the tag. Before I can get a look at it, I'm greeted with nuzzles and some very determined attempts to lick my face that I barely manage to avoid because I don't want dog drool all over me.

"Yeah, I'm happy to see you too," I tell him, batting him away. "Calm down for a fucking second so I can check this."

His tail wags so hard it thumps into the floor over and over again, and Gage laughs under his breath, standing there watching.

I glance up at him, but he's not giving anything away on his face.

I finally manage to get the tag in hand and check the name. It says Harley.

“What’s this?” I ask, turning to look at Gage again.

He shrugs. “Since the dog is clearly a permanent fixture at this point, I figured it’s about damn time he had a real name. Knox and Ash taking turns calling him whatever weird or offensive shit they can come up with is probably fucking the poor mutt up.”

“Why Harley though?”

“You and Knox had that whole argument on the drive back about whether Harley Quinn or The Joker was a better name for the dog, so... I sided with you.”

My heart swells just hearing that. I like it a lot. Not just the name, but the reasoning behind it and why Gage got the collar and tag in the first place.

I get to my feet and go over so I can lean up and give Gage a kiss. Then, just for good measure, I give Harley a kiss too.

“Jesus,” Gage groans. “Just because he’s got a collar now, that doesn’t make his mouth sanitary.”

“What’s wrong with a few puppy kisses?” I ask innocently.

“He’s a dog. He licks his own ass and eats out of the trash can.”

I roll my eyes at his indignation about it. “You’ve literally licked Ash’s cum out of my pussy, and a dog licking my face grosses you out?”

We hear Ash howling with laughter as he comes into the living room just in time to hear that little gem. Apparently he didn’t know that, but it cracks him the fuck up.

“Whatever,” Gage grumbles. “That’s not the same, and you know it.”

“Why, because you actually liked the taste of my cum?” Ash teases, and Gage narrows his eyes at him like he might hit him with something.

“I’ve got news,” Priest says, walking in with his phone in hand.

That sobers us all up pretty quickly, and Knox comes in right behind him.

“What’s up?” the burly man asks.

“There’s a party happening in a few days. A big fancy one. An invite only kind of thing at Alec Beckham’s house. Julian will be there.”

“That’s the opportunity we’ve been looking for to put the next part of the plan into motion,” Gage murmurs.

“Do you guys have an invite to the party?” I ask them.

Knox shakes his head. “No, but this is the kind of party you get invited to by knowing the right people. And luckily, we do know a few of the right people. We can call in a favor or two and make it happen.”

My stomach flutters a little, and I let out a breath. One step closer to the end game. I glance at Knox, lifting an eyebrow at him.

“Are you sure you want to do this next part?”

He makes a face. “Fuck no. But if it’ll keep you from having to do it, then I will.”

KNOX

FUCK, I could go for some pizza right now.

Pepperoni and sausage. With pineapple. Or ham. Ham and pineapple. No olives though. Maybe some banana pepper. The fucking supreme ones always have goddamn olives on them, and I hate those little fuckers. Little salty assholes. Almost as bad as mushrooms. Who the fuck thought mushrooms were a good idea? Probably the same idiots who hide them under the cheese so you get a slimy little surprise when you're going for the hot, cheesy goodness.

I should've eaten before this, goddammit.

I'm camped out outside Julian's massive house with nothing but my own thoughts to entertain me, and I switch back and forth between craving pizza and thinking about how I'd like to barge into Julian's place and drag him down to that little basement he kept River in. Really make him pay for what he did to her.

He probably doesn't have the kind of tools I do, but that's okay. I can improvise. I've got car keys, and I bet he has a real nice set of kitchen knives in there that I could break out and use. He seems like the type, the showy motherfucker.

I'm a good distance away from the house, and I've got a drone with a camera attached to it, ready to go. Now all I need is my target to get his ass in place, and I can use it.

Maybe I won't do pizza. Maybe a steak sandwich. With onions and peppers. No mushrooms. Lots of cheese sauce too. Or pizza *and* a steak sandwich. Fuck it. I deserve it after doing this shit.

The thoughts of cheesy goodness are interwoven with the thoughts of fucking Julian up, and I laugh a little under my breath, imagining eating a slice of pizza while slowly jamming my car keys into his thigh.

Yeah, that would be fun.

He'd be in pain, I'd be in heaven.

I'm just killing time now, letting my mind wander. I text River a few times, asking her what she wants for dinner and telling her I'm still waiting for this asshole to show up.

She's in favor of pizza, but she stabs me right in the fucking heart when she says she actually likes mushrooms and I'm crazy for thinking they're worse than olives.

The fucking betrayal. She's lucky I can't get enough of her, even if she does like mushrooms. Slimy little monsters.

I catch some movement near the house, and that gets my attention back on the mission at hand. Julian's car pulls up to the house, and the man himself gets out.

Just seeing him makes my lip curl and my palms itch. Restlessness beats in my blood, and I have to remind myself that I'm here for a reason. This is a step in the plan, and the plan will make it so River can kill Julian in the end. She's the one who deserves to take him out, and maybe she'll let me watch at least. That would be good.

He goes inside, and I steer the drone to the house, keeping it out of sight.

It's a handy little toy, equipped with a camera and mic, perfect for spying. I've got a tablet on my lap that lets me see and hear everything that's going on.

He's pacing in the living room, his phone up to his ear. I can't hear whoever's on the line, but I can hear Julian, and he sounds fucking pissed.

"I know what they fucking said. I don't need you to read me the accident report again, you goddamn idiot!" he snaps. "It's too neat, is what I'm saying. That runner has made that trip plenty of times, and now all of a sudden he forgets how to fucking drive and runs my shit off the road?" He's quiet, listening to what the other person is saying. Through the camera, I can see the tension in his body as he paces, and I grin. Good. He fucking deserves it.

"How the fuck should I know?" he explodes in response to whatever the person said. "That's not my job to know this shit. All I'm saying is, it's

suspicious. Maybe the suppliers want to cut out the middle man or some fucking gang wants to get in my way because they don't like that I'm cornering the market on this shit. I don't trust anyone involved in this shit as far as I can throw them!"

That's even better. He thinks the sabotage, if there is any, is coming from someone involved with the cocaine selling in the city. He doesn't seem to suspect River or the rest of us at all.

I smirk, pleased. That's just what we were hoping for, especially given the fact that Cyrus's death was carried out by someone other than us, and there are plenty of witnesses to that. We've managed to keep the suspicion off us the whole time, and I have to hand it to Gage. He's always right about when to go subtle and play the game the right way.

But Julian is obviously starting to feel the pressure of shit going wrong. He's not all smarmy and smug now, and he looks like he's a step away from tearing out his hair in frustration. I grin savagely. Karma's a bitch, and her name is River.

"Shut the fuck up!" Julian snarls. "Just shut the fuck up. I don't want to hear anything else about that. I don't know who the hell you think you are, but you work for me. You got that? You do what the fuck I say. If I say jump, you ask me how high and if I want you to do it in a fun little costume. You don't talk back to me. I know there's something going on. Shit's been going wrong left and right, and it's not just accidents. It's volatile fucking drug dealers and suppliers being shitty. I know what the fuck I'm talking about, do you hear me?"

He doesn't give the other person time to respond before he hangs up the call and stands in the middle of the room, breathing hard. He looks pissed, hands clenched so tight it looks like he might crush his phone.

Eventually he lets out a long, slow breath and then drags his fingers through his hair. He's crumbling a little, and I love to see it.

Another car pulls up to the house, and I don't recognize it, but I do recognize the bitch who gets out. Natalie. I almost gag at the sight of her. I hate this frigid bitch so much.

She lets herself in, and Julian's agitation is pretty obvious.

"What happened?" I hear her ask him.

"You know what happened," he tells her. "And now I've got people trying to tell me it's all just bad luck. Just accidents happening, and it's no one's fault and out of our control."

“Julian,” she says, putting a hand on his shoulder. “You have to breathe. You look like you’re about to explode.”

“What do you expect me to look like?” he demands, jerking out of her hold. “You know what’s happening. You know how bad this is. Cyrus was our biggest buyer, and now he’s fucking dead because he couldn’t stop Apollo from charging into his club and blowing his brains out. Where the fuck was his security? Who the hell just lets that happen?”

“That’s not on us,” Natalie says, but Julian cuts her off before she can finish her sentence.

“I know it’s not fucking on us, but it affects us. It affects the business. How the fuck do we make up for losing him? And for losing so much goddamn product in that ‘accident’.” He makes vicious air quotes, and Natalie sighs.

“We find new buyers. It’s not like it will be hard in this city. Everyone here wants to get high on something. We’ll make up for what we lost.”

“You make it sound so easy,” Julian mutters.

“I’m keeping my head about this,” she fires back. “Unlike you.”

His eyes are furious when he looks at her, and he takes a step toward her like he’s going to hit her or something. Instead, he backs her against the wall, practically shoving her into it hard.

“Shut the fuck up,” he says, and it’s almost too quiet for me to hear it. “You don’t know how hard this is. You don’t have the weight of this shit on your shoulders.”

“The fuck I don’t!” she shoots back. “I’m involved in this too, Julian. It’s not just your—”

Whatever she was going to say is cut off by Julian slamming his lips against hers in a heated kiss.

Natalie claws at his back, and it’s pretty obvious she’s grinding against him and not squirming to try to get away.

“Fucking disgusting,” I mutter under my breath, but angle the drone to catch footage of them going at it, getting the audio as well.

And they do fucking go at it.

Julian starts ripping her clothes off, leaving them in a heap on the floor. Natalie cusses him out about how much the dress cost, and he says he doesn’t give a fuck and spins her around so she’s facing the wall. He slaps her ass hard and fumbles at his fly to get his dick out.

He leans forward and mutters something into her ear that I can't hear, but judging from the way Natalie moans like a whore, she liked whatever he said.

It doesn't take long before Julian thrusts into her, fucking her hard and fast against the wall, slapping her ass every now and then. They go at it like that for a bit, and then Julian pulls out and shoves her over to the couch.

"Don't push me!" Natalie snaps.

"You love it," he growls, and starts fucking her over the back of the couch.

Her noises are fucking gross, like a pornstar not getting paid enough, and I let the drone get it all. Once I have enough footage, I steer the drone back to me and get the fuck out of there.

It's a relief to get back to the house and not have to listen to Julian going to town on his damn sister anymore. I walk into the living room, and River's lying on the couch with Harley, wearing an oversized shirt.

Something about seeing her, especially after I just watched the woman I almost had to marry, makes me want her more than ever.

"Go drink out of the toilet or something," I tell the dog, nudging him off the couch.

Harley barks at me, but gets down and trots away into the kitchen.

River sits up, looking up at me, and I flop onto the couch, grabbing her around the waist so I can pull her down on top of me when I lie down.

"How'd it go?" she asks.

I groan and bury my face in her hair, inhaling her scent.

It's soothing, especially after the shit I just had to watch, and I soak it up before I answer her.

"Julian's pissed off. He doesn't think any of this is an accident, but he doesn't suspect us at all."

"All according to plan, then," she murmurs back. "And the rest?"

I make a face. Even having River in my arms and the weight of her body on mine isn't enough to drive away the disgust that rises when I have to think about what I saw. "I got what we needed. And plenty of it. They were going at it for a while after having a fight."

River sticks her tongue out, shuddering on top of me. "I'm sorry you had to see that."

"Me too. Natalie's fucking gross. Julian is too. They were arguing and then they started going at it like rabbits. I really fucking didn't want to

marry her.”

That makes River laugh, and she leans down and kisses me deeply. “I didn’t want you to marry her either. So at least something good came from all this mess. Now we’ve got the footage, we can move into the next phase of the plan.”

I make a face at that, and River laughs.

“What’s that face for?”

The next part of the plan involves calling River’s “buddy” in the FBI, Mitch Carter. I’m not looking forward to it.

“I don’t like that guy. I don’t like how he always seems so damn interested in you. Like he wants something from you or something.”

River smiles at that. “Are you jealous?”

“Fuck, no. I just want to kill that guy for looking at you.”

Her grin stretches wider, and she arches an eyebrow, a few strands of silvery hair brushing her cheeks as she looks down at me. “I don’t know, Knox, that sounds like jealousy to me. It sounds like you think no one else should look at me but you.”

“That’s not how it is,” I grumble, defending myself. “Gage, Priest, and Ash can look at you too.”

She laughs, shaking her head. “So you won’t mind if I wear something nice and a little revealing the next time I see Carter then? That won’t bother you at all.”

I growl at the thought of it. River there in something skimpy and Carter eyeing her up like he has any fucking right to. It pisses me off just thinking about it, and I narrow my eyes at River.

“Don’t you fucking dare.”

“Why not?” she teases. “You’re not jealous, right? What’s the big deal then?”

“The big deal is he doesn’t have the right to look at you. He doesn’t deserve it.”

“And that’s for you to decide, is it?”

She doesn’t sound pissed off about me being possessive. In fact, she looks fucking entertained, like she’s egging me on. Even knowing that, I feel myself getting worked up. Anger and heat run through me, and I want to find anyone who would even think about looking at River too hard and fuck them up. At the same time, I want to throw River down and remind her who she fucking belongs to.

I carved it into her back for a reason. She's ours.

"Maybe it is," I say, answering her question. "Maybe it should be."

"Maybe," she replies. "But that sounds like jealousy to me."

I grumble under my breath, and River sits up. I make a move to grab for her, to keep her from darting away, but she just grins and scoots down so her head is right at my crotch.

The heat surges even higher, blocking out any of the anger that was left. How could I be angry when I get a sight like this? River on her knees between my legs, her hand moving to my crotch to undo my fly and pull my cock out.

It's half hard already, just from her touching it, and she strokes it slowly, working me up even more. I lift my hips, seeking out more of that good as hell friction, and she grins, dipping her head down to swirl her tongue around the head of my cock.

"Fuck," I groan, head flopping down against the arm of the couch. "Goddamn."

She just laughs and eases her mouth over me, taking me down further and further until the head of my cock hits the back of her throat.

It's a fucking effort to keep my hips still so that I don't choke her, and she pulls off slowly, letting me feel it as she rubs her tongue along the underside of my cock. She plays with my piercing with her tongue, and I shudder, groaning her name.

"Your mouth is so fucking good," I tell her, my voice deep with lust.

River smirks around my cock and then pulls all the way off, spitting on the head of my dick so it runs down and gives her something to use as lube when she goes back to stroking me.

Seeing her do something filthy like that just sparks the heat in me higher, making my spine tingle with the need to have more of her.

That irresistible smirk is still on her face, and she meets my eyes while she works her hand, giving her wrist a little twist in there for good measure.

"I like how possessive you are," she murmurs, and I can see the truth of that statement reflected in her dark eyes. "I like how much you want me. How you can't get enough."

She punctuates that by squeezing my cock a little, and I groan for her, my hips bucking.

She dips her head and takes me back into her mouth, bobbing up and down as she sucks me hard and fast. It feels fucking amazing, and I can't sit

still. Every time she goes down, I meet her halfway, hitting the back of her throat sometimes, making her gag.

But she takes it like a fucking champ.

She just swallows around me and gets right back to sucking me off.

“Fuck,” she gasps when she lifts her head for another breath. “Your cock is so damn sexy. I like this piercing. I love how it makes me feel.”

She drags her tongue along it, and heat lances up my spine again.

It’s impossible to look away from her. Impossible to think about anything other than the heat of her mouth and the way her hand feels around my cock. The way she’s working me up while she talks.

“You’re mine,” she groans. “You’re fucking mine, and I want to mark you like you’ve marked me.”

“Fuck, yes,” I groan. “Do it. Mark me up.”

Whatever she wants at this point, I’d give her. If she wanted to cut me or bite me or do whatever, I’d be down for it. I want to be hers and I want every fucker to know it.

River dips her head, taking me back into her mouth. She relaxes her throat, and the head of my cock slips into it. I have to clench my teeth to avoid coming undone right then and there because it feels so fucking good.

She feels so fucking good.

When she raises her head again, her eyes are dark with possessive lust.

“You’re *mine*,” she mutters again, her eyes flashing with something feral. “Just like I’m yours. All of yours.”

That overcomes me, and when she goes back down, I grab her head, keeping her in place. I give up on trying to be gentle and not hurt her. She can take it. I know she can take it, and I can’t hold back.

My hips thrust up, and I fuck her face, thrusting my cock down her throat, rubbing it against her tongue while she takes it.

And just like before, she takes it like a champ. She moans around me, drool and precum spilling out of her mouth. Spit connects her mouth to my cock every time I pull out enough to let her breathe, and then I thrust right back in.

She gets off on getting it rough and hard, just like I do, and knowing that makes my insides go tight with the heat of pleasure.

When I come, it’s with a growl of her name, forcing my cock down her throat so I can come in spurts. She swallows it all, and when I pull back, her lips are red and swollen and she’s panting a little.

“Come here.”

I pull her into my lap and kiss her deeply, tasting myself on her tongue before I draw back to gaze at her again, unable to get enough.

She’s sexy as fuck like this.

Flushed and satisfied and fucking *mine*.

RIVER

THE NEXT DAY, I make my call to Mitch Carter.

I still have his card from when he was trying to get information out of me on his last little visit to the house, and I kept it, just in case there was ever a time when we could use it. Working with the feds is dangerous, especially in a game like this, but throwing Julian under the bus is worth the danger.

Carter might already have his suspicions about the guys, but it's nothing he can prove. So it's worth the risk, even though I don't really want to talk to him at all.

I stand in the living room and punch his number into my phone, holding my breath a little when the call goes through.

He answers the phone on the third ring, sounding professional and detached. "This is Carter."

"Hi, Agent Carter," I say, keeping my voice neutral. "This is River Simone. We've met a few times?"

I already know there's no way he doesn't remember me, but I have to play it like there's a chance he won't. As if I think *he* thinks I'm so uninteresting that he put me out of his head as soon as he walked out of the house last time.

"Yes, of course," he says immediately, and his whole tone changes. He sounds surprised to hear from me, but definitely pleased, like he didn't think I would call, but it's something he's wanted. I don't really like that. "How are you, Ms. Simone?"

"I'm fine. You told me to call you if I had any information, so..."

I leave it up to him to fill in the blanks.

He does, but of course he fills in the wrong blanks, going off assumptions. “I did. And I’m glad you finally realized you can come to me for help. I understand you might have been afraid before, since you’re living with those four men, but if you tell me everything you know, I can protect you. You’ll be safe, and if they try anything, it will just get worse for them.”

I roll my eyes, and it definitely grates on my nerves a little. He’s so fucking excited at the prospect of me turning on the Kings, ratting them out like they’ve done something wrong. They’ve done a lot of shit, but compared to Julian and the other scum in this fucking city, they’re practically saints.

Or at least, they’re my kind of monsters.

“No, no, you’re misunderstanding me,” I tell him. “I do have information, but not about the men I’m living with. It’s about someone else.”

“Ah,” he says, and there’s a definite trace of disappointment there. “Well, I’m happy to hear whatever you’ve found out. Tell me.” There’s a rustle in the background, probably him flipping open that damn notebook so he can write down what I say.

“Not over the phone,” I say. “I’d rather talk to you in person about it.”

“Of course,” he replies immediately. “We can meet up face to face. I have time this afternoon. What time works for you?”

“I have time today. Let’s meet at three.

“Excellent.”

He gives me a location, which I recognize as being a public park.

I get why he chose it. We’ll be out in the open, but there will be plenty of little places in the park to have a private meeting. I wonder how many informants he’s met there, and how many of them were pressured into giving information away.

But in this situation, I have the upper hand, so I agree to it and end the call.

The guys are all in the living room with me, and I glance up at them. Gage and Priest look attentive, like they were paying attention to my side of the conversation to try to see if there was any information to be gathered. But that’s just how they are.

Ash is draped over the couch, flipping and spinning a pen between his fingers, and Knox has his arms folded, leaning against the wall. It’s still

pretty clear that even after yesterday, he's not thrilled about me meeting with Carter.

But it's not like we have a choice, if we want this to work.

"So we're ready to go, right?" I ask them. "We have everything you need me to give to Carter?"

Gage nods. "We're ready. What we want to tell him should be enough to get him interested."

"Then I guess I should get ready to meet him."

"You're not going alone," Priest says immediately.

"I was just about to say that," Knox chimes in. "I don't trust that fucker."

I give him a look because we both know why he doesn't trust Carter, but I'm not going to argue about it. "I didn't tell him I was bringing anyone," I remind them.

"And you don't have to," Gage says. "You'll meet with him alone, but we'll be there as back up. We'll keep our distance, but we'll be there if you need us."

I nod because I don't mind that. I know it's not because they don't trust me, but because at this phase of the game, things are close to coming to a head. The only people we can really trust are each other. They're just having my back, the way I would have theirs if they had to do something like this.

Gage smiles at me, and it's a mark of how far we've all come together that that's the end of it. There was definitely a time when I would have argued and told Gage to go fuck himself if he thought I couldn't do this. But now the notion of having him there, having all of them there, makes me feel more secure in what we're doing.

Carter and I arranged to meet at a local park. At this time of day, it's not packed with people, so there's privacy at the little bench we chose to meet up at, but it's not suspicious for people to be sitting there or milling around nearby.

Carter's already there when I arrive, leaning back with his sunglasses on and one arm along the back of the bench. Nothing about him screams FBI agent, but I can immediately see that he doesn't quite blend in.

He looks up, sees me and smiles, pushing his sunglasses up onto his head. I sit down next to him, and he gives me an expectant look.

"The information I have is about Julian Maduro," I tell him.

“I see.”

“You know him?”

“I know of him, of course. He’s been involved in some of the things going on in the city lately. He was at the church.”

I nod. “Well, he’s not all he seems, I can tell you that.”

“Few people are.” He gives me a long look that I choose to ignore.

I start to lay out some of the information we have on Julian’s business. A little info about where to look for money that Julian has hidden in offshore accounts, the fact that some of his ‘business associates’ have their fingers in shady dealings as well. I don’t give him too much, and I hold back some of the info that me and the guys know. Just enough for him to see my tip as valid and make it something he’ll want to look into.

I can tell I struck the right balance, because Carter looks very interested. He writes down what I told him, asking questions to clarify anything he needs more on.

Some of it I lie about, saying I don’t know, and on some topics, I give him a little more information just to keep it interesting.

When he has all of it down, he looks up at me with assessing eyes. It’s like he’s trying to see through me to the heart of the matter, and it’s a good thing I know how to play this game because my expression doesn’t change.

“What’s your game, River?” he asks me. “Why are you telling me all this?”

It’s a good question, all things considered. No one gives away information for free in this town. But I’m not going to tell him. It’s none of his business for one thing. He’s just a link in this chain. Another piece of the plan that will take Julian down once and for all. Plus, I don’t trust him.

So I just shake my head, keeping my cards close to the vest. “You wouldn’t understand.”

“You might be surprised what I would understand,” he says, and his voice is a little softer. I can’t tell if it’s real or an act, but in the end it doesn’t really matter.

“That’s all I’ve got for you,” I tell him.

His perceptive gaze is still on me, and it feels like there’s something I’m missing. Just as I’m keeping secrets from him, it almost feels like he’s keeping secrets from me too.

My stomach clenches a little with a wave of anxiety. One thing the guys and I haven’t accounted for is the possibility that Mitch Carter could

already be in Julian's pocket. There's no telling how far his reach stretches across the city, and while we didn't find any evidence to make us think he's got feds on his side, that's the kind of thing a person would keep buried for maximum effect.

If he does have Carter on his side, then this whole thing could blow up before we have a chance to carry out our end game.

"That's all," I tell him again, making it clear that the meeting is over.

"Well, thank you for your time," he says. "And for the information. I'll be sure it gets to the right channels." He holds his hand out for me to shake, and I take it, giving him a firm handshake before getting up from the bench and walking away.

I can feel Carter's gaze on me as I go.

That wave of anxiety doesn't fade, and all I want in this moment is for the last few steps of this plan to be complete and the whole thing to be done. There's so many moving parts to this plan, which means there are more chances than I'd like for it to go wrong. In the end, it'll be worth it. I have to keep reminding myself of that.

For Hannah.

For all the innocent people who suffer in the name of powerful men gaining more power.

It's worth it.

PRIEST

GENTLE FINGERS TRAIL down my arm, and then soft lips press to mine, giving me a light kiss. I feel it through the haze of sleep, and I jerk awake, going from asleep to wide awake immediately.

It's late at night, dark in my room, but River's face comes into view when I blink to clear my eyes.

"Sorry for waking you," she murmurs softly. "But we're ready to go."

I nod, reaching up to run fingers through my hair before capturing her chin in my hand and pulling her down into another kiss. This one is deeper, not just a brush of lips, and I press my tongue into her mouth, savoring the way she tastes.

She melts into it, and I like how that feels. How the little sigh she exhales against my lips tastes.

I still struggle with my demons sometimes, but I've been taking more and more of these moments for myself. Just touching her whenever I want, reaching for her and kissing her just because I can. And because she wants it too.

It's been a long time since I've gotten out of my own head this much. Since I've given in to something that feels good just because I want it. This thing between us just keeps growing, and giving in to it makes me feel like I'm becoming a better version of myself.

So I kiss her thoroughly, trying to say things with my lips and tongue that I don't have words for yet. River kisses me back with the same hunger, so maybe she understands what I'm trying to tell her.

We break apart after a moment and get up, joining the others as they all get ready to head out.

We slip on our black tactical wear like we've done before, shoving black masks into our pockets to put on later.

It's second nature for the guys and me to check each other over, to make sure we're covered and ready, and River folds into that ritual easily. Once we're all geared up and ready, we head out to Julian's boxing ring.

It's a pretty big place, a well-known establishment in Detroit.

Before Julian was on our radar, we knew about this place, and we've even been to a few fights here before.

"This is one of those places you'd never know was sketchy until you met the owner," Ash murmurs softly, looking around. "Well. Not that sketchy anyway. Yeah, the fights aren't always above board, but everybody knows about it and a lot of people come here to train or watch fights. That's just a thing you do when you live here."

"Oscar DeLeon fought Pascal Lewis here," Knox says. "That was a hell of a fight. We were right in the front row for that one. Shit got crazy."

River tips her head to one side and looks up at the building like she's sizing it up. "I knew Oscar's daughter," She says softly. "Or I met her, at least."

It sounds like there's a story there, something faraway in her voice, but there's no time to poke at that. We're all here with a job to do, after all.

We pile out of the car and move quickly, pulling our masks on so we're covered in head to toe black. Gage takes point, and the rest of us fall in as we move on the building together.

Knox steps up and uses a tool from his pocket to break through a window. He clears out enough glass that he can fit through, and shimmies himself into the building with a grace that seems out of place for someone his size.

But he makes it work and then helps us all get inside one by one.

We pause once we're in, listening.

Silence.

So far so good, then.

"Where's the accelerant?" Gage whispers.

I open the bag I'm holding and pass the bottles out. Everyone takes one and we start moving through the building, squeezing the bottles and drenching everything we can see.

We want to make sure it's all well soaked so it will all go up quickly and burn completely.

The smell of it is strong, and it burns my nostrils, but I don't let that slow me down. I work quickly, spraying the accelerant in arcing waves to hit everything.

My heart beats a little faster while I work. Fire always makes me think of Jade and losing her to the flames. There's always that moment where it feels like I can hear her screaming in the distance, and where I feel that sense of paralyzing dread that I can't save her.

It's gotten more faint over the years, but there's a part of me that wonders if I'll ever truly be over it.

But this flame will serve a different purpose. This is for River, to help her in her quest for vengeance, so it's more than worth it.

"Make sure you get it everywhere," Gage is saying to Ash, talking in a quiet, rushed voice. "Don't just squirt it everywhere."

"Make up your mind," Ash hisses back. "You either want me to get it everywhere or you don't." He squirts his bottle a little more aggressively, spraying the wall in a splatter.

"You know what I mean," Gage fires back and then moves on. "We have to be thorough. There's no way we can make this look like an accident, but we want the whole place to go up in smoke."

After the other two massive blows to his business, there's no real way Julian would buy that his boxing ring burning down was just some random occurrence. Even if we went to great pains to make it seem like that.

"Speed over stealth," Knox says, echoing something River said when we came up with this plan.

"That sounds like the name of a porno," Ash mutters, and Knox snorts a laugh.

Gage just rolls his eyes. "I'm so glad you're all taking this seriously," he grumbles.

"It'll get done," River says. "One way or another. He's going to lose everything, and we may as well enjoy making that happen, right?"

She has a point with that, and if anyone deserves to revel in the destruction we're heaping on Julian Maduro's head, it's River.

Eventually, the bottles are spent, and Gage steps back. He glances at Knox, who nods. We've done as much as we can here. The ring smells like chemicals, and all we need now is the fire.

Knox holds up a box of matches with a savage grin on his face.

"Who wants to do the honors?" he asks.

“I’ll do it.” The words are out of my mouth before I even really take the time to consider them, and I surprise myself by saying them.

The group looks to me, and Knox tosses me the box. I pull a match from the box, holding it between my fingers for a second. Then I strike it, and the flames leap to the little bulb. The scent of ash and smoke fills my nose, but I keep my head and flick the match right at a little puddle of accelerant on the floor.

It ignites immediately, and the flames snap and spread, following the trails of fluid on the floor to the walls.

“Fuck,” Knox breathes. “Okay, time to go.”

We hustle out of there, moving quickly. Our ride is parked a little down the road, and we only wait long enough to make sure the building is going to go up completely. And it’s pretty clear that it is. The flames are already climbing, bursting out the windows and licking at the walls of the building, engulfing it in flickering red and amber.

That’s all we really need to see, and we get into the car and peel out.

It’s a quick drive back to the house, and we strip off our masks and some of our gear once we get through the door. River hesitates once her face is free, and it looks like she wants to say something.

It’s so clear how attuned to her we all are because we all notice and turn to look at her, waiting.

She bites her lip, and then her face softens.

“Thank you,” she says quietly. “For helping with this. For putting so much of your own business aside to help me take on Julian.” She takes a deep breath and lets it out slowly. “It used to scare me, how willing you are to do this for me. But it doesn’t make me afraid anymore. It just makes me feel...”

River trails off, like she doesn’t know how to put it into words. She shakes her head and looks up at us again, glancing around.

“Thank you,” she repeats. “For this, and for everything.”

I stride over to her and take her face in my hands. I look down at her, those dark blue eyes, her sliver hair. The soft expression on her face that we don’t usually get to see when she’s being so determined all the time. It’s new, and I’m coming to cherish it every time I see it.

I dip my head and kiss her, losing myself in it a little bit. River leans up into the kiss, giving back as good as I give her.

When we break apart, her lips are red and her eyes are bright.

“There’s nothing we wouldn’t do for you,” I tell her, my voice soft but insistent. “I mean that.”

And I know the others agree with me.

I don’t look away or try to hide how I feel, and I can see it when River sees the truth in my eyes. Emotion passes through her eyes, something soft and a little bit fragile. I can guess that she hasn’t had very many people in her life who have vowed to take care of her and take up her causes as their own.

This isn’t her first quest of vengeance, but it is probably the first one she’s had where she isn’t doing it alone. Where she knows she has back up and protection and people who give as much of a shit about it as she does.

She can see that I understand that, and that emotion builds between us. River gazes up at me, and I try to put as many promises as I can into my gaze as I look back.

Of course, then Knox has to break the tension by clapping loudly and grinning. “This calls for a motherfucking toast!”

RIVER

THE MOMENT WITH PRIEST BREAKS, and we all move into the kitchen where Knox has taken over pouring shots. My heart is still beating a little faster than usual, from everything I saw in Priest's eyes. It's hard to believe that he once seemed like the coldest of all the men. Now that I've seen the fire inside him, I can't help but be drawn to that flame like a moth.

Getting to see more of him, to understand his pain and suffering and know that he understands mine too, has changed everything between us. I want to see more and more of who he is inside. I can't get enough.

Knox starts sliding shot glasses across to all of us, and I take mine, swirling the dark liquid around. He raises his glass in a toast, grinning in a combination of joy and savage pleasure at what we just did.

"To putting Julian fucking Maduro in a body bag one day," he says, his voice practically a snarl.

We all drink to that, knocking back our shots. The whiskey burns going down, and I lick my lips. In my head, I make an extra promise to Hannah that one day this will be done and she'll be at peace.

Gage looks over and catches my eye.

"When this is all over, I've been thinking about some things you could do with our business," he says. "It's no secret that you have plenty of skills, and you'd fit right in for some of the things we need."

He talks like I'm one of them. Like when this is over, I'll be a part of their everyday life. A part of their forever. A permanent fixture in their little family.

"Yeah?" I ask, leaning against the counter.

He nods. "Yeah. We've never really thought about expanding our little gang to include anyone else, but you're a shoe in. We know you. We trust you. We've seen you in action."

I like the sound of that. Of waking up every day and knowing I belong somewhere. With people who know me and see me. I wouldn't have to pretend to not be fucked up. All the guys understand who I am and why I am the way I am, so it would be so freeing.

"Sure," I tell him. "I'm up for whatever."

He smirks a little back at me. "I know."

"My vote is sexy cage dancer," Ash says, leaning casually against the counter. "I mean, we have some good ones already, but River in one of those little outfits?" He wolf whistles and grins at me.

"That means everyone else who comes in would get to see her, Ash," Knox points out. "It's not like she'd be our own private dancer or anything."

Ash shrugs. "Sure, but think about it. She's up there, dancing for everyone, and the whole time we know that she's going home with us at the end of the night. Everyone else wants her, but only we get to have her. That doesn't get you going a little bit?" He rubs his chin. "Although now that you mention it... having her be our own private dancer does sound really damn good. We could get one of those cages installed in the back office."

"In your fucking dreams," I retort. "Plus, you've never seen me dance. I could be terrible at it."

"The dancing doesn't really matter."

"Oh, so you just want me in a cage then?"

"Got it in one, killer." Ash waggles his eyebrows at me, and I roll my eyes.

Gage shakes his head, interjecting into the conversation. "That wasn't quite what I had in mind. I was thinking you'd help with something other than distracting Ash from his work. That's already easy enough to do."

"Excuse me." Ash gives him an offended look. "I do my work."

"Sometimes."

"Yeah, now you do," Knox throws out. "Because the only ass you want is waiting for you at home, and you're not trying to dick down all the dancers anymore."

Ash pouts, although there's still a grin playing around his lips at the same time.

He's the most model-handsome of all the guys, and I know he had plenty of women before I came into his life, but it doesn't really bother me anymore. Now that I know about his past, I have a better understanding of how he became the person he is today. And he's so fucking possessive, hungry, and affectionate with me that it would be impossible for me to doubt his feelings for me at this point.

"Anyway," Gage cuts back in, getting back to the matter at hand. "We'll talk about it once this is all done. If there's anything you're particularly interested in, River, we can discuss it. But like I said, I have some ideas for things you'd be good at."

"I mean, sure," I say casually. "I could do that. I could probably do anything you guys do. How hard could it be to run a nightclub, right? I could do it with my eyes closed, I bet."

"Bold words," Priest drawls. "And you'd be surprised."

He glances at Gage, who laughs a little under his breath and says, "It might look easy, but it's definitely not. Remember the mix up with the vodka?"

Ash groans and scrubs a hand down his face. "You're never going to let me live that down, are you? I don't know how many times I have to say that she didn't tell me it was diluted."

"And you didn't read to make sure," Gage points out. "Probably because you were too busy flirting with her to do your job right."

I laugh at that. "Wait, what happened?"

"Ash, do you want to tell her or should I?" Gage asks.

"Fuck off, you always tell it wrong."

"That's because you always try to make yourself look better when you tell it."

"I'll tell it," Priest cuts in, smiling. "You both take liberties, and the story's good enough on its own. So," he turns toward me. "It's maybe the fifth weekend that the club has been open. Ash is in charge of making sure we're stocked with liquor for the bar. It's been going well so far, since we're still new, there hasn't been that much business. But it just so happens that the weekend coming up is Memorial Day weekend. People are going to want to get drunk, and to capitalize on business, we decide to do half price drinks."

"Okay..." I say. "So what went wrong?"

“Our liquor vendor at the time was slammed with orders because every other club in the city also wanted to get a shit ton of booze too. So we went to a different one. One who, for some reason, also sold diluted liquor that’s half the strength of the real stuff. Ash thought he’d gotten an amazing deal and scored us five cases of vodka.”

“Diluted vodka.”

Priest nods. “Diluted vodka. The customers were pissed.”

“Until they had more drinks and then it was fine,” Ash points out.

“There was almost a riot.”

“We lowered the price on the diluted cocktails and people drank even more than they would have normally. We made the same amount of money as we would have otherwise.”

We all laugh at Ash’s indignation, and he huffs but doesn’t seem that upset about it.

“Okay,” he says. “But what about the time Knox fucked up with the smuggling?”

“Look,” Knox cuts in. “I didn’t know what the fuck I was doing. I did what I could, and it turned out okay.”

They launch into a story about how Knox was in charge of smuggling weapons through the club on behalf of another gang and ended up sending them to the wrong place.

“We got them back before it was too much of a shit show,” Gage says. “But it was a very close thing.”

“What would have happened if you didn’t get them back?” I ask him.

He shakes his head. “We would have been in the territory of a gang with a hair trigger temper, with a bunch of weapons that didn’t belong to us. Maybe we could have talked our way out of it, but probably not without it coming to a fight.”

Knox cracks his knuckles and shrugs like getting into a fight with an angry gang is just another Tuesday or something. “The fight we could have handled,” he says. “It was everything after it that would have been a shit show.”

“Even if we walked away from the fight—” Priest begins.

“Which there was no guarantee we would have,” Gage adds.

Priest nods. “Right. It would have been with them knowing who we were and that would have ruined everything.”

“Good thing it didn’t break bad then, I guess.”

“Understatement,” Gage replies, but he doesn’t sound upset about it.

It’s interesting to hear these stories of how they were when they were just getting started. Obviously they’re better at it now, running both sides of their business, but it makes sense that there was a time when they were young and just learning the ropes of everything.

Judging from how much laughter there is about it, those mishaps have turned into funny stories that they look back on fondly, and that’s good to see.

Knox pours more booze, and we take the shots. The second round goes down even more smoothly than the first, and Gage moves into a story about how they almost blew a stakeout of a rival club because a dog wouldn’t stop barking at Priest.

“That wasn’t my fault,” Priest points out. “Animals just don’t like me.”

“Except for Harley,” I tell him. “Harley acts like you invented bacon just for him or something.”

“Yeah, this dog did not share that sentiment,” Ash says. “It was barking like it wanted to leap over the dumpster it was hiding behind and try to tear Priest’s throat out. The hilarious part is the dog was probably just a little bigger than a football.”

“It was not that small!” Priest insists, taking another shot when Knox pours it.

“It was!” Knox yells, sloshing whiskey around in the bottle. “It really was.”

I can feel the alcohol making me tipsy, making my face feel a little bit numb and my insides go a little tingly. It’s a nice feeling, drinking for the fun of it with people I like, instead of trying to drown my sorrows in a bottle or something.

I look around the kitchen, and something shifts inside my chest. I can’t really deny it anymore. I’m falling for these men. I’m falling in love with them, as terrifying as that is. Even knowing I had feelings for them and wanted to stay with them, I’ve been avoiding thinking the ‘L’ word. It’s just such a big thing. One of those things you can’t just say and then take back. Even thinking it feels like a commitment, and it’s not something I have any fucking experience with at all.

For so long the only thing I loved was the memory of my sister. That was all that kept me going. All I had to hold on to. I had Hannah’s picture, the list of names on the back, and the memories of her that kept me moving

forward, trying to get to the end of my mission so I could finally lay things to rest.

But things are so different now. So much better, as scary as that is to admit. Instead of having almost nothing, I have four men who have made a place in my heart.

When I was focused on that list, I never really thought into the future. I didn't see the point of it. What good was thinking about what would come next when I knew I'd be going it alone?

Now I feel like I can actually see a future.

I can see the possibilities ahead for me and these men, so many things I never even considered before. Nights like this, drinking and joking around. Fucking shit up together. Fucking each other. Learning more about them and letting them learn more about me. Not being afraid that what they find out will make them push me away.

I want all of that with them.

"Oh my god," Ash groans, putting a hand over his face as he laughs. "I forgot about that. Gage was always so in control, and he completely fucked that up."

They all laugh, and I find myself smiling softly.

Maybe I can have what I want. Maybe that future can really be ours.

For the first time in what feels like a long time, I let myself do something that feels more wild and dangerous than anything else I've ever done.

I let myself hope.

RIVER

THE BARK of the tree is rough and familiar against the palms of my hands. As soon as I realize where I am, the ache in my chest eases a bit, and I let out a little sigh of relief.

This tree has come to feel like a safe place. Detroit is a crazy, rotten city, and there's always something going on, but up in this tree, we're above it. None of it can reach us.

Hannah is ahead of me, like she always is. She climbs slowly, making sure I know where each handhold is. It's almost like I'm starting to memorize the movements because I don't need as much help as I usually do. I follow her more easily, climbing up and up and up through the branches.

We finally reach that spot where we can cling to the trunk and look out over the city, and we're quiet for a few long minutes, catching our breaths and taking in the view. I don't know if this Hannah in my dreams needs to breathe, but I watch the rise and fall of her chest and the way the flush of the climb gradually fades from her cheeks.

I break the silence finally, feeling like my mouth is dry, but I have to say something.

"I miss you," I tell her. "I miss you so fucking much. It's worse this time than it was the first time around. Then I knew I'd fucked up, and I didn't keep you safe, but now I have to live with the fact that you died for me. It's... it's hard."

Hannah smiles softly, glancing over at me. "It was never your fault, River. Not then and not now. You would have done the same for me in a heartbeat. That's just how we are."

I nod because she's right. That is how we are. It's the promise we've always made to each other.

"I'm glad you're not alone, at least," Hannah says. "I'm glad it's not like the first time."

"Me too." I cling a little harder to the trunk when a gust of wind comes rushing through. "They're... good. For me. They have their own demons, and they can be brutal and savage in their own right. I'm sure people with standards would say they're bad men, but they're good for me. And they're good to me."

"That's what matters," Hannah agrees. "You've never given a shit what anyone else thinks, and 'standards' are stupid."

I laugh a little because she's right, and it's so Hannah to point it out like that. "They're just everything I never knew I needed."

"And probably some things you wouldn't admit you needed. Because you thought you were beyond needing things."

That's very her too. The way she's always seen through me. But it's not scary. Maybe it's because it's a dream, and it's the only place I can still be with my sister, and where my fears are held at bay for a moment. Whatever it is, it makes me feel bolder than I have before, and I take a deep breath.

"I love them," I tell her.

It's almost a relief to say it and to know that it's safe to do so here, far away from the reality of waking life. I watch Hannah's face, trying to gauge her reaction, but all she does is smile brighter, looking happy for me.

"I'm so glad, River," she says. "I worry about you, you know. You always let your goals take over and forgot about how you deserve to be happy. I want you to be happy."

That brings tears to my eyes. Hannah always did have a way of getting right to the heart of the matter. She saw me better than anyone ever has before, and even though she's right there, close enough that I could reach out and touch her, I know this isn't real. I know it's a dream, and when I open my eyes, she'll be gone.

It's better than watching her die over and over again, knowing there's no way I can stop it, but it still aches. It still makes my heart hurt and sends jagged pain spiking through me.

"I'm sorry," I tell her. "I wish... .fuck. I wish I could have saved you. You have no idea how much. I wish you were really here. I wish we could go

back to this tree and climb it and talk like we did when we were kids. I just...

I shake my head, overcome. Tears stream down my face, and I don't take my hands away from the bark of the tree to wipe them away.

Hannah's smile turns sad, but it doesn't dim. She nods at me, reaching out with one hand to touch my shoulder. I don't really feel it. There's a vague sort of warmth there, but no weight to her hand. There's no grip when her fingers squeeze. Just more proof that she's not really here.

"I know," she says. "But since you couldn't, I need you to do something else for me, okay?"

I nod through my tears, sniffing a little. It's a good thing no one else is here to see this.

"Anything," I tell her.

"What you can do for me instead is... live. Live, River. Live and be happy. Keep your men and find things that bring you joy. Please. That's all I want for you."

"Okay. I'll try."

It's the best I can promise. I've never been good at being happy or living life without something to strive toward, but I guess fulfilling this wish for my sister is something I can put ahead of me as a goal. Not trying to kill people or get revenge. Just trying to live and be happy.

Hannah smiles, and it's so bright it puts the sun to shame. She reaches up to touch my face, smoothing her fingers over my cheeks like she wants to wipe my tears away. She can't do that, not even in the dream, but the thought is enough.

"Love you," I murmur, looking into her eyes.

"Love you back," she says. "Always."

The dream fades, and I wake up in my bed between Ash and Gage. Ash is awake, watching me curiously as I blink and shake the haze of sleep off.

"Good morning," he murmurs, his voice a little raspy. He leans in and kisses me, and I lean into it gladly, kissing him back and taking comfort in it.

"Bad dreams?" he asks, pulling back and searching my face.

I shake my head against the pillow, brow furrowed as I try to think of how to describe it.

"It wasn't bad," I say. "I was with my sister, but we were just... talking. It just hurt because..."

Ash nods, reaching up to brush hair out of my face. “Because it wasn’t real?” he offers.

I nod in return. “Yeah. Because I can only talk to her in my dreams now, and that’s not really... real. That’s not how I’d want to talk to her. But it’s a better dream than so many I’ve had, you know? I didn’t have to watch her die time and time again, and Julian wasn’t there. I’ve been having better dreams lately, where we just talk and hang out in our tree.”

“What do you talk about?” Ash wants to know. I can’t tell if he’s asking because he actually cares about the answer or because he thinks it’s good for me to talk about it, but either way, I tell him.

I smile a little, one half of it pressed into the pillow. “Well, we talked about you guys a little.”

“Oh, really?” he asks, arching an eyebrow. He doesn’t have his glasses on in bed, but we’re close enough that it doesn’t affect how he sees me, I guess. He looks younger without them, more playful. “Did you tell her how amazing we are? How we rock your world every night and then tuck you into bed like gentlemen?”

“Yeah, Ash,” I say, rolling my eyes. “I told my sister all about the sex we have. For sure.”

He laughs softly, still stroking fingers through my hair. “Knew it. What did you actually tell her?”

“I told her—” I remember telling Hannah that I loved all these men in my dream. I remember how easy it was to say it there, knowing the only person who could hear me was my sister who would never tell anyone because she can’t.

Somehow the thought of saying it out loud in the light of day is still terrifying. I’m not sure what I think is going to happen, but my heart races just thinking about it. The words won’t come out, so I take a deep breath and pivot a little.

“I told her I’d try to be happy.”

Ash narrows his eyes. He’s so fucking perceptive, especially when it comes to people not telling the whole truth. Then he grins, leaning in closer to me. “You look like you have a secret.”

“No, I don’t. You’re just seeing things. Probably because you’re not wearing your glasses.”

Ash rolls over on top of me, pushing me onto my back so he can settle between my legs. He leans down and kisses me, starting with my forehead.

Then he drops one on my nose, making me scrunch my face up. But he smooths it back out again by kissing me on the mouth, soft and slow.

I arch up into it, kissing him back. It's a good way to wake up first thing in the morning.

Gage wakes up beside us, yawning and squinting.

"Jesus fucking Christ, Ash, can you be any louder? I think there are some people down the goddamn street who might still be asleep."

He's grumpy and gruff, but I know he doesn't really mind that much. That fact is just emphasized when he rolls over and presses his lips to my bare shoulder, kissing his way up to my neck.

A happy little sigh spills from my lips, and I don't even bother to try to hold it back. I love waking up like this.

Ash is morning hard against me, and I know if I scooted a little to my right I'd be able to feel that Gage is probably hard too. But before I can even contemplate doing that, the door opens and Knox comes walking in.

"Motherfucker," Ash groans, lifting his head and looking at Knox. "Really? You just come bursting in here first thing in the morning? We're busy."

"Oh, fuck off," Knox replies, rolling his eyes. "You're the biggest fucking cockblock in this house. You're always interrupting shit and you don't care. Don't crawl up my ass when I do the same shit."

An offended look crosses Ash's face. "I interrupt when I have to," he points out. "Not just for the fun of it."

"Right. That's why you're always cackling like a little gremlin about it. Because you don't want to do it and don't enjoy it."

"Fuck off, Knox."

"Truth hurts, Ash."

Gage sighs and interjects before they can get into it too much more.

"Knox," he says, using his stern voice to cut through the argument. "What's going on?"

The big tattooed man blinks and then gets himself back on track. "Oh, right. So we just got some intel from one of the informants about Julian. Apparently, he's freaking the fuck out. He knows about his gym, and that thrown on the pile of shit he's lost, he's well and truly fucked. Even better, he knows it."

I frown. I want Julian to be upset, and I want him to watch everything crumble around him, but I don't want it to ruin the plan.

“Do you think he’ll still show up to the party tonight?” I ask the guys. “With his business collapsing and all?”

“He will,” Gage says. “He doesn’t have a choice at this point. These people are his ticket to the upper level he so fucking desperately wants to reach, so he can’t miss out on it.”

He sounds sure, so I nod and let go of that little worry. It makes sense, especially if everything else Julian has is falling apart. He’ll want to cling to the things he still does have and try to scramble to grab more power. Men like him always do.

The party is tonight, and there’s a lot to do to get ready, so we all get up and get to it. It’s not just getting dressed up to go to this thing, either. We have a lot of plans that need to go with it.

Gage calls their hacker friend, making sure everything is good to go. He talks in his authoritative tone, giving orders and expecting them to be carried out, and he’s in his element.

Knox double checks our weapons and all of that. His area of expertise, and he always looks so gleeful when he gets to play with dangerous things.

Priest handles the technical side of things. Knox got the footage of Julian fucking Natalie, and we have to be sure it gets played at just the right time and in the right way.

Ash and I convene in the kitchen. He makes coffee and we go over the plan for our part of this.

“I’ll give you the signal when it’s time to take Julian’s phone,” I tell him, pulling out the milk and sugar.

“Can you make the signal something good?” he asks. “Maybe like blow me a kiss or something?”

I snort at that, shaking my head. “That’ll definitely distract you from the job at hand.”

“No it won’t. It’ll just motivate me more because I’ll want to get it done right so I can get a real kiss from you later.”

That makes me laugh, and I hold my mug out for him to pour me some coffee. “If we pull this off, I’ll kiss you for real. You don’t have to worry about that.”

Ash grins, pleased. “Perfect. I’ll signal you when I’m done with the phone.”

The day passes quickly with so much to do. As usual, we move like a well-oiled machine, and I’m always so surprised how easily I fit into it. It

wasn't so easy at first, when I was determined to work alone and half of the guys didn't want anything to do with me, but now it's obvious that I'm a part of their group, and we work hard to get it all done before we need to start getting ready.

When the guys secured the invite to this party, they told me they'd take care of getting outfits for everyone to wear, and I walk into the living room to find them there with a garment bag draped over the couch.

Priest holds it up when I come in, and Gage and Ash unzip it, revealing a fucking stunning black evening gown.

"That's beautiful," I tell them, feeling a little bit breathless.

They all look pleased that I like it, and I step closer to get a better look at it.

It's made of a shimmery material that looks like it will drape in the right places and cling in others. The bodice is tight, and the top is low cut enough that it will show off just the right amount of cleavage. Enough to be considered classy for a high class party. There's a slit up one side of it, just high enough to be sexy, but still leaving enough material to hide a weapon on my thigh if I need to.

They thought of everything.

"That's not all," Knox says. He comes forward with a shoe box and whips the top off to show me a pair of black heels. High and pointy, just like I like them.

I reach out and touch them, sliding my fingers over the pointed toe, and Knox grins.

"I remember you eyeing up the shoes like you wanted to fuck them at the store that day, so I figured out they're your weakness."

I like that he paid attention to that and that he remembered, so I nod. "You're right. They are my weakness."

He hands me the box and winks at me.

I take all of it upstairs to get dressed, and the guys go to get ready too.

I take care with my appearance for this thing. Looking nice is part of the plan, and I want to be wearing my best when we ruin Julian's life even more. Like another 'fuck you' in his face. I curl my hair and pin it up on one side, letting the rest of it fall in silvery waves over my shoulder. I can't do skull makeup for this, like I did when I killed Ivan, but I still want to mark the occasion somehow.

So I put on delicate silver earrings with skulls on them, and paint my nails with a blood red to black ombre. It seems fitting.

The dress goes on like a dream, hugging my curves and showing off just enough skin. When I look at my reflection in the mirror, I almost don't recognize myself, but the whole thing looks good as fuck. The shoes Knox got me just finish off the look, and I love it.

There's a knock on the door, and I turn to see Knox poking his head in.

"Aw, damn, you're dressed," he says. "I can't decide if that's a good or bad thing."

"What's that supposed to mean?" I ask him.

"I wanted to see you naked," he says, coming in. "But this is a pretty damn close second. You look fucking incredible."

He's got weapons and other gear in his hands, and he comes over to help me strap them on under my dress. His hands linger on my skin, rubbing my thighs and over the small of my back as he attaches straps and makes sure they're secure.

I can tell he's turned on from the way he's breathing and the growing tent in his dress pants. One big hand cups my ass and squeezes hard, and I groan for him, rocking into his touch.

"You look so fucking good like this," he says, and his voice has that low, husky quality to it. He keeps running his hands over the material of the dress, grabbing it in places like he wants to rip the dress off me. Just like the time he cut one off me in that dressing room.

I almost want him to. But we both keep ourselves under control enough that I'm still dressed when he's done. My pussy is throbbing, and we're both breathing hard when he steps back, but my makeup isn't even smudged. Which is good because I don't have time to redo it.

Knox licks his lips and steps in closer to me, pressing the hard lines of his body against my front. I can feel the bulge in his pants and the heat coming off him, and it makes me swallow hard.

"I'm going to fuck you good and hard later," he promises right in my ear. "With you wearing just those heels."

A shiver of anticipation goes down my spine, and I'm even more eager to get this whole thing over and done with.

"Fuck, yes," I groan, and we share a look filled with heat.

G A G E

STANDING in front of the mirror in my room, I adjust my tie, putting the final touches on my look for the night. The suit is well pressed and tailored, all black except for the white dress shirt and red pocket square in my breast pocket. I can admit that I look good. This isn't my or any of the guys' usual style of dress, but we can all wear the hell out of a suit when we need to.

Normally, going to an event like this would be something we'd do to try to further our business. Making connections and networking, gathering intel on other gangs and business people.

But tonight, it's all about River.

I'm determined to have her vengeance carried out tonight. I want to give that to her more than anything.

I run my fingers through my dark brown hair and give myself one last once-over. No one will ever mistake me for a straight-laced businessman—and I wouldn't want them to—but I look like I belong among a gathering of the powerful players in Detroit.

Satisfied, I nod and head downstairs.

Priest and Ash are already there, dressed in their nice black suits with the one splash of red. It seemed right, since we're ruining a man's life tonight.

River and Knox come down a moment later, and as soon as Knox clears the stairs and we can see the silver-haired woman behind him, we all hone in on her. She draws my gaze no matter where she is, and right now it's impossible to look away from her.

She looks sexy as fuck. That dress was the best idea, and it fits her so damn well.

I can also tell that Knox already got his hands on her, from the way her face is a little flushed and her hair is a little messy.

As soon as she's standing close enough, I grab her arm and drag her into a kiss. It's deep and hot and not at all long enough, but it'll have to do.

When I pull back, I arch an eyebrow at her. "Are you ready to sow a little mayhem?"

She grins back. "Just call me the Queen of Anarchy."

"Damn right."

I let her go, and Priest and Ash both take their turns kissing her. Like each of them want to steal some kind of promise before we head out. It's a big moment, and we all know it.

The party tonight is being held in what can only be described as a massive mansion. We get into the car and drive over there, and I can't help eyeing the location as we pull up. It's gotta be one of the most expensive places in the Detroit area, although it's well outside the city, sitting proudly on a massive plot of land.

We have to drive through a set of wrought-iron gates that swing open as soon as we approach, and we curve up the driveway with the other cars to the front of the house. Ours is probably the least fancy of the bunch, which is saying something since we're in a sleek black Lexus. But everyone else is flexing their wealth with what they drive, giving instructions to the valets not to scratch anything. As if they aren't already well trained.

Everything is glittering and bright, and a valet in white gloves and a red coat with tails immediately comes over to take the car, leaving us to walk up the rest of the way to the house on foot.

There are house staff and event staff everywhere, guiding people up the drive to the open door, spilling light out into the darkness of the night. A pretty redheaded woman with a fake smile and a sparkly dress stands at the door with a tablet, checking names of the people who are lining up to get in.

I give her ours, and she scrolls for a bit before smiling up at me.

"There you are," she says. "Come right in. Enjoy the night."

She shoos us into the grand entrance so she can get to the people behind us. She probably has no idea who we are, and in the grand scheme of things, she probably doesn't give a shit. We're on the list, and that's all that matters for her job tonight.

I wonder how ballsy you'd have to be to show up here with no invite and then get turned away. If someone did that, trying to get to Alec

Beckham or any of the other high profile guests, they wouldn't even get through the door before they got turned away. No amount of sweet talking would matter.

To get on that list, we called in a favor from a pretty well connected person in Detroit. It's something we've been sitting on for a while, waiting until we really needed to use it.

To be honest, this wasn't what we would have planned to use it for. We'd discussed situations that would call for it, that would be worth giving up something as good as that to have in our back pocket. But as far as I'm concerned, this is completely worth it. We'll be taking out a major player in the city, and River's vengeance is as good a reason as any. Better than most, even.

We walk through the entry way, and I look around, casing the place. I know my brothers are doing the same thing, and in a place like this, it's not even suspicious. You don't have grand mansions like this, unless you want to show off all your shit and your money, and that means you want people to look. And feel jealous that they don't have what you have. It's all a game to these kinds of people.

But we're not checking out the art on the walls or the crystal chandeliers that hang from the vaulted ceilings. Instead, we look for security and check for exits, mentally running through the plans we have for the evening and figuring out the best way to make them work with the space we're in.

There are security team members dotted through the place, of course. They blend in a little with the crowd of guests already here, but they're easy to pick out since I know what I'm looking for. And this many rich people in one room need their armed guards to feel safe or whatever. The exits are just as easy to point out, although it's hard to know where they lead to, since we don't have a layout of this place.

River is at my side, and she leans in closer to me. "You need to relax your face," she murmurs.

I frown and glance at her. "What?"

"You look like you're about to knife someone," she says. "You have resting murder face."

I crack a small smile at that.

Her sass and quick mouth were things that bothered me about her in the first place, but they've become my favorite things about her over time.

She's been through more shit than anyone should ever have to handle, and yet she's still got a fire inside her.

I never want to let it go out.

RIVER

A LOT of the guests are here already, and we make our way through the large house. Everything is dripping with too much money, sparkly and shiny and designed to make people look at it and want what the owners have.

But we're all focused on our task here. Despite me giving Gage shit for looking like he might murder someone, I feel almost as tense as he looked.

Tonight will be the night. Everything has been building toward this moment.

My palms are tingly and my heart rate is a little faster than normal, proof that I'm just anxious to get through this without anything going wrong.

It's a party, so we mingle among the other guests. A waiter passes by with a tray of champagne flutes, and we all take one, scoping out the crowd.

I take a sip of the champagne, letting the bubbles tickle my nose. Hopefully the alcohol will settle my nerves a bit, but it also gives me something to do with my hands.

There's no sign of Julian yet, and I frown as I scan the crowd. There are so many people here in their finery, glittering and doing their fake laughs and all, but I don't see the reason we came here.

He would be impossible to miss, since I feel like my body is honed in on him, just waiting.

"Maybe he's not coming," I murmur. "I don't see him anywhere."

"Neither do I," Ash says. "But he'll be here."

"How do you know?"

He shrugs. “Like we said, it’s more important than ever for him to come to this, considering he needs these connections more than he did before. He’s going to be clinging to whatever he can, and this is a last chance for him to avoid losing everything.”

I let out a shaky breath, reminding myself again that they’re right. I know they’re right. He won’t let the chance slip through his fingers, so he’ll be here.

The crowd starts to part a bit, and I crane my neck to see what’s happening. A little ways off, there’s a tall, handsome man walking through, and everyone seems to be zoned in on him.

Alec Beckham, the host of the party, has made his appearance, then.

Ash snickers when he catches sight of him, lowering his voice so only the five of us can hear. “Do you know how far Julian would stick his nose up Alec’s ass if he had the chance?” he comments. “All that smug bullshit he talks, but if Alec told him to roll over like a good dog, he’d do it in a second. Lick his boots? No problem.”

Gage snorts, and even Priest cracks a smile at that.

“Why is this guy so important?” I ask them. I’ve heard of him, of course. Everyone in Detroit has heard of Alec Beckham. He’s one of the richest men in the state, if not the richest, so it’s impossible to do anything without at least hearing his name and his business ventures and shit.

“He’s old money,” Gage tells me, keeping his voice low. “The kind of money that’s been passed down so many times no one in his family knows what it’s like to not have money. It doesn’t rely on him being clever or good with business, but he probably is. His money makes money, and that’s the kind of wealth Julian would love to get his hands on. He wants to be a part of that echelon of society.”

Priest nods. “We have money to do what we want with, and so does Julian, but he doesn’t have the prestige and reputation that goes along with it. That’s what he wants.”

But we’re still waiting for Julian to arrive, and the longer he takes to show up, the more antsy I get. I tap my foot against the shiny, polished floor, glancing around nervously. Every time someone passes by or comes through that arched door, I look to see if it’s Julian. And so far, it’s never him.

I sigh audibly, and Ash catches my gaze. He grabs my hand and tugs me after him, not really giving me a chance to argue. The other guys let us go,

not seeming worried at all. There's still the plan to execute, and Priest has to go set up the video to play the footage that will damn Julian tonight.

"What are you doing?" I ask Ash as he drags me out of the room and then down a quieter hallway. It's lined with doors, and he chooses one, seemingly at random to open and then tugs me inside.

We end up in what looks like a storage closet. It's more spacious than any closet I've ever been in before, with shelves along the back piled high with linens and towels. An automatic light snapped on as soon as we walked in, so when Ash closes the door after us, we're not immediately plunged into darkness.

Ash just grins down at me and pulls me into his arms. Before I can ask him again what he's doing, he leans down and kisses me.

It's a surprise, because I definitely wasn't expecting him to do something like this in the middle of this party when we're here to ruin a man's life. But that doesn't stop me from leaning up and kissing him back.

There's never really a bad time to kiss Ash, and he makes a soft noise into it, pulling me even closer as our mouths move together.

When we part for breath, there's a crooked smile on his face and heat in his eyes. "It's been a while since we've done this, huh?" he asks. "Made out somewhere fancy while we're all done up."

It hits me then that he's thinking about the night of the gala. It does seem like that was a long time ago, even though it really wasn't in the grand scheme of things.

That was the first time we fucked, and he's probably thinking about how I was using it to try to drive him away. It's like he's trying to erase that, to overwrite that moment with this one.

I know we'll have to get back to the party soon, but the need for Ash rises as strongly in me as his own need seems to be. There's also something in me that wants to show him things are different now. That I'll never hurt him like that again.

That things are not the same as they were back then at the gala.

I grab the front of his suit and drag him in closer so I can seal my mouth over his in an almost desperate kiss. I kiss him like I'm drowning and he's the only thing that can give me air. Or like I want to drown in him, chasing the pleasure of his mouth on mine and sliding our tongues together.

Ash grabs on to me, his fingers digging into my skin through the fabric of my dress. I can feel his heart beating fast and the heat of his body

through both layers of clothes.

My body hums in response, that need building and building.

If we had the time, I'd strip him out of that suit and kiss him everywhere, but the clock is ticking. We don't have more than a couple minutes to spare, so we need to make every damn one of them count.

His hands clutch at my body, and he turns me around to face the shelves. I brace myself against them, putting my hands up. Ash presses in tight against my ass, and I can feel how hard he is.

"Fuck," I groan, already pushing back against him because I want him so bad. My pussy is throbbing, soaking through the panties I put on this evening.

I can't see Ash's smug grin, but I can hear it in his voice as he grabs my ass. "You're so perfect like this," he says, sounding breathless himself. "So worked up for me in your fancy dress. I love that."

"We don't have time for compliments," I pant back, glancing at him over my shoulder.

He just grins wider and starts gathering the fabric of my dress, hiking the long skirt of it up and over my hips. "There's always time for me to tell you how fucking beautiful you are," he shoots back.

He drags my panties down, letting them settle around my ankles. "And how much I want to fuck you. How I want to hear you scream my name and know that I'm the one making you feel so damn good."

While he talks, he undoes his pants and gets his cock out, making good use of the time. I can feel it when he rubs the head against the slick lips of my pussy, and I moan, spreading my legs for him.

"It's like you're made for this," he groans softly, letting the head breach my hole and then shoving the rest of it in. There's no time to go slow, no time to savor how good it feels.

Once he's balls deep inside me, I start squirming, desperate for more, and Ash draws back and then slams into me hard, setting a furious pace.

He rocks me forward, pressing me further against the shelves. His hands dig into my hips, holding on tightly as he plows into me. I can hear how wet I am, the sound of his cock slamming through the soaked mess of my pussy. It echoes over our harsh breathing and the groans and grunts we let out as we fuck.

"Just like that," Ash pants.

I can feel his hot breath on my neck, and he tucks himself in tighter against me, grinding his cock in further, forcing me to feel everything.

“Ash,” I moan, and it sounds desperate and needy, but I don’t even care.

“Fucking perfect,” he gasps out. “You feel so goddamn good.” Each word is punctuated by a hard thrust, rocking me up onto the balls of my feet as I take it.

My pussy is spasming, going tight around his cock like it’s already ready to milk him of everything he has. It just feels so fucking good. Heat and pleasure curl through me, making it impossible to focus on anything else. Every time he slams into me, it’s with the slap of skin on skin, and I can feel my body rushing toward a climax already.

“Tell me,” Ash breathes in a low voice. “Tell me you’re mine. Tell me you want this. That you want me.”

“I want it,” I practically wail, thrusting my hips back to meet him halfway into the next thrust. “I’m yours—fuck! I want you, Ash, please.”

“There you go,” he praises. “You’re so damn sexy when you beg. This is so good, isn’t it? What we have?”

I nod eagerly, pushed toward honesty by the tidal wave of sensation crashing through me as he fucks me wildly, like he’s out of control.

My heart is galloping in my chest, and our pace turns almost frantic as we move together. I meet him with every thrust, working my hips back as he pistons his hips forward. We meet in the middle again and again, and his voice takes on a strained quality as he keeps praising me, telling me how good I am and how good this feels.

“Ash—” I choke out. “I’m close— I need—”

I can barely string together a full sentence. The pleasure is just growing, cutting off the part of my brain that knows how to make words come out and replacing it with the need to come undone for Ash.

“I’ve got you,” he promises. “You beautiful, filthy thing. I’ve got you. I want you to come for me. I want you to fall apart right here, in a closet in the middle of the fanciest fucking house we’ve ever been in.”

I don’t know how he has the breath for all that, but he gets it out, and it’s like magic how it works on me. My body goes tight, and the orgasm that’s been barreling down on me like a freight train hits me hard.

Ash is right behind me, swearing in a breathless gasp as he fills me up, coming hard while I spasm and jerk in his hold.

Unlike the last time we came together like this in a place like this, I'm not trying to break something between us this time. This time, I'm all in, letting myself go. Letting myself feel all of it.

We come together and take a second to catch our breaths. I can feel Ash shuddering against me, and then he pulls out and tucks himself away.

Ash helps me clean up, smoothing my dress back down and fixing my hair where it got messy in our fucking. He has a crooked grin on his face, and it hits his eyes in a different way than his usual charming grin does. He's happy, through and through, and I'm so glad to see it.

He kisses me, pulling me close to him. I can feel the heat of his body and smell the scent of our banging on him, under his cologne. It makes me shiver, remembering what we just did.

"I'll never let you forget how I feel about you," he murmurs against my mouth. "That this is real."

I swallow hard, overcome with a sudden wave of emotion. I put my arms around him, holding on tightly and breathing him in. I don't think I could ever forget how he feels about me, even if I tried. Even when I wanted to.

Ash just smiles, taking my silence for the agreement that it is. He kisses my forehead and then takes my hand, pulling back.

"We should probably get back out there. Priest has probably done what he needed to do by now, and we don't want to fuck up the plan."

"Right," I tell him. I smooth my hand down my dress and then nod. I'm ready.

We head back out to rejoin the others, and even though we did our best to put our appearances back to rights, there's not really any hiding what we were just doing from the others, who are pretty trained to recognize it by now.

"Really, Ash?" Gage asks, shaking his head. "Here? In the middle of the mission?"

Ash just shrugs, not looking bothered at all. "I do my best work right after I come. I need a steady hand for this shit, and sex soothes me."

I laugh at that because he says it so seriously. Hell, he probably does actually mean it. Gage rolls his eyes, but then focuses on something beyond Ash's shoulder. We turn to look at the doorway leading to the large room we're gathered in, and my heart jumps into my throat for a second.

Julian has just walked in.

Here we go.

ASH

I WASN'T EXACTLY KIDDING about a good orgasm giving me a steadier hand. I actually do feel more relaxed after sex, and I figured this could only help. But seeing Julian walk into the room makes me tense up immediately, so all that relaxing sex almost goes flying right out the window. Just because one asshole shows up at the party.

I almost snort under my breath. I should have known.

Julian is a fucking dick, and it takes all my self-control not to walk over there and punch him right in the fucking face. Of course I'm tense.

Luckily, I'm good enough with my hands that it won't matter. I can still do what I need to do.

Julian doesn't see us at first, so we stand there and watch him for a bit.

We have a good vantage point of the rest of the room, so we can see him as he puts on his game face, in this case, that smug, fake charming smile, and starts to schmooze his way through the crowd.

He's shaking hands and talking to people, but only the really important ones. He can't afford to piss anyone off here, but it's clear he's really only interested in rubbing elbows with the people who can get him somewhere. Which, to be fair, is almost everyone in this mansion right now.

He laughs at jokes that probably aren't funny, sucking up to anyone he comes across that seems like they fall into the right category for him. It's kind of disgusting to watch, actually. The way he's kissing asses and pretending to be this smooth as fuck gentleman or whatever.

It's amateur hour because you can't pretend to have charm when you don't have any to spare, and I find myself hoping that everyone can see

through him. They probably can't though. If there's one thing I've learned about rich people, it's that they love having smoke blown up their asses.

Even if it's not real. Even if it's from someone they can't stand. The fact that they're in a position where they matter that much gets them off something big. It's a power thing, most likely, and it's fucking gross.

But Julian fits right into that whole scene, playing the game as best he can to try to climb that ladder.

Which makes it even clearer how fake he is when he turns and finally spots us. I can see it when his features change. That charming grin slips right off his face, and a look of disgust takes over, his lip curling into a sneer when he sees River. This is the real Julian. An ugly, petty murderer, who doesn't deserve anyone's fucking time.

We don't move from our spot, and he comes over to us instead. As he gets closer, it's clear he's fuming, pissed off that we would dare to be in the same place he is.

"What the fuck are you doing here?" he demands, his eyes snapping with disdain and anger. "Did you forget what I said to you the last time? I've been fucking lenient, not going after you for when *she* tried to steal Hannah away at the wedding." He jerks his head at River. "You don't belong here."

"First of all," River snaps. "Hannah is—was—a person. You can't steal people, and she didn't want to be with you in the first place. I don't blame her for that. Second, we were invited, so we have just as much right to be here as you do. You might think you're the only one who knows people, but you're not that fucking special. We didn't say anything to you, so maybe you should go about your business."

It's clear to hear the anger and hatred burning in her voice as she confronts Julian, but it's also clear that she's holding herself back a little because of the plan. Otherwise she might have already clawed his eyes out for daring to talk about her sister that way. I want to have her back, to stand right beside her as she faces down this fucker.

But I can't.

I have a job to do.

Allowing my brothers to be the ones who stand behind and beside her, I shift around to one side a little. Julian is so fucking focused on staring down River, almost foaming at the mouth with his anger, that he doesn't even

notice when my sticky fingers find their way into his pocket and take his phone.

I turn my back a little, one ear cocked to listen to River dressing him down while the rest of my focus is on the phone in my hand. We got a little device from our hacker friend that I plug into his phone. It's designed to basically allow us to tap into his phone, so we can hear his calls and things like that.

It runs a program that downloads the software onto his phone, and I tap my foot a little as I stare at the screen, willing it to hurry the fuck up.

"You have a lot of nerve," Julian is saying, practically spitting the words at River.

River snorts right in his face, and I smile with pride. "You're one to talk," she shoots back.

The program finishes downloading, and I unplug the device, pushing it back into my pocket before sliding Julian's phone back into his, just as subtly as I took it out.

He never moves or notices, so focused on the anger and hatred coming from River. Going both ways, really.

I step away from Julian and sneeze into my hands, not loud enough to draw attention, but enough to give River the signal that I'm done with what I had to do.

She glances my way and something shifts in her eyes, so I know she got the signal. Finally, she lets herself say to Julian what I know she's been dying to say this whole time.

"You know, it's surprising you're actually here at all tonight," she says, her tone still angry. "Considering the word on the street is that your business isn't going so well these days."

Julian's eyes narrow. "What the fuck is that supposed to mean? What do you know about that?"

I can see it the second the suspicion hits him. Because of how carefully we planned all this out, he hasn't had a reason to suspect us this whole time. But now that River's in his face telling him about it, it hits him that we're the ones with reason to go after him.

River shrugs.

"I know a lot about it," she says. "Because we're the ones who burned down your gym. We stood there outside of it and watched it go up in flames."

Julian opens his mouth, but no sound comes out. Maybe it's the shock of hearing that, or maybe he's just so full of rage he doesn't know what to say.

But River isn't done yet. She grins, and it reminds me a lot of the savage, unhinged look Knox wears sometimes.

Only it's a lot hotter on her.

"We're also the reason you have no supply or demand for your fucking drugs. So yeah. We know business isn't exactly booming right now."

Fury fills Julian's face in a split second, and the tension grows thick and heavy in the air. We all shift closer to River, ready to protect her if we need to. But before Julian can do or say anything to her, a loud moan cuts through the air, amplified in the large room and ringing from the vaulted ceilings.

Julian's face drains of color, and his eyes widen, as if he recognizes the sound immediately.

And, you know, he should.

Considering it's his sister.

RIVER

MY HEART IS POUNDING in my chest.

I watch everything that plays across Julian's face as he hears the unmistakable sounds of sex and his sister's moans.

This main room has one of those large, almost theater sized TVs in it, mounted into the wall, and that's where Julian's fucked up sex tape is currently playing. He whirls around and sees the video, watching himself as he shoves Natalie over the couch and pushes into her, fucking her hard for everyone in the room to see.

Everyone at the party is turning to watch as well, drawn by the sounds.

Up to this point, I hadn't seen the video yet because I really didn't want to see a repeat of what I saw live in person at the church. But I have to admit that Knox got a great fucking shot. It's filthy stuff, and it's incredibly obvious who it is.

Both Julian and Natalie's faces are clear in the video, and they keep moaning each other's names.

At one point, Julian even makes her admit that no one can make her come like her brother does, telling her he won't let her finish if she doesn't say it, which really just seals the fucking deal. There's no way around the damning evidence about just what kind of relationship the two of them had.

People in the crowd start murmuring, watching the video and turning to their little clusters to talk about what they're seeing. It's amazing, because some of those same people are the ones Julian was just rubbing elbows with, trying to charm his way into their good graces. And now they can all see him for what he really is, live on a ridiculously big TV screen.

It's perfect.

Julian looks like his brain has momentarily shut off. He looks stunned, like he's cycling through dozens of options to try to find a way to salvage this, to fix it. But there isn't one. It's clear he keeps coming up with nothing.

Savage satisfaction fills me just to see it. Just to know how much this is going to destroy him.

While he's still reeling from watching himself fucking his sister on the big screen, I lean in and catch his attention.

"Oh, one more thing," I tell him. "I told the FBI about your illegal dealings and all the money you've got hidden in offshore accounts. They're looking into all that now, so..."

Julian doesn't even react to that. He's still in that shocked stupor, lips parted and eyes unfocused.

Before he recovers, we slip through the crowd.

The video is still playing, and people are still murmuring, some voices getting louder as people express their disgust. They're not making any secret of how fucking gross they find all of this, and it feels good to hear it.

We leave the house, but instead of going to the front where the valet would get the car for us, we find the lot around the side of the house where all the cars are parked. It's easy to pick Julian's out, since we've seen him in it before, and Gage grins at me and hands me the house keys he keeps on a ring.

I grin back, taking the key and dragging it along the shiny red paint job of Julian's car. The guys get in on it, using their own tools and keys to carve shapes and symbols into the paint. Knox grabs a big rock from the side of the lot and drops it right on the hood of the car, leaving a massive dent in the metal. He picks the rock up again, and this time he throws it at the windshield, leaving spider-webbing cracks behind.

It's the most fun I've had in a while, and I let myself enjoy every single second of it.

Everything else we have planned and done to him was to dismantle his empire. To ruin him and make sure that no one can follow in his steps once he's dead.

But this?

This is just petty, and I fucking love it.

He obviously never loved my sister, but I have a feeling that he's the type of person who loves his fucking car.

I'm breathing hard as we keep fucking with the car, and Knox looks over at me with that grin on his face.

"You look like an avenging angel," he murmurs, his eyes glinting with pride in the lamp light.

I like the sound of that.

Once we've done enough to ruin Julian's car, we get into our own and peel out of the lot. But we don't go far. Instead of driving off back home, we stick around close enough that we can see the entrance to Alec's house.

I wish I could be inside the house to see what the fallout is, but I can imagine it pretty well. There's not a lot someone can say when everyone who's anyone in the upper crust of Detroit has seen them railing their sister.

"He's so fucked now," Knox says, practically cackling with excitement. "He spent all that time kissing ass when he got there, and now those same people will know he'd rather be kissing his sister's ass."

"That's gross, Knox," Ash groans, making a face and miming throwing up. "Fucking foul. That video was... a lot."

"It was a good video," Gage puts in. "Not the content, obviously, but the footage you got. Good job, Knox."

The big man beams. "It was almost worth it to have to watch all that shit just for this moment." He twists around in the passenger seat to look at me. "Are you happy, little fox?"

I grin at him, letting it be the monstrous one that we share sometimes. "I just wish I could be in there to see him losing his shit. I bet he's falling apart."

"Maybe he'll run," Ash suggests. "I mean, what else is he going to do? There's no way to explain himself, and they're not going to want him to stick around after seeing that."

We keep our eyes glued on the house, watching for signs of people coming and going.

"Probably not," I agree. "I can't imagine he'll stick around long."

"He's going to have to go into damage control mode," Gage says. He sounds thoughtful, thinking like a businessman trying to recover, probably. "There's not much he can do to save face, but he'll try to salvage this. He has to if he wants to get anywhere."

And we'll be there to make sure there's nothing left to salvage. I love that.

A little while later, Julian comes out of the house. He's obviously reeling with emotions, rage practically radiating from him. His hands are balled into fists, and he stomps his way over to the valet.

There's a short exchange, and it looks like Julian is a second away from cussing the man out. The valet holds up his hands and goes to get Julian's car. A few minutes go by, and the valet comes back, without the car.

He looks anxious, and he keeps his distance as he appears to explain to Julian what happened.

Julian immediately flies into a rage at the man, yelling and waving his hands in his face.

From next to me, Ash mimics what he thinks Julian is saying in a voice that makes him sound like a cartoon villain. "Do you have any idea who I am? Do you know how much I'm worth? You fucker! You idiot! You buffoon!"

"Yes, sir," Knox says back, mimicking the valet, making him sound tired and fed up with this shit. "You're the guy who loves banging his sister, aren't you?"

We burst out laughing at that, watching as Julian stomps a little ways away and pulls his phone out to make a call.

"Oh, perfect," Ash says. He pulls out a little black speaker looking device. "Now we can hear the rest of his breakdown."

He presses a button and we listen as the call connects. Before the person on the other end of the call can even say anything, Julian is already yelling.

"I need you to get down here and bring me a car now!" he snaps.

"Sir?" the man on the line says. "What happened to the—"

"I don't pay you to ask fucking questions!" Julian bellows, pissed and taking it out on this guy. "I pay you to do what the fuck I say. Bring me a goddamn car!"

The man just sighs and says he'll be there as soon as he can. There's a resignation to his voice that makes it pretty clear that Julian treats everyone below him like shit, and this is a regular thing when he gets pissed off.

Probably they haven't seen him this mad before though.

It takes about twenty or so minutes for the man and the car to show up, pulling up to the front of the house. Julian gets in and slams the door so hard we hear it from where we're parked. They don't linger, driving away in a hurry.

Knox starts the car we're in, and we follow them. While Knox drives, I change shoes, leaving my dress on but swapping the heels for shoes I can actually move in for this next phase of our plan. Gage pulls a bag out from under his seat and passes it around, giving us all ski masks to wear as well.

We tug on the masks and stay at a safe distance, listening through the little device as Julian calls Natalie to tell her what happened.

"What the fuck do you mean they all saw it?" she asks, her voice going high and shrill.

"Just what I said!" Julian snaps. "It was playing on the TV there, and everyone was just standing around watching it."

"But how did they find out? How did they get that footage?"

"I don't fucking know!" he explodes. "I don't know. But it's fucked. It's bad, Nat. That fucking bitch said she told the FBI about the accounts. They're going to be poking around, trying to find that money."

I'm not even mad about him talking about me like that. It's just too good to hear him losing his shit.

"Shit," Natalie swears. "Fucking goddammit, Julian. We have to do something. We have to move the money before they can find it. If this all comes crashing down, that's all we'll have left."

"I know. I fucking know, okay? I'll handle it. I'll take care of it."

"You'd better!"

He hangs up with her, and then calls someone else, making a quick and almost frantic demand to have the money moved out of the offshore account it's been in.

"Which account do you want to move it from?" the woman on the other end asks in an almost robotic voice.

"Oh shit," Ash whispers, even though there's no way they can hear us. "This is it. Someone get this."

Priest already has his phone out with the notes app open, ready to take down the numbers as they're read out.

This is what we've been waiting for. Julian starts to read out the account numbers and Priest takes them down. As soon as we have them, he sends a message to Harv, who will use the account numbers to intercept the money and reroute it to a different account—one set up in my name.

Instead of Julian sheltering his money, we'll steal it all.

Savage joy and pleasure fills me when Priest's phone buzzes and he looks down at it and then over at me.

“It’s done,” he says. “We got it.”

That was the last thing we needed Julian for. He had to be alive to be the one to initiate the transfer so we could steal all of his money.

Now that that’s done, there’s no reason for him to be alive anymore.

This is the part I’ve especially been waiting for. The part where I get to make Julian fucking Maduro feel all the pain and suffering that he’s inflicted. Where I get to look him in the eye as I kill him and make sure he knows that he brought this on himself and that he deserves every single fucking thing that’s happened to him.

“Knox,” Gage says, his voice serious. “Step on it. Let’s take this fucker down.”

KNOX

THAT'S all I need to hear.

Something in me leaps with savage joy as I punch the gas harder and send the car speeding down the highway. I'm in my element right now, and this is the kind of shit I live for. The chase, the fight. Knowing at the end of it I get to help River bring Julian down for good.

Unlike the last time with the drug runner, we don't have to worry about making it look like an accident or covering our tracks as much. So we can do whatever the fuck we want here to make this work.

"Take out the tires," I tell the others, knowing they'll know what to do.

Gage rolls the window down and Priest and Ash do the same thing on their sides in the backseat. They draw their guns and aim for the tires and the windows of the car in front of us. Glass explodes from the windows when there's a hit, and the car jerks and swerves a little when the driver realizes they're under attack.

Someone manages to hit one of the tires, and it starts to go flat, making the car lose speed. I yank the wheel to the side a little, and when Julian's car drops back so it's almost side by side with us, Gage aims for the driver's side and blows the window out.

The bullet hits the driver, and I glance over in time to see him slump behind the wheel. The car starts to spin out, out of control with no one driving it. It veers off the road, smashing through the guardrail and crashing into the trees down the short hill.

I steer us off to the side and bring us to a stop. The car is barely off before we're all getting out, and climbing down after the car.

The driver is dead in the front seat when we get there, but the back door is open and Julian isn't inside.

"Fuck," I curse. "He's gone."

We all draw our weapons, and I'm glad we planned to be armed up for this. It should have been easy to knock out the car and have Julian be too dazed from the crash to fight back, but at least we're prepared since shit isn't going according to plan here.

It's dark out, but there are five of us and one of him, so we spread out, moving into the trees to hunt him down. He's not getting the fuck away. We're going to end this here. Tonight.

Something rustles in the brush, and I turn gun raised. It goes silent, but I cock my ear, listening for the sound of heavy breathing or quiet footsteps.

For a second there's nothing, but then I catch sight of a streak of white darting between two trees. Julian, with his suit jacket off.

I take off after him, and the others follow, not needing me to tell them Julian is close

He runs faster than I would have expected, but he doesn't have the stamina that I do, so I run him down, gaining on him as he tries to dart through the trees and put distance between us. He zig zags around, and I just plow straight through, ignoring the branches that whip against my chest and arms.

When he's close enough that I can hear him panting for breath, he dips into a thicket of trees and disappears for a second, bringing me to a stop.

"Come on out, Julian," I call after him. "We just wanna talk."

I hear the others come crashing through the brush after me, and I start moving closer to the trees Julian disappeared behind.

Only, when I get there, there's no one in that spot.

"Shit," I hiss, wheeling around in time to see Julian come darting from behind another cluster of trees.

Before I can call out a warning, he races up behind Priest and grabs him, yanking him back.

Priest opens his mouth, but Julian presses the barrel of his gun against Priest's temple.

"Don't say a fucking word," Julian grunts.

His eyes are wild in the darkness, and his chest heaves from the chase. There's blood dripping down one side of his face, either from the crash or from a branch catching him in the temple as he ran.

“Back the fuck off,” he snarls, grinding his gun tighter against Priest’s head.

Priest’s face is hidden behind his mask, but I can see his light blue eyes flash in the dim moonlight as Julian drags him back even more, farther away from us.

I take a step forward, and Julian jerks toward me.

“Stay the fuck back!” he screams. “If you come any closer, I swear to god, I’ll kill him. I’ll blow his brains out right here and now.”

My muscles tense, and I stop in my tracks.

Everything in me is screaming for me to rush in and attack this motherfucker. It’s possible that I could get to him before he had a chance to shoot Priest, and I want to. I want to murder him. I want to kill him with my bare hands and watch the life drain from his eyes for even fucking daring to put his hands on one of us.

I’ve never been the type to hold back. When we were going after that drug runner, I ran right in, rushing him even though he had a gun and was shooting at me. I didn’t give a shit about anything but getting the job done.

But this is different.

I don’t mind putting myself in danger. Hell, I even get off on the thrill of it sometimes. Escaping something that could have killed someone else, someone with less balls, is a head rush like no other. But this goddamn asshole has my cousin. He’s got Priest, and I can’t risk anything happening to him.

I don’t know for sure if I could get him before he pulls that trigger, and it’s too big a risk to take.

So I hold off. It fucking kills me, but I stay in place, gritting my teeth, feeling the rage snapping under my skin.

All the others hold off too, and I can feel their tension as we watch Julian, waiting for his next move.

He keeps the gun in place, breathing hard, his eyes wild as they dart around. He starts dragging Priest away, and I have to clench my hands into fists so hard that my nails bite into my palms, just to keep myself from following them.

I can hear my heartbeat pounding in my ears, and it almost drowns out that voice in my head that’s screaming at me to not let this fucker run away with Priest.

But there’s nothing I can do.

“Where’s your car?” Julian demands.

“Up the hill,” Gage says. He sounds so fucking pissed, but still calmer than I feel.

“Are the keys in it?”

Gage glances over at us, and Julian snarls a curse.

“Answer my fucking question!” he screams. “I want the keys to your goddamn car, since you ruined both of mine.”

Seems like a long ass time ago that we were laughing about keying the fuck out of Julian’s shiny red car.

Now we’re standing here in the dark, trying to hold this shit together.

Julian doesn’t let up, and Gage nods at me in a silent command.

I don’t even grumble or argue. There’s no point in making this shit worse, and as reckless as I can be, I’m not gonna risk getting Priest murdered. I pull the car key from my pocket and toss it to Julian. He snatches it up and tightens his grip on Priest again, dragging him up the hill.

None of us dare move while we watch, helpless and furious.

If we rush him, he could still kill Priest. It’s not safe. But every step he takes drags my cousin farther away.

Julian pops the trunk and shoves at Priest’s back, the gun still trained on him. “Get in the fucking car. Now!”

He practically shoves Priest inside, then slams the trunk closed, swinging his gun around to aim it in our direction as he makes his way to the driver’s side door. He slides inside, and my feet are already moving, my instincts overriding everything else now that Priest no longer has a gun to his temple.

I sprint forward as the engine revs to life, but I’m not fast enough.

Julian peels out, sending up a cloud of dust and gravel as he speeds off down the dark road with Priest locked up in his trunk.

RIVER

MY HEART IS in my throat as I stand frozen, watching the car speed off.

No.

No, no. No. This isn't how this was supposed to go!

We were supposed to be the ones with the upper hand. We were supposed to snatch Julian. To make him suffer for everything he's done. He wasn't supposed to be able to give us the slip or turn the tables on us, but he did.

Driven to the brink and so fucking desperate, he managed to do this shit. And now he has Priest.

Everything in me screams in agonized fury at that thought. *Not Priest. He can't fucking have him.*

The other Kings are just standing there, and I can tell they're scared and furious. Even Ash, usually cool-headed and easy-going, even in a crisis, looks like he wants to either scream or rip someone's head off.

Knox has his hands balled up into fists, and there's no way his palms won't be bleeding when he uncurls his fists. Gage grinds his jaw, looking like he's searching for a solution to this in his head and coming up short.

I feel so fucking sick. I start pacing, walking back and forth in the brush, trying to keep my breathing under control so I don't hyperventilate out here.

"What the fuck are we going to do?" I demand. "He can't just—we have to do something! We can't let him have Priest. What the fuck. This wasn't —"

I can barely get the words out. They all come tumbling out of my mouth so fast, and I stare at the guys like they have the answers. Like they can fix

this somehow.

I've never been one to look to others to help me with shit, but now we're in this together, and one of ours is missing. There's no way Julian's going to treat him well. Not after what we did to him, and I'm terrified that if—when—we find Priest, he won't be in good shape.

"We have to go after him," Gage says. He sounds angrier than I've ever heard him before, his voice a low, barely controlled growl. "We have to get to wherever the fuck he's taking him."

"We can't take Julian's car," Ash points out. "It's a fucking wreck."

Gage lets out a breath and tugs at his lip, nodding. "I'll call in a favor," he says. "It's all we've got."

Thank fuck they have so many people who owe them favors. Thank fuck they're so well connected in this city.

"How long will that take?" I ask him. We're still outside the city, so there's no fucking telling.

When Gage looks at me, I can tell he's thinking the same thing, and my stomach clenches with worry. He grabs his phone and makes the call, talking in a low, urgent voice to whoever's on the line. Gage gives them our location, and I want to ask for an ETA, but at the same time, I don't want to know. If it's too long, I'm not going to be able to handle it, but what the fuck else can we do?

I feel outside my body in a way. Panic and anger swirling inside me in a violent storm. That high I felt earlier is completely gone. It feels like that was a different person. All I can think is that Julian is going to take another person from me. Someone else I care about so much. I can't let that happen.

"We can track him," Ash says, sounding like he just remembered that. I don't blame him. All of our heads are fucked up right now. He pulls out his phone and taps into the software we downloaded onto Julian's phone. It shows us a little red arrow, indicating where Julian is in our car.

So we know where he's going at least, but we have no way of following him yet.

We troop back up to the road, all of us glancing anxiously in the direction our ride will be coming every few seconds.

Watching isn't going to make it come any faster, but what else can we do?

I spare a thought that this must be how Julian felt at that party earlier tonight. Scared and angry, pushed to the limit but out of options. The only

difference is that he fucking deserved it.

Time keeps passing, and the little arrow gets farther and farther away. There's no sign yet of the car Gage called for, and I can't wait any longer.

Another car comes down the road, and since Gage doesn't react when he looks over at it, I know it's not the one we're waiting for. But I've had enough. I can't wait anymore. Not knowing that Priest is in trouble.

Without even really thinking about it, I step in front of the car as it approaches where we're huddled on the side of the road. I'm almost moving on autopilot, risking being hit if the driver doesn't stop in time.

I hear one of the men call my name, but I don't move out of the way, and the car comes to a screeching halt just a few feet in front of me.

As soon as it stops, I grab the door handle and wrench it open, sticking the gun in my hand in the guy's face. He looks startled and then afraid when he sees my masked face, but I don't give a shit.

"Get out of the car," I say, my voice surprisingly even considering how frantic I feel.

The guy's eyes go even wider, and he scrambles to get out, grabbing his phone and stumbling out of the car to the road.

"Let's go!" I call to the others, getting behind the wheel as Gage, Ash, and Knox pile into the car quickly.

We leave the man in the dust as I floor it, fingers clenched on the steering wheel. I'm driving erratically, weaving back and forth, and my hands are shaking so much I can barely keep the wheel straight.

Gage looks like he wants to say something from the passenger seat, but he doesn't. Ash is in the back with Knox, giving me directions as he follows the tracking on his phone.

"Left here," he says, and I yank the car in that direction, bumping over the curb a bit as I send us shooting down a side street.

I blow through a stop sign, and it's a good thing that it's late enough that there aren't that many people on the road. Because I can't care about traffic laws or any of that when Priest's life is hanging in the balance like this.

At one point, Gage reaches over and rights the wheel, guiding me away from the side of the road and back into my own lane. I've got so much adrenaline running through me, and my brain is just playing memories with Priest on a loop.

I think about how we didn't get along at all when I first got here, and how much he hated me. How he wanted me dead. Looking back just makes

it even more painful because we've come so far. All I can think about is the shit I haven't said to him and the wild desperation in Julian's face.

He told us he wouldn't be lenient next time we crossed him, and we crossed him in a pretty big fucking way.

We end up in a warehouse district near the docks, and I bring the car to a halt in front of a line of buildings that stretches for several blocks, then yank my mask off. The men have already taken off theirs, and their faces are shadowed in the interior of the car.

It's dark all around us except the light from the few street lamps that line the sides of the street, and it seems deserted at this time of night.

The whole place is quiet, and the silence is almost eerie.

"Which one?" I bite out, looking at Ash in the rearview mirror.

"I don't know," he mutters with a grimace. "I can't pinpoint which building. But he's here somewhere."

The tension in my body only increases at that. There are a ton of buildings on this row, and they could be in any of them. That's not fucking helping at all.

We're close. We're so fucking close to where Julian is, yet so far. And Julian had a head start on us. A pretty fucking big one. He's had too much time. Anything could have happened, and the longer we wait, the more chances bad shit has to happen.

I get out of the car and start walking to the closest building. The windows are dark, and when I peer through, all I can see is dusty boxes and vague covered shapes.

Not this one.

We go down the line, checking each building for signs of life or a struggle, but we don't find anything, and the longer it takes, the clearer it becomes we're not going to be able to do this on foot. There's just too many buildings to search.

But what else can we do? That thought comes to me again, and I'm almost sick with it. We have to keep looking. We have to—

The ringing of a phone splits the silence of the night, and I glance over to see Gage pulling his phone out of his pocket.

He scowls down at the screen, and I know instantly it's Julian and hurry over.

"Where the fuck are you?" Gage says as soon as he answers, putting the phone on speaker.

At first, there's no sound, other than the slight crackling of the call coming through. Then the screen goes black for a split second, only to fill with the image of Julian's face.

He's put it on a video call.

He swings the phone around then we see Priest. He's chained up, bloody and sagging in the restraints. Julian moves back into the frame and jabs Priest in the arm with his finger, digging it into a clearly open wound.

Priest flinches in pain, but doesn't cry out. I can see the muscles in his jaw working, and he's straining, trying to hold back the scream.

I don't know what Julian has been doing to him, but there's blood running down that arm, and Priest's chest heaves as he pants for breath.

"I know you took my money," Julian spits. "I know you did. I want it back. You give me my fucking money back or I'll kill him. We've been having a great time getting to know each other." He digs his finger even harder into that wound and Priest closes his eyes, agony flashing over his face. "But I'll end it right here if you don't give me my shit back."

The agony on Priest's face makes me feel agonized too. He could be anywhere, and there's nothing we can do if we don't know where the fuck he is.

Something monstrous rises up inside me on the heels of that agony though. I feel like I'm about to explode out of my skin. I've never wanted to kill someone as much as I want to kill Julian fucking Maduro in this moment.

"Fuck you," I spit, letting all my rage and hatred come out in those two words.

Julian sneers. "I should have killed you when I had the chance," he says. "You and that bitch I married. Her pussy was the only thing I needed, and I should have gotten rid of her when she gave me what I wanted."

Blood roars in my ears, and I can barely hear Julian as he keeps talking, over the pulse pounding rage that I feel.

"Doesn't your friend mean more to you than money?" he's saying, taunting us all now. "I thought you were all family or some stupid shit like that. Would you really let him die over money that doesn't even fucking belong to you?"

He sounds angry, but so sure of himself. So sure he has the upper fucking hand. He knows how much we care about each other and that this is the best way to manipulate us.

Rage boils up inside me, and if there was a way to reach through the phone and kill someone, I'd do it in a heartbeat. Out of frame, he does something else to Priest, and we hear the grunt of pain that follows.

I stare hard at the phone, taking in what I can see, and then, all of a sudden, I have a moment of perfect clarity. Like all the desperation and anger and worry distills down into something that points me to exactly what I need to see.

There's a window off to the side in the room where Julian is holding Priest. Just in the corner of the window, I can see a green highway sign. I can't read what the sign says, but that doesn't matter. The building has a view of the highway, which means there aren't any other structures on that side of it to block the view.

Only the last row of buildings in this area are close enough to see the highway, and there are only two in that row. One of them is boarded up and abandoned, and I don't think Julian would have taken the time to pry the boards off the windows and doors when he had Priest in tow and knew we would be coming after him.

Which means he has to be in one place.

"Give me my money back, or I'll kill him," Julian says. "And I'll fucking enjoy it." He ends the call, and the screen goes black again.

Knox looks like he's about to explode, and Gage and Ash just look angry and sick. I look at all three of them.

"I know where Priest is."

RIVER

“WHAT DO YOU mean you know where he is?” Gage asks. He’s frowning, but there’s a spark of hope in his eyes that I’m telling the truth.

“I saw the window when Julian was gloating,” I tell him. “I could see a highway sign. Only two buildings here have a view of the highway.”

I explain to him about the one building being boarded up, and how Julian would probably have been too desperate to try to un-board it. Which leaves one building for us to check.

Gage looks at me with intense respect on his face. There’s stark relief in Ash’s eyes, and Knox looks like he’s ready to break into that building and start killing people.

I feel the same way.

We get back in the car because it’s faster than walking, and I get us to that building in record time, parking a little ways off so we can scope the place out.

Julian’s had enough time to set something up if he wanted to, so we have to play this carefully, even though I know we all just want to run in and start shooting.

There’s a guard posted outside the building, and it hits me that this must be a spot that Julian knows well. It’s not random that he chose this place. This is probably the spot Lorenzo used for his trafficking business. That’s why Julian brought Priest here. Because there are already guards around this place.

Knox is already moving before any of us can come up with a plan. He moves more quietly than I would’ve thought possible for someone his size,

slipping up behind the guard before the man has time to turn around and see him.

The guard has about two seconds to struggle before Knox snaps his neck and leaves him in a heap on the ground.

We move up to his body, and Ash rummages around until he comes up with a key card.

“Good work,” Gage murmurs. He takes the card from Ash and slips it into the lock on the door. The sensor light on it flashes green, and the door clicks open.

We slip inside, trying to be quiet and not give ourselves away just yet.

It’s a big fucking place. There are corridors crisscrossing through it, and lots of random rooms and alcoves and dead ends.

We can’t move as fast as I’d want to like this, since we don’t want to tip anyone off that we’re here, and it’s frustrating.

Every time we open a door and find nothing but boxes or bags and tarps behind it, it’s like a knife in my damn heart.

But as we move toward the back of the building, the sound of Julian’s voice becomes audible. He’s talking to someone. Monologuing, really, which means he’s probably tormenting Priest. The thought of it makes my heart leap right back up into my throat, and I grit my teeth as we keep moving forward.

After another moment, Knox peers around a corner up ahead of us and holds up a hand to stop us.

“Guards,” he murmurs in a low voice when we gather around him. “At least five of them, lined up in the hallway with a door at the end. That has to be where Julian is holding Priest.”

We’re outnumbered, so we’ll need to be quiet about it as we take out the guards. We coordinate our attack with a few whispered words and silent gestures, working out a strategy to take as many of them down in quick succession as possible. If we can get them all before any of them can sound the alarm, we might still be able to take Julian by surprise.

Knox will go first, and he plasters himself to the wall next to the corner he peered around, readying his weapon and steeling himself. He’s usually the type to go in guns blazing, no hesitation, so I know he’s nervous about this. It’s his cousin’s life on the line, the only one of his “brothers” with whom he shares actual DNA, and I’m sure he’d give anything to switch

places with Priest—to be the one Julian took, if it meant Priest was still free and unharmed.

We'll get him out. We can do this.

Gage takes his place right next to Knox, and Ash and I ready ourselves behind him, weapons drawn.

My gaze shifts to Knox, and his eyes glitter in the dim light as he holds up a hand, counting down with his fingers.

Three.

Two.

One.

Moving as a unit, we stream around the corner. Knox takes out the first guard, while Gage goes for the second. Ash and I race past them, heading for the third and fourth guards. Our attack is so sudden and unexpected that we manage to take out all four before they can raise the alarm, but the fifth man ducks out of the way as Knox drops the body of the first and moves to attack him.

The remaining guard grabs his gun and starts shooting in our direction, and we jump back, trying to scramble for cover.

“Fuck!” Knox curses.

More of Julian’s guards come rushing out of the room, armed and ready to fight, and it turns into chaos. The guards yell to each other, taking shots at us where they can. They rush down the hall, trying to overtake us in the same way we just tried to do to their buddies.

Knox roars his fury now that being quiet is a pipe dream, and he lashes out, knocking the guards back and taking a couple on with his bare hands, not really seeming to give a shit that they’re firing on him.

“Knox!” Gage calls out, ducking into one of the empty rooms as a storm of bullets rings out. “Get the fuck back here before you get shot!”

It’s hard to see in the chaos if Knox gets hurt, but when he ends up next to me, he seems alright. He’s breathing hard, and there’s fire in his eyes. These fuckers are standing between us and finishing this. Between us and rescuing Priest.

We can’t let that happen.

Bullets fly as we return fire, taking out what guards we can. They shoot back, and there are so many of them that we can’t move forward. They have us pinned down in a little corner, and it’s all we can do to defend ourselves.

The whole time I'm shooting, trying to make some progress, I can't help the creeping feeling of terror that settles in my gut like acid.

What if Julian has heard the commotion and is killing Priest right now?

Logically, I know he probably isn't. He wouldn't resort to that unless he had to, since Priest is the only leverage he has against us. If he kills him, he'll have nothing to bargain with.

So I keep pressing forward, holding on to that thought and letting it drive me.

Priest is still alive, and I have to get to him.

When Gage takes out one of Julian's guards, sending him careening into a wall with a hole in his head, I see an opening. Without thinking, without hesitating for even a fraction of a second, I take it.

"Cover me!" I call to Gage as I dart forward, slipping down the hallway toward the room where Priest is being kept.

Gage curses, but he does what I asked. He, Ash, and Knox take on the remaining guards, holding them off while I slip into the room. I glance around quickly to get my bearings, and my heart seizes when I see the place where Priest is chained to the wall.

Julian lunges for Priest, and I draw my gun again and shoot at him, desperate to keep him away from the blond man.

I manage to clip Julian's shoulder, and I lunge forward to finish the job, aiming for his head. Before I can get a shot off, Julian runs at me. Pure hate and disdain contort his features, and I try to duck back out of the way, but he nails me before I can get too far, bringing me down to the ground.

The wind is almost knocked out of me as we land on the hard concrete floor. My gun goes flying, and when I try to scabble for it, Julian pins me down.

"Get the fuck off me!" I shout, grappling with him.

"I'm going to fucking kill you, you fucking bitch," he growls. "You can finally be with your precious sister in hell."

Any other time, I would have bristled at the idea that Hannah would go anywhere near hell if a place like that even existed. But now I'm too focused on the fight.

My gun went skittering across the floor in the struggle, and I don't see where it went. That leaves me with just my bare hands as I try to fight off Julian. I put a hand on his face and push him away from me, trying to flip our positions so I can get on top.

It takes two tries, but I finally manage to roll us over. I straddle him, grabbing a fistful of his hair and slamming his head into the hard floor with a dull thud. He roars in pain, but instead of leaving him dazed like I hoped it would, the pain just seems to send a wave of adrenaline through him. He lashes out at me, slapping me across the face hard enough that my ears ring.

I jam my knee down, aiming for his groin, and he rolls away just in time to avoid it.

“You fucking bitch!” he screams, sounding wild and unhinged. “You cunt!”

I don’t waste my breath trading insults with him. And I don’t give him a chance to get away from me, grabbing him and putting all my weight into it. He struggles underneath me and ends up elbowing me in the stomach, winding me for long enough that he can flip our positions again and get an advantage over me.

All at once, I’m hit with a vivid flashback, one so real that it’s like I’ve been forced backward in time.

Julian’s face is hovering over mine, twisted into a mask of rage and desperation, and it reminds me of his father and the night I killed him.

Lorenzo and I fought just like this, grappling and trying to get one up on each other, each determined to get the upper hand. All I knew in that moment was that Lorenzo couldn’t live through the fight. He couldn’t be allowed to walk out of that bathroom and go on with his life. I had to kill him. There was no other choice.

It’s the same now.

Julian has to die here. Tonight.

If he gets free, if he manages to get the better of me, he’ll probably kill everyone I love to get away from this. To get his own revenge. And that’s *not* how this story is going to end.

It can’t be.

A fresh wave of energy pours through my exhausted limbs, and I fight with everything I have, just like I did that night years ago. Squirming on the floor, I keep Julian from getting his hands around my neck, and I try again to knee him in the balls.

But he’s fast. And even more than that, he’s fighting reckless and dirty.

Lorenzo was caught off-guard when I got to him. He was at the top of his game, and he thought he was untouchable. But Julian has already lost

everything. The only thing he has left to lose is his life, and it gives him a strength that's hard to top.

He manages to knock me back against the floor hard enough that I have to blink stars away from my vision, and before I can recover, he gets his hands around my throat.

I thrash under him, trying to kick him, scratch him, anything. But he uses his weight to pin me down and tightens his fingers, choking me.

My breath sputters out, and fear fills me as my lungs burn. For a second, I feel like I'm that helpless little girl I once was again. Trapped somewhere, being hurt and used with no hope of fighting back. Julian's face blurs as the fear climbs, and he could be his father, leaning over me, whispering shitty little sweet nothings.

It would be easy to give in to that fear and the memories, but it hits me that I'm not that same person anymore. I'm not a helpless little girl, and I'm not in this alone.

I think about Priest, who's still chained to the wall, watching all of this go down without being able to do anything to help me or stop it. I think about the other Kings, still fighting off the guards from the sounds of the gunshots that are still ringing out around us.

I think about Knox and his lessons on how to inflict pain. How he told me that anything could be a weapon if you know how to make it one.

Hooks.

The hooks.

With a surge of inspiration, I yank one of my earrings out of my ear and stab Julian right in the eye with it.

He shrieks like a wounded animal and reels back, and that's the opening I need. I break his hold on my neck, gasping for breath and trying to find my footing. I can't give in now. This might be the only chance I have.

Out of the corner of my eye, I see my gun on the stained and dirty floor nearby. It's just out of reach, but close enough that I can lunge for it. I look to Julian, and he's coming for me again, blood pouring down his face from his punctured eye.

My fingers close around the gun.

I swing around and aim in the same gesture, pulling the trigger and shooting Julian Maduro right in the forehead.

Time seems to move in slow motion as his head whips backward from the force of the shot.

Then he drops to the ground.

Dead.

My ears ring from the sound of the gunshot, and my neck aches from where Julian was strangling me, but there's no time to catch my breath or anything.

The guys are still fighting the guards, and rather than giving up, his security detail kicks up a notch when they realize Julian is down—probably realizing there's no chance for a cease-fire now, and that this is truly a kill or be killed situation.

I leap back into the fray, shooting one guard in the back before he can lunge for Ash, and then spinning to elbow another one in the face so Knox can come barreling through to take him out.

There aren't that many left, and we manage to pick them off one by one until we're the only ones standing.

A sudden quiet falls over the warehouse space when the last guard goes down in a heap.

It feels almost odd, considering how loud it was before. No gunshots, no yelling, none of Julian's toxic ranting about how he's going to kill us all.

Just silence and the pounding of my heart.

I don't look at Julian's body. I know he's fucking dead. I saw the bullet hole in his forehead, and that's good enough for me. He's not getting up from that.

Instead, my gaze goes right to Priest. And then my feet follow, carrying me toward him as fast as I can go.

PRIEST

MY BODY ACHES and throbs from everything Julian did to torture me. Cutting me with knives and then digging his fingers into the cuts, punching me, asking me questions and then slapping me hard in the face when he didn't get the answers he wanted.

I took all of it as silently as I could, not giving him the satisfaction of showing pain while he took his anger and desperation out on me.

But no matter how much agony the injuries to my body have caused, it was nothing compared to being chained to the wall, unable to do anything, while Julian tried to kill River.

As soon as I see her coming toward me, I strain against the restraints, trying to get to her. To touch her and make sure she's alright. Nothing has ever mattered more.

She grabs the key to the chains down off the wall where Julian stashed it and starts freeing me, her movements jerky and desperate.

The very second I'm free, I grab her. Just having her here, having my hands on her, helps a little bit. She's solid and real and alive.

The whole time I was watching her be hurt by Julian, fighting him off, struggling to keep the upper hand and not let him get the better of her, all I could think about was how there was nothing I could do.

Just like with Jade.

I was stuck watching her, and my brain screamed at me to do something—*anything*—to make sure she didn't die.

My wrists are scraped raw and bruised from how hard I fought against those chains, but none of that matters now. I barely feel the injuries Julian inflicted with River right here in my arms.

She grabs me back, running her hands over me, either checking to make sure I'm not more hurt than she can see or because she just wants to touch me.

Either is fine.

We grope each other, just for the sensation of touch, going from hugging to looking each other over.

River's dark blue eyes are a little frantic as she searches my face. Worry burns in their depths, and I can imagine how much it hurt her when Julian made the video call to show them what he was doing to me. I never would've wanted her to see that, but that's the kind of cold bastard Julian is.

Was.

Now he's nothing but a pile of blood and bones on the floor.

"Fuck. I'm so glad you're okay," River breathes out. "God, I was so fucking—"

She breaks off, shaking her head, and when she looks up at me again, her eyes are shiny and glassy.

Instead of telling her that everything is okay, I lean down and kiss her. It makes more pain throb in my face from my split lip and the bruises on my cheek, but I don't give a fuck. The kiss is tinged with coppery blood and the taste of River, and I bite at her lips like I'm trying to get the skin to split, trying to let her soul out so I can capture it.

I want every part of her. Every little thing I can get. I don't want anything held back between us. That fear of losing her, of being unable to do anything but watch her die, turns every emotion trapped in my chest up to eleven. I kiss her like a starving man, like I'm drowning and I need to keep breathing her in to survive.

My hands roam over her body, finding bare skin through ripped patches of fabric and seeking out more. Everything in me calls me to keep going. To never stop.

Something has snapped inside me—the same kind of emotion I felt after she got taken and held captive by Julian, what feels like forever ago now. It's a wild, unhinged need to make her mine so completely that nothing and no one can ever take her away.

There's so much raw emotion, more than I'm used to, coursing through me. And instead of trying to hold back the tide of it, I just let it flow through me. I let it take over, allowing myself to run on instinct and pure need instead of trying to think my way through this.

River clings to me, and I turn our bodies so I can press her against the rough brick of the wall where I was being restrained before. My lips go from her mouth down to her neck, kissing and biting, licking and sucking at her skin.

She moans my name, clinging to my shirt, and I let out a ragged breath at the pure perfection of that sound.

I can already feel my cock thickening, growing hard and aching in my pants, and I grind against River, pressing my shaft between her legs.

She moans again, spreading her legs a bit, and I wedge my thigh between them, pressing it right where I know she wants it.

“Priest!” she gasps out, her eyes wild with desire. “Fuck.”

“Come on,” I mumble against her lips when I go back for another kiss. “Show me. Show me what you want.”

River grinds against my thigh, humping it with wild abandon. She doesn't seem to care that we're in this warehouse, and that there are bodies of people she and my brothers killed scattered around the space. Neither do I. All I can see or feel or think about is her.

Her, and the incredible heat as she grinds on my thigh, chasing more friction, more pleasure.

I kiss her deeply, thrusting my tongue into her mouth and seeking out the exquisite taste that's all River. That indefinable, addictive flavor that I can never get enough of. I can feel how much she likes this, how wet she's getting for me as she drags her pussy over my thigh, and I like that too.

But it's not enough.

It will never be enough.

Desperately, I reach down between us and shove at my pants, undoing my fly and button to free my cock. My shaft is hard and leaking at the tip, aching to be inside her. It's impossible to remember a time when I got this turned on this fast, but the circumstances are different here.

This is us being driven by a need to be together, to reaffirm that we're alive and still breathing. And for once, I don't hold myself back.

I shove her clothes out of the way, ripping through the fabric of her dress to make enough space for what I want. What we both need. I rip her panties off and lift her up, ignoring the screaming pain in my body as I drive into her with no hesitation.

River grunts deeply, almost as animalistic as I feel in this moment.

“Oh my god,” she gasps out. “Fuck!”

She holds on to me, her arms around my neck and her body braced between mine and the wall. Her legs go around my waist, and we're locked together, body to body, with my cock so deep inside her it feels like I can feel every part of her.

It's the first time I've ever been inside of her like this. The first time we've ever fucked. We're both covered in smears of blood, most of it mine, but neither of us seems to care about that.

Her body is tight and wet and perfect, and it's all I can focus on. The way it clings to me, the way it reacts every time I move.

"You feel so fucking good," I grunt. "Better than I ever imagined."

Her eyes are dark with lust, and she moans, grinding against me, trying to get me to move more.

"Please. Shit, Priest, please," she pants, begging me with breathless, desperate words. "I need—more! Please."

I draw out slowly, savoring the feel of her warm, wet walls trying to suck me back in. Then I snap my hips and drive back into her, fucking her hard. I haven't done this in so long, but it's hard to forget the rhythm of it. Especially when I'm being driven by my most base instincts, giving in to what my body wants and letting it take over.

I couldn't stop if I wanted to at this point, and every thrust proves that.

I'm breathless and aching, my wounds bleeding harder from the exertion of what we're doing, but that doesn't matter.

River doesn't seem to care either, clinging to me like nothing could pry her away. Her nails dig into my shoulders, and when she arches up to kiss me again, I can taste the blood in it.

That doesn't stop us either. Nothing can stop us.

"Fuck," I groan. "River. You're so—"

My voice chokes off, and I thrust into her even harder, slamming her against the wall. I bite at her lower lip and then trail my mouth to her neck, biting there too.

"What?" she pants. "So what? Tell me."

"You're fucking amazing. So goddamn good. Tight and hot and perfect. Like I knew you would be."

She moans at that, and I can feel her pussy throbbing, clenching around me like a vise.

I barely even know what I'm saying at this point. The words just keep spilling out of my mouth, and I feel like a beast has come out of me that

only wants one thing—to devour her. To consume her and keep her close forever.

Nothing can take her from me.

Nothing and no one.

I'm never letting her go.

"Never," I tell her roughly, panting against her ear. "Never. You're never going anywhere."

She shakes her head, going tight around me again.

"I don't want to," she manages, her voice a harsh whimper. "Want to stay with you. Fuck. Priest, please. I'm so—fuck, I'm so close."

Hearing her say that makes my blood beat faster in my body. Suddenly, I'm consumed with the need to have her come for me. To watch her fall apart and know that I did that to her. To feel her convulse around my cock.

My hips move faster, fucking her harder, pounding into her body with everything I have.

Her voice gets higher pitched when she moans my name, and it only takes a little bit of that before she's coming undone, coming with a soft scream on my cock.

I can feel the way she tightens around me. The way the shivers of pleasure work through her body, making her tremble against me. She pants for breath, mouth open and eyes unfocused, and she's never been more beautiful than she is in this moment.

It just spurs my desire even higher, and I press my forehead against hers, slamming into her, both of us sweaty and covered in blood.

"Oh god," she moans, and her body doesn't stop shaking. Her eyes fall closed, and it looks like if I wasn't holding her up, she might have already crumpled to the floor.

I feel her body spasming hard again, and she's either coming for a second time or it's the same orgasm rolling on, the aftershocks turning into a second wave that makes her cry out, tears spilling down her cheeks.

I'm swept up in it. In her pleasure and mine. In the way she looks, wrecked and turned on, and the way it all makes me feel. I've never felt more connected to her than I do right now, and after everything that happened, that makes sense.

It's all so much, and I can't hold back any longer. The pleasure builds and builds, then overflows, and I come inside her with a groan.

That seems to go on forever too. In the moment of release, time seems to slow down for a heartbeat and my breath mingles with hers. We gaze into each other's faces from less than an inch away, lips brushing. It's a perfect, crystalized moment, heat driving all of it, bringing us impossibly closer together.

I shudder, my cock jerking as I unload inside her, giving her everything. Everything I've been keeping inside all this time. It feels like a release on so many levels, and even though this isn't the first time I've come with her, it almost may as well be. It feels new and different, like something inside me has been washed clean and remade.

I thrust up into her a few more times, feeling my cum spilling out a little with each jerky thrust.

My heart is thundering, and for the moment, I don't feel the pain of my injuries at all. Just the way River shivers against me, and the ragged breaths she takes as she comes down.

All I can feel is her.

RIVER

MY BODY HUMS WITH PLEASURE, and I fight for breath as my lungs struggle to get enough oxygen. It's such an intense feeling, having Priest inside me, his cock still semi-hard and buried to the hilt.

Even though I've had sex more recently than Priest has, I've never done it with him, and the hugeness of this moment mixed with the height of my feelings when I thought I might lose him makes the whole thing really fucking intense.

But good.

So goddamn good.

I stare into Priest's eyes as he slowly pulls back. They're such a pale blue, icy even as they burn with pleasure and heat. His cock still pulses gently inside me, his body pressed against mine, pinning me to the wall.

There are smears of blood on his face, trailing from his lip, and there are bruises and cuts on him, showing through the places where his clothes are torn and dirty.

It's clear he's been through hell, but he looks fucking beautiful to me.

I reach up and trail my fingers over his cheek, and he holds my gaze as something wordless passes between us. Something neither of us has a name for, but we both clearly need.

Slowly, my head clears of that all-encompassing pleasure and relief, and I become aware of where we are again. The fact that we're in a warehouse in the middle of the night, surrounded by a bunch of dead bodies, hits me like a freight train. The other King of Chaos are all here too, and I blink and then look over Priest's shoulder.

The three of them had started to clean up the mess of the fight while I freed Priest, but now they've stopped, and all eyes are on us. They're clearly turned on by what they saw, differing degrees of lust and heat in their eyes.

"You know," Ash murmurs, breaking the silence as he usually does. "I almost want to go find some other dangerous drug lord to take on, just so I can see that happen again."

He grins brightly, and it's a relief to see him smiling, after how tense and worried we all were before we got here to save Priest.

Gage rolls his eyes, but even he can't hide the heat in his gaze as they all stare at us.

I focus back on Priest for a second, cupping his cheek.

"Are you okay?" I whisper.

All of the men know about Priest's hang-ups with sex, hence his nickname, but this feels like something between us. What we just did was crazy intense, and we're both still shuddering from it. I almost can't believe Priest is still standing after everything he's been through tonight.

He leans in and rests his forehead against mine, closing his eyes for a second. His shoulders rise and fall as he drags in a deep breath and then looks at me again.

"I am now," he murmurs. "You're alive."

I smile softly and nod because he's right. I am alive. And so is he.

"I promise I'll try to stay that way," I tell him. "You do the same. Please. I can't lose you."

Priest nods and presses closer against me, kissing me again. I can feel all the emotion in it, all the things he either doesn't know how to say or doesn't have the words for. I wrap myself up in it and kiss him back, trying to give him back all of that and make sure he knows I feel the same.

Finally, we separate.

I don't even bother cleaning up his cum, just letting it trail down my thigh as I fix my clothes. My dress ripped in some places, and my panties are somewhere on the floor of the warehouse, but I don't give a fuck.

Priest tucks his cock away, leaning on me a little as he zips up his pants. He's clearly hurting and exhausted, and I wrap an arm around him as we rejoin the others, letting him put more of his weight on me.

"Should we do anything with his body?" I ask, jerking my head in the direction of where Julian's corpse is still sprawled out where I dropped him.

“Nah. I say we just burn this whole place down,” Knox says. “Easier than trying to move all this shit, and I’m not dumping another body in the river just for it to show back up again.”

That’s a damn good point.

“We’ve still got some accelerant,” he continues. “The warehouse should go up quick. It’s all boxes and shit.”

His words make me think of Ivan St. James, of course. We still don’t know who the fuck dredged his body up. We’ll have to get back on digging into that once this shit is dealt with. Part of me wonders if it was Julian, and whether he lied about it the same way he lied about so many things.

It would be convenient if it was him, since he’s gone now, but it’s not like we can ask him to be sure.

Knox’s plan is the easiest way to handle this, so we do as he suggested. Just like we did with Julian’s gym, we spray the accelerant around the warehouse, trying to get as much of it as possible, and then we light the building up, walking away from it as it burns.

It feels good to be walking away from it together. To all be in one piece and to know Julian’s dead once and for all. He might have turned this night into a longer one than we planned for, but at least he got his in the end.

Priest will heal, and maybe sometime soon we’ll all be able to relax finally.

It’s a relief to head back home after the night we’ve had. It feels like we left for the party days ago, and like this whole ordeal has been one endless mess that could have taken any length of time. It definitely doesn’t seem like just a few hours.

Harley barks excitedly as soon as we come through the door, jumping around and wagging his tail like he hasn’t seen us in weeks.

I don’t blame him for that.

After everything, I’m the kind of tired that feels bone deep, and everyone else looks as exhausted as I feel.

I remember standing here in the living room before we left for the party, kissing each of them, feeling like we were invincible. It’s a different feeling now, but I’m so fucking relieved to still have them all here with me.

I move to Gage, who has blood splattered on his white dress shirt. His tie is long since gone, and his hair is a mess. His green eyes are a little wild when I look close, and I know it was hard for him to see the plan go so horribly out of control tonight, just like it did at the church. He considers

himself the leader, and we all look to him that way, and it weighs heavier on him when things don't work out.

I reach up and touch his face, smoothing one hand up his cheek. Gage gives me a small smile, and it even almost reaches his eyes. He pulls me in close and kisses my forehead before drawing back to look at me again.

"You're a fucking warrior," he murmurs. "Never think differently. After what you did tonight, nothing can stop you."

"No, it can't. Not when I have you guys at my back," I murmur, and he's still smiling as he releases me.

I move to Ash next. It feels like a very, very long time ago that the two of us were going at it in that closet in Alec Beckham's house, but when I look at him, I know he's thinking about it too.

He grins tiredly and reaches for my hand. He kisses my palm and then each of my fingers, ignoring the fact that they're dirty and streaked with blood.

"I'd tell you all the things I want to do to you after how bad ass you were tonight, but I think I'd fall asleep halfway through." He chuckles. "Rain check?"

"Always," I tell him, leaning up to kiss his cheek.

Knox is next. I've never seen him as pissed off as he was tonight, standing there in helpless fury while we had to watch Julian drag Priest away.

It's not his style to stand down, and there's still some of that anger in his face, in the way he holds himself. I feel like he's going to need to get this frustration out somehow, even if things are over now.

As soon as I get close to him, he yanks me right up against his body and buries his face in the crook of my neck. He breathes me in, his fingers digging into my hip as he holds on tight.

Neither of us says anything for a long moment, and then he pulls back and he looks a little better. Of all the men—except for Priest—he's the most blood-spattered, and I know he threw himself into that fight hard because he needed to kill and hit and hurt to deal with his feelings.

"You killed that fucker," he says, reaching up to grip my chin. There's so much pride in his voice, and I smile at the sound of it.

"I didn't make him suffer the way he deserved," I admit, grimacing.

Knox shakes his head. "Nah. He suffered. He thought he was going to get the better of us, and you beat him at his own game. He died knowing he

was a fucking failure, basically pissing himself with his own fear of what was coming. That's what matters."

Hearing those words makes me feel better about how Julian's death went down. Of all the guys, Knox understands this part of me the best, and if he says it was good enough, then maybe it was.

I let out a little breath and then move to Priest.

He's still standing, but it's clear he's worn down and in pain.

I reach for his hand, and he takes it, threading our fingers together. "We should get you cleaned up," I tell him. "You look terrible."

A little smile lights his face, and he pulls me in closer to him. "I know."

I kiss him, lingering soft and gentle with my mouth against his. Something has shifted between us after everything that happened tonight, like something finally slotting into place. It makes everything else feel sharper and more intense.

We've kissed plenty of times, but doing it now feels like coming home.

"Come on," I say, tugging him up the stairs after me.

He moves slowly, wincing from time to time when his wounds protest the movement, but he doesn't stop. We get to his bedroom, and I help him strip out of his clothes carefully.

Without them, it's clear to see just what Julian did to him. There are cuts up and down his arms, bleeding sluggishly, and bruises on his face and chest where Julian hit him, starting to bloom in different colors.

His clothes are crusted with blood and sweat, and I toss them to the floor and kick them to one side.

Luckily, none of his cuts are big enough to require stitches. Julian was going for maximum pain, but he wasn't trying to kill him or make him bleed out while he tortured him.

"Get in the shower," I tell Priest. "I'll be there in a second."

He does as I say, stepping into the bathroom. A second later, I hear the water turn on and he lets out a low hiss, probably when the hot water hits some of those cuts.

I quickly strip out of my own clothes, letting the remains of my dress fall to the floor, then I hurry to join him in the shower.

He watches me as I approach, not saying anything. I step into the spray with him, and the water runs red as it rushes down to swirl around the drain.

Priest's eyes are intent, seeing everything the way they always have, but there's nothing I don't like about that now. It's not the same way he used to

look at me, like he was trying to see through me and find something, anything, that would give him a reason to make good on his threats to kill me.

Now he's just... looking.

Because he wants to.

Because he likes what he sees.

We stand there in silence for a bit, just letting the shower water take away some of the aches and pains of the fight we were in tonight.

Priest is the most banged up for sure, but I can feel the aftermath of my fight with Julian as I stand there. There's an ache in my neck where he tried to strangle me, and I have bruises on my body from where we slammed each other into the concrete floor.

That tiredness is even more apparent with the heat of the shower soaking into my muscles and bones, but I keep myself from giving in to it just yet.

After a few moments of silence, Priest speaks up.

"I've been wanting to do that with you for so long," he says, his voice soft. "I was afraid, and that was holding me back. But in that warehouse, watching you fight Julian and not being able to help you..." He shakes his head, shuddering a little as if the very thought of it is horrible to him. "I had so much regret that I let fear hold me back from doing the things I wanted to do. From showing you how I feel about you."

"There's nothing to regret," I tell him, my throat going tight. "Even if... if things had gone differently with Julian, and we'd never gotten a chance for anything more, I already knew how you felt about me. I *know*. You show me every day, in so many little ways."

Priest blinks, as if he's surprised by my words. I think sometimes he still sees himself as cold and closed-off, the unreadable man of ice. But the truth is, that's not who he is anymore. He's still outwardly less expressive than the other men, and that will probably never change. But in bits and pieces, in small moments and little gestures, he's let me see who he is.

And even though I've been dying for him to fuck me, dying to feel that connection with him, it's not because I didn't know how he felt about me.

I just... wanted him.

I still do.

Resting my hands lightly on his chest, I tilt my head up, going up onto my toes a little as I find his lips with my own.

The kiss deepens, and we both lean into it, giving it all we've got.

He's hurt, and I don't want to make it worse, so I try to pull away from him. But he won't let me. He wraps his arms around me, keeping me close.

"I need you, River," he murmurs, and I can hear the truth of it ringing in his words. "I need you so fucking much."

My body responds to that immediately, humming with the same desire. We just fucked in that warehouse, but that was different. That was desperation and fear driving us to prove to each other that we were still alive and okay.

This is something else entirely.

Something deeper and more deliberate.

A choice, not just an instinctual reaction to almost losing each other.

We wash up quickly, running our hands over each other's bodies as we do. Priest doesn't even flinch when I touch his wounds, so caught up in putting his hands on me, touching and kissing every inch of skin he can reach.

We end up on the bed once we're out of the shower and dried off, and I help Priest lie down on his back so he won't have to move too much and put strain on his body. Once he's situated, I crawl up and straddle him.

He's hard again, fully hard. His cock juts out from between his legs, flushed and already wet at the tip. And it's all for me. I lick my lips and smirk, settling myself over him so I can feel that hard heat against my pussy.

Priest groans, clearly wanting more, but I don't give in just yet. I tease him, dragging my pussy along his hard length but not taking him inside.

His cock pulses against me, getting even thicker, and I fucking love that.

I can't keep up the teasing for very long, though. Not when my body is crying out for him, my pussy throbbing and clenching and too empty.

I steady his cock with one hand and lower myself down over it, putting him inside me.

"Fuck," Priest groans. He tips his head back against the pillow and closes his eyes, breathing raggedly. It doesn't seem like he's in pain, just still getting used to having his cock inside me, and I give him a little time before I start to move.

"You feel so good inside me," I tell him. "I've been waiting so long to feel this. To feel you. Fuck. I needed it so bad, Priest."

His eyes open, and the usual pale blue color is dark and intense.

We hold each other's gazes as I start to move, rising and falling on his cock, taking him all the way down each time. His hands go to my waist, holding on, and his lips part on a moan.

He looks so fucking good like this. Letting himself go, not holding anything back.

"River..." He moans my name, sounding almost delirious.

"I'm here," I tell him. I put my hands on his chest, feeling the strong, steady beat of his heart under my palm. "I'm right here with you."

He nods, a jerky motion that he punctuates by rolling his hips upward.

"I'll never get enough," he pants. "Never. There's never enough of this. Of you."

"You can have as much as you want," I whimper. I clench around him, letting him feel me, and he groans loudly. "I'll never stop wanting you like this. Watching you lose control is so fucking hot."

"How could I help it with you?" he breathes. "When you're so—"

He doesn't get the word out, choking on a moan when I slam myself back down on his cock.

I can tell Priest is getting closer, turned on beyond measure and reaching the point of no return as his orgasm starts bearing down on him.

His fingers tighten on my hips, and he starts bucking up, losing control and fucking up into me. Our bodies slap together, the sound of skin on skin ringing out in his room. I don't want him to have to move, because even though he's so far gone now, I can see the pain in his face.

So I do all the work, pressing him back down and rising and falling faster and harder, riding him like I can't get enough. I lift up and slam back down again and again, fucking myself hard on his cock.

"River!" He practically shouts my name, and he holds on to me for dear life, caught up in the pleasure of it.

I'm right there with him. Heat sparks through me, intense and all-consuming. All I can do is keep moving, chasing the feeling of desire that's threatening to tip me right over the edge.

I love how Priest's control snaps when he's with me. All that pent up passion pouring out. It's all over his face, clear in the way he moves, in the way he holds on to me like he might fall apart completely if he lets go.

It all builds to a frenzy, to a tipping point, and I almost scream his name when I come, the feeling of it hitting me like a ton of bricks. My pussy

clenches around him, and that drags Priest's orgasm out of him, sending him over the edge right after me.

My heart thunders in my chest, and I can feel the tremors wracking Priest's body as we catch our breaths and start to come down. Every so often a jolt of pleasure will hit me, and I shiver each time, licking my lips and letting out a breath.

I settle down onto Priest's chest, careful of his injuries, his cock still inside me.

"Thank you," he murmurs, the sound vibrating against my ear as I tuck my head under his chin.

"For what?"

"For coming for me." His hand finds my hair, stroking through the still-damp strands. "For saving me."

Somehow, I know he's not just talking about tonight. He's talking about all of it, everything that's happened between us since the day we met.

And the truth is, he saved me too.

"I always will," I murmur. "I promise."

He wraps his arms around me and lets out a soft sigh, and we fall asleep like that, our heartbeats syncing into a single rhythm.

RIVER

THE NEXT MORNING, I wake up with Priest's cum drying on my leg and his arms around me. He's already awake, stroking his fingers through my hair lightly.

It's so comfortable and soothing, and for a second, it's hard to believe that the terror and anger of last night happened at all. There's sunlight streaming through the blinds, bathing the room in a soft warmth, and when I lift my head, I can see it lighting up Priest's face as well.

It glances off those sharp cheekbones and hits his icy pale eyes in a way that makes them seem to glow. The bruises and cuts are still on his face, proof of what he went through last night, but he looks content.

He looks like there's nowhere else in the world he'd rather be than here with me right now, and that makes warmth well in my chest and spread all the way down to my fingers and toes.

"Good morning," he murmurs, his voice husky and low from sleep.

It makes me shiver a little to hear it. My body is pleasantly sore from our fucking last night, and I have to agree with him. This a very good morning indeed.

"Morning," I whisper back. I lean up so I can see his face more clearly, searching it for any signs of regret or pain.

There's nothing there but open contentment, and I smile at him and dip my head to kiss him softly.

The hand in my hair tightens a little, and Priest kisses me back, murmuring my name against my lips. He pulls me back down, like he doesn't want to let me go.

“Are you okay?” I ask him, just wanting to make sure. Just wanting to hear him say it.

He chuckles a little, his arms tightening around me.

“Maybe it’s strange to say this the day after being tortured, but it’s been a very long time since I’ve felt this good,” he tells me. “So yeah. I’m okay.”

He drops a kiss to the top of my head, and a soft, pleased sigh rustles through my hair.

I love that. I love feeling him so close to me, and I could stay here forever in this warmth. But unfortunately, we can’t. Not yet.

“We should get up,” I murmur after a while. “I want to get downstairs and check in with the others.”

“Good idea. There should be some news about the fallout from Julian’s death by now.”

Priest kisses me one more time for good measure, and then we get out of bed and throw on some clothes before heading down.

Everything seems different and brighter in the aftermath of Julian’s death. Having it done with, no longer hanging over our heads making everything tense and urgent just feels so good.

I can tell the others feel the same when we come down to the kitchen. Knox is whistling as he cooks, and Ash and Gage are at the table, having a conversation. I don’t know what they’ve been talking about, but it makes Gage laugh, his expression carefree and unbothered.

It’s probably the lightest I’ve ever seen any of them.

Ever since I got here, we’ve been jumping from crisis to crisis. From mission and plan to mission and plan. But now the future is stretched out in front of us, bright and full of potential. It feels like we’re all on top of the world, even after how hard last night got.

Because the important thing is that we got through it. We all came out of it in one piece, and stronger together than we would have been apart.

“So,” Gage says, glancing over as he notices Priest and me walk in. “I checked on that money we rerouted from Julian.”

“You don’t look pissed off, so I’m assuming it’s good news,” I comment, dropping into the chair across from him.

He smiles and turns his laptop so I can see the screen. It’s some kind of banking site, and I see the account has my name on it. And the number for the balance has more zeros in it than I think I’ve ever seen in my life.

“Holy shit,” I breathe.

Gage sits back, a satisfied smirk on his face.

“It’s untraceable,” he says. “Well, it would be very difficult to trace, at least. Someone with the right skill set could do it, but I don’t think we’ll have to worry about that.”

“We had to give Harv a significant cut,” he continues. “For all his help and so he’ll keep his mouth shut about it all. But he’s the best in the business, so it’s worth it.”

“Even if he is a snarky little shit,” Knox puts in, coming over with plates of eggs and toast and bacon for us all.

“He’s a snarky little shit we couldn’t have done this without,” Gage points out.

No one can argue that.

We all tuck into the hot food, and it somehow tastes even better now that all this is behind us. I can’t help but stare at the screen of the laptop from time to time, just blown away by how much money that is.

Even with the parts they had to give away, it’s more money than I’ve ever had associated with me in my life.

“You know I’m not keeping all of this, right?” I tell them, glancing around the table. “It’s in my name, but it’s our money. If I’m going to be a part of your business, then so is this money. It’s a part of it too.” I frown down at my plate. “I’d like to use some of it for Cody. To make sure he’s always taken care of. That’s what Hannah would want.”

“Of course,” Gage replies. “Whatever you want to use for him is more than fine. And speaking of that. We figured out where he is.”

That catches my attention, and I look back up. “Where is he?”

“After what happened with Hannah, Julian sent him away to this... boarding school type place.”

“Boarding school?” I ask. “He’s like four! Who sends a fucking four-year-old to boarding school?”

“Just goes to show how little Julian actually gave a shit, I guess,” Ash puts in with a shrug. “He cared about having an heir, but he didn’t care that his son was an actual person.”

“Honestly, that’s probably why he kept Hannah around for so long,” Priest says softly. He glances at me, and there’s an apology in his eyes for phrasing it that way.

But I know what he means.

“Right. He didn’t want to raise his own son, so he kept her around to do it for him. And then as soon as she was gone, he shipped the kid off so someone else could pick up where she left off.” I shake my head. “If that fucker wasn’t already dead, I’d want to kill him again.”

“We can’t change what Julian did before,” Gage says. “But we can act now. We found out where the school is, and we’ll go get Cody and get him out of there.”

I nod, grateful for what they’ve done to move this along.

We keep eating, making plans to leave and head up to where Cody is, and as we’re finishing up, there’s a knock on the door.

Instinctively, we all tense a little.

We’re not expecting anyone, and after last night, it’s hard to say if an unexpected visitor is a good thing or not.

Ash gets up, putting on his usual carefree grin, although I can tell it’s an act.

“If it’s someone selling something, I’m going to be real pissed,” he jokes, but there’s an undercurrent of a true threat in his voice.

“Unless it’s Girl Scouts or something,” Knox calls after him as Ash goes to get the door. “Then get me some cookies.”

I snort at that, and it does lighten the tension a little.

At least, until Ash comes back into the kitchen a moment later with Mitch Carter in tow. The look on the handsome King’s face isn’t amused anymore, and there’s a hard set to his jaw.

“Good morning,” Agent Carter says, glancing around at all of us. His broad shoulders are stuffed into a sharp, professional looking suit, and he has the same cool demeanor as always. “I didn’t mean to interrupt your breakfast. I just need a little of your time, if that’s alright.”

“Of course,” Gage says. He leans back in his chair, looking every inch like the king he is, relaxed with nothing to hide. “What can we do for you?”

Carter looks over at me. “I did some digging on that tip you gave me the other day, and it turns out that Julian Maduro’s offshore accounts were all emptied out.”

I shrug, tipping my head to one side. “That’s strange. I wonder what would have made him do something like that.”

“So you don’t know anything about it?”

“No, I don’t.”

“I see.” Carter eyes me. “What’s also strange is that Julian’s body was found in a warehouse last night.”

I keep my face straight when he says that. “Well, the upper crust of Detroit found out that Julian was fucking his sister last night. So maybe he just didn’t want to live with that kind of shame hanging over him.”

Carter’s eyebrows rise into his hairline. “You think he killed himself?”

I shrug again. “I can’t say. All I know is the kind of person Julian was probably wouldn’t be able to handle that kind of shame. It’s just a guess.”

“I see.” His eyes linger on me, and I can feel Knox bristling from across the table. “But I don’t imagine you feel sorry for him.”

“No,” I answer that part honestly. “He wasn’t a good person. Bad people usually get what’s coming to them one way or another.”

Maybe it’s a little too much to give away, but I stand by it, and Carter doesn’t probe too much deeper there.

He looks at the guys instead. “You didn’t do business with Julian did you?”

Gage shakes his head. “Not really. There were some talks of us combining in a few different ways, but nothing really panned out. He’s not the kind of person we like to associate with.”

“Really?” Carter asks. “He’s not good enough for you?”

“No,” Gage says, and again, it’s an honest answer. “We don’t like to do business the way he does it. Did it. He treated his employees like shit, and that’s not a good way to make people want to stick around.”

“Fair enough,” Carter says. “Do you know anything about the warehouse block down by the docks?”

“We know it exists,” Priest says. “Not much else. We don’t deal in shipping or anything.”

“That’s where Julian’s body was found. In a warehouse that was pretty much burned down to the foundations. We had to ID his body with what little was left. I was just wondering if you had any ties to it.”

Gage shakes his head again. “Not us. Maybe people we associate with, but we’ve never personally used it for anything.”

Nothing other than being a convenient place to kill Julian, but that wasn’t on us.

Carter watches us all very carefully, and I can tell he’s asking specific questions on purpose. He knows we had something to do with this, but he can’t prove it. Without evidence, all he can go off are his hunches.

We're good at this by now, answering his questions with responses that give nothing away, and it's clear he knows he's not going to get anything out of us.

"Alright," he says with a little sigh. "I'll let you get back to your day then. I'm sure you're all busy people." There's something loaded about the way he says that, but none of us react to it.

Ash gets up, like he's going to show Carter to the door, but then Carter turns back and looks at us again.

"One more thing," he says. "There was also a carjacking reported last night. A woman and three men stole a car from a man at gunpoint. They were masked, but the man reported that he thinks the woman had light colored hair, either white-blonde or silver. You don't know anything about that, do you?"

I shake my head. "No. I hope that guy's alright, though."

"He's fine. Just shaken up, from what I hear," Carter replies. He purses his lips, letting the silence settle for a long moment like he often does. Then he nods. "Well, thank you for your time. I'll leave you to get back to your day."

He heads for the door, and once again, Ash follows to escort him out. I wait until the front door closes behind him and Ash comes back to breathe out and relax fully.

"Just gonna say it again," Knox comments, staring with narrowed eyes at the spot where we last saw Carter. "I really don't fucking like that guy."

I roll my eyes. "We know, Knox."

He just doesn't like him because he doesn't want any other man paying attention to me. Which I kind of like.

But I don't dislike Agent Carter. There's something about him that almost makes me feel like he understands me more than he's letting on.

I remember what he said when I met with him to give him the intel about Julian's accounts. About how it might surprise me what he would understand.

Part of me thinks maybe he's glad that Julian is dead and his business has been disrupted. Maybe part of being in a position like he is as an FBI agent means picking the lesser of two evils sometimes. And compared to Julian and all the shit he was up to, the Kings and I are definitely the lesser evil.

“We need to be careful where he’s concerned,” Gage is saying, drawing my attention back to him. “He’s poking around a lot, and I definitely get the feeling he knows more than he’s letting on.”

Priest nods. “He doesn’t seem like an immediate threat, but we should be watchful.”

“And if he becomes a threat...” Knox cracks his knuckles ominously and grins.

“Let’s hope it doesn’t come to that,” I tell him. “I think trying to cover up offing an FBI agent would be a big thing. And we’ve got enough on our plates right now.”

“Exactly,” Gage agrees. “Speaking of which, we should go pick up Cody.”

We get ready and head out, getting in the car to make the drive to the school Julian shipped Cody off to.

It’s hard to know how to feel now that we’re on the way, but I try to shove those mixed feelings down. I’ve killed two of the Maduro men now, and I hope that has interrupted the cycle of them turning into cruel, manipulative assholes. Without Julian’s influence, hopefully that won’t happen to Cody. I’ll make sure he doesn’t end up like that.

He deserves better than that, and Hannah deserves better than to have her son, who she cared so much about, turn into someone like Julian or Lorenzo. Both men who abused her and treated her like shit.

Having Cody be happy with Hannah would have been the best thing, but having him safe with me is the next best plan, and it makes me happy to think about it.

Getting vengeance, ruining Julian’s empire, and taking his money is one thing. But this is the true thing I was doing for Hannah. Protecting her son. That overrides any weird feelings I might have about all of this because that’s what it’s about. It’s about helping Hannah rest in peace, knowing her son is okay.

We reach the school where Cody is, and it’s a big, sprawling campus.

Ash lets out a low whistle, glancing around. “This is a swanky place. I guess at least Julian didn’t ship his kid off to some shit hole.”

“He wouldn’t have,” I tell him. “Because that would have looked bad on him. He had to make sure his son was somewhere nice if he wasn’t going to look after him himself.”

We get ready to get out so we can go inside and look for the kid, talking about maybe splitting up to cover more ground. Ash points out that of all of us, I'm the only one Cody really knows, so it's probably better for him to see me there than one of the guys, who are all still strangers to him for the moment.

It feels weird to be the one Cody knows, but it's a good point.

Before we can get out of the car, we see two figures come striding down the lawn, moving quickly.

One of them looks like a woman, walking briskly, with a child behind her. As they get closer, it's clear the woman is almost dragging the kid along, trying to get him to walk faster and keep up with her.

Then they get close enough for us to see their faces, and my heart stops. It's Natalie.

She beat us here. And she's trying to take Cody away.

ASH

NATALIE DRAGS Cody to a car parked in the lot near the school's sprawling campus, her grip firm on his arm and a hard look on her face. She opens the backseat of the car and ushers him in, then walks around quickly and slips in behind the wheel on the driver's side, starting up her car and driving away.

"Follow her," River bites out.

Gage is already doing it even before she speaks, pulling away from the curb to tail Natalie at a bit of a distance—hopefully enough that she won't see us behind her.

"What the fuck?" River breathes. "What the fuck is she doing? What does she want with him?"

Her body is so tense that she feels like a statue beside me, and her jaw clenches as she stares out the front window. We're not losing sight of the car, but she keeps craning her neck, trying to keep it in view. I know she's freaking out a little because this wasn't a part of the plan. And after last night turned into a shit show pretty quickly, I can't really blame her for being worried about it.

We didn't think to account for this. Didn't think Natalie would have any interest in Hannah's son, especially since she clearly hated Hannah.

All the shit we did to dismantle Julian's life before we killed him fucked his sister over pretty thoroughly too, and I figured she'd be too busy dealing with the fallout over that to worry about her brother's kid.

"That fucking bitch," River mutters under her breath. She throws herself back into her seat for a second but never stops staring at the car ahead of us, like she's afraid if it gets out of her sight, they'll disappear forever.

Her worry is palpable, filling the car like a sixth passenger. I know killing Julian was the main focus of our planning sessions over the past weeks, but getting Cody back is the part that ultimately matters most to her. If we fail at this, she'll never forgive herself.

"Natalie won't get away with Cody," Gage says from the front seat, as if he's read my damn mind. "That's not going to happen."

"What's the plan, though?" I ask, my fingers moving restlessly. I don't have a coin in my hand at the moment, but the habit is ingrained in my muscle memory by now. "We can't just attack the car. The kid is in there. It's too fucking risky."

Gage lets out a rough breath. "I know. For now, we'll just follow her. See where she's going. If we can get the kid away from her, then we can figure out where to go from there."

River grinds her teeth next to me, and I put my hand on her knee, squeezing it lightly. I know how much she hates this.

I think of that conversation we had in the shower all that time ago, about how she wasn't sure she could ever see Cody without seeing his father and grandfather in him. It was a fair point then, considering her history with them and all they put her through. After Julian nearly killed her, her hatred for these Maduro men probably only grew.

But this moment right here, watching her get so protective of this little boy, proves that's not true. She has it in her to love this kid. She probably already does without realizing it, just because he's the last living piece of her sister.

It makes me just as determined to protect Cody too. He matters to River, so he matters to me too. I'm not going to let anything happen to the kid.

None of us are.

"Hang back a bit more," Priest tells Gage. "We can't let Natalie know we're tailing her. If she realizes she's being followed, shit could get bad for Cody."

"Yeah." Gage nods, slowing the car down a little.

We keep following Natalie's car, all of us leaning forward a little to peer out the windshield. I expect her to turn toward one of the neighborhoods along the way that we know she and her brother usually frequent, and I chew my lip absently as we trail her at a safe distance. I keep waiting for her to take Cody to her house or Julian's house or any place that has to do with their old business, but she just keeps driving.

River is back to sitting straight up in her seat now, glancing around at where we are as she tries to figure out what Natalie is planning.

She's not alone in that. I have no idea what Natalie would even want with Cody, and the ice queen has passed by most of the places I thought she would've taken him.

Finally, she makes a turn off the main road, driving to an abandoned little spot near the side of the river. We're practically outside of the city by now, in an area I've never been to before.

"What the fuck is she doing?" River asks, glancing around as Gage slows our car to a crawl.

There's nothing here. Just some trees, set back from the road, and the rush of the river that sweeps along. It's not even a nice part of the river, too close to the highway to be peaceful, and full of deep, murky water.

We pull to a stop far enough away that Natalie can't see us, our car blocked from her sight by a few trees. All of us tensed and ready, and I crane my neck to peer through the small gap in the trees to where Natalie stopped.

After a second, Julian's sister gets out of the car. But instead of getting Cody out too, she just slams the door closed once she's out.

There's a beep as she locks the doors, and I have a second to wonder what the fuck she's doing before the car starts to roll forward. She never cut the engine, and she must've left the hand brake off too, because the car begins rolling down the embankment toward the river.

"Shit!" River curses, and she's got that right. Because what the actual fuck is this bitch doing?

Dumb question, I think to myself. She's trying to kill him.

We all jump into action at once, leaping out of our car and racing toward the bank of the river. So much for fucking subtlety. If we'd known she was going to try to murder Cody, we wouldn't have followed at a distance at all. We would've gunned her down in the road and found a way to get the kid safely out of the car.

Natalie looks up and sees us coming, and her face twists into an ugly scowl.

"You!" she screams, focusing her gaze on River. "You *bitch!* You took him from me!"

She draws a small handgun from her purse and starts firing at us, but her aim is shit.

A bullet whizzes by River, far enough away that it doesn't even graze her, but still way too close for my liking. I body check River out of the way, putting myself in the line of fire as the car picks up speed behind Natalie, crashing into the river with a splash.

"No!" River gasps, horror in her voice.

The Bentley begins to sink under the surface, and I fire off a shot at Natalie, forcing her to duck for cover behind a few rotted out logs that sit along the riverbank. My bullet hits one of the logs as she dives behind it, sending pieces of dead wood flying.

"Get the kid out of the car!" I yell to the others.

Then I make a beeline for Natalie.

I'm not letting this bitch hurt River, and I know that's exactly who she's gonna go after if I don't keep her occupied.

Natalie pops up from behind the fallen logs as my brothers and River head for the water and the car currently sinking into it. Her gun is aimed for my head, but before she can shoot me, I duck out of the way, lunging for her to try to knock her off balance.

The logs are in my way, so although I manage to sink my shoulder into her solar plexus, it's not as hard of a blow as I was going for. She wheezes when I hit her, but she doesn't go down. Instead, she claws at me with her long-ass nails, raking them down my arm like fucking claws.

"You helped her!" she snarls, her cold mask of a face contorting into something ugly and feral. "Didn't you? You killed my fucking brother!"

"*Fucking* brother," I grunt, grappling with her as I try to twist my gun around to line up a shot. I'll shoot her at point blank range if I have to. "Accurate description, coming from you."

Natalie shrieks like a banshee, clearly not appreciating my joke. She dropped her gun when I tackled her, so we're fighting over control of mine now, and she scratches me again, leaving bloody red marks on my skin.

"I'll kill you," she pants, her teeth bared. "I'll kill all of you."

Her voice is hoarse, and her pupils are so blown out that she looks like a goddamn shark. She's lost just as much as Julian did before he died—*more*, even, since he's gone too—and it's clear she's feeling it.

She's vicious, fighting dirty as hell as she lashes out.

She goes for my crotch with her knee, and I shift to the side, trying to evade her strike.

I manage to block it for the most part, and her knee grazes the edge of my goods instead of hitting them square on. There's still pain, but it's definitely not as bad as it could have been if she'd gotten me right in the nuts.

"He gave *her* a baby," she pants, pain making her voice raspy, "but he wouldn't give *me* one."

Fucking gross.

She wanted to kill Cody because he was a reminder that her brother had a kid with someone else. I don't have anything to say to that, so I just nail her in the face with my elbow, splitting open her nose and sending blood cascading down over her mouth and chin. She grunts, baring her red-tinged teeth at me.

Natalie is fighting like someone who doesn't have shit to lose, and it makes her wild and intense.

But it also makes her sloppy.

When she tries to grab the gun from me again, I pull back suddenly, opening up a little space between us as I fire.

"Ahh!" She screams as the bullet tags her in the side, her clawed fingers latching on to me as she goes down.

She pulls me off balance, and we hit the ground hard, slipping and sliding and skidding all the way down to the edge of the river, still trying to get the upper hand on each other.

Sharp stones and dirt grind into my skin, and then we hit the water, which is like a shock of cold all at once. The gun is knocked from my hand, and I curse, then have to close my mouth before I suck in a lungful of river water.

Natalie gasps, treading water wildly as she tries to find her footing in the deep, sludgy river, and I use that to my advantage. I grab ahold of her hair in a tight fist and shove her head under the surface.

She thrashes like crazy, splashing and sending up little waves of murky grayish water as she flails.

Bubbles rise to the surface, and I can feel her kicking at me, trying to get me to let her go. She twists around, trying to bite at my hand, her nails dragging over my skin again and again.

But I just hold on, keeping my grip on her hair and forcing her deeper under the water.

I told River once that she's the strongest person I know, but I hate that she *has* to be strong. I hate that the world has forced her to go through so much bullshit just to survive.

So I'll keep her from going through this too. I won't make her carry this death with her, even though there's no doubt in my mind that Natalie deserves it.

And I'll be the one to give it to her.

More bubbles break the surface, and I can feel Natalie's movements growing weaker beneath the water. Her limbs twitch a little, her entire body jerking as she fights for air. Then, finally, she goes still.

I keep her submerged for several more long moments, then release my hold on her, letting out a slow breath. I'm drenched, covered in dirt and blood, and the cuts on my arms sting like a bitch.

But it's done.

As Natalie's lifeless form floats in the water before me, her blonde hair twisting and swirling around her face, I glance over to see the others pulling a shivering Cody out of the car.

"Thank fuck," I mumble to myself.

RIVER

CODY CLINGS TO ME, shaking and crying a little. He's obviously scared, and I can't blame him for that. If someone from my family stuffed me in a car and then tried to drown me, I'd be fucking scared too.

I have no idea how to be motherly or comforting or anything like that, but I hold on to him tightly as we wade out of the water.

Ash is there near the bank, pulling himself out of the river as well. He's dripping wet, and he tugs his glasses off his face and frowns, trying to find a dry patch of clothes to wipe the water away from the lenses.

"Is it done?" I ask him.

He nods.

"Yeah. She's in there," he says, nodding toward the river. "Put up a hell of a fight though. These better not get infected with whatever's in that river."

He rolls his sleeve up, and I can see the lines from Natalie's nails going down his arm.

"I think you'll be okay," I tell him. I lean up and kiss him, melting against him for just a second despite the fact that we both smell like muddy river water. "Thank you."

He grins, then makes a face.

"I've never been into this kind of shit the way Knox is," he admits. "Death. Torture. Vengeance. But even I can see this was a fitting end for that bitch."

Out of all the Kings, Ash is the one who gets his hands dirty the least, that's true. He pick-pockets and charms people who need to be charmed, and I've definitely seen him shoot people before when the situation calls for

it. But that's different from holding someone under water until they're dead. He doesn't get off on it the way Knox does, and that's perfectly fine.

When it mattered, he did it.

For Cody.

For *me*.

"I mean it," I repeat. "Thank you."

No one is going to mourn Natalie Maduro, and she can join her brother in hell as far as I'm concerned.

In the river, Knox, Priest, and Gage dredge up Natalie's body. They drag it over and put it in the car, closing the door before pushing the whole thing deeper into the water, until it sinks completely.

Then they all wade back to shore.

"Instead of looking like an attempted murder, it'll look like a *successful* suicide," Knox says with a shrug, running a hand through his shaggy dark hair and sending droplets of water sliding down his tattooed forearm. "Given what came out about her and Julian last night, it'll be an easy story to believe. They both folded under the pressure and killed themselves."

I grin at him, relief flooding through me. It was close there for a second, but we got Cody back. And Julian and Natalie are both dead.

It's over.

Fucking finally.

Cody has stopped crying, but he clings to me all the same. His little arms are wrapped tight around my neck, and fine tremors move through his body.

"Do we have anything for him?" I ask, glancing at the guys. "I think he's cold."

Gage pulls a blanket out of the trunk of the car, and I shoot him a look with raised brows, asking without words if that blanket has been used to wrap dead bodies in or something.

He half smiles and shakes his head, holding it out so we can wrap Cody in it.

"It's alright," I tell the little boy. "We'll get you warm and dry at home. I promise. It's all gonna be okay."

Those words feel a bit empty in light of everything this poor kid has been through, but I have to hope that Julian and Natalie disappearing from his life won't hit him as hard as losing my sister did. Julian seemed like an asshole of a father who was perfectly happy to ignore his kid unless he was

belittling him for being too weak, and Natalie probably never said more than ten words to him his whole life.

His mom seems to have been the only one who truly cared for him, and although I can't give her back to him, I can at least try to make sure he feels cared for and protected again.

We get back into the car, and I keep Cody on my lap as Gage drives us back home.

Everyone is quiet as we make our way back into the heart of the city, and just like that night when we stopped by the side of the road in the rain, Gage refrains from bitching about a bunch of wet asses on his car's leather seats. I notice Ash and Knox both shooting curious glances at Cody, and I wonder when the last time was that any of them were around a kid.

For me, it's an easy question to answer—not since I *was* a kid.

I don't know what to say to Cody, but luckily, he doesn't seem like he's in the mood to talk anyway. So I just hold on to him, trying to dry him off a little and keep him warm as we near the Kings' house.

The place is big enough that there's another guest bedroom, so once we get inside, we set Cody up in that one. I grab a few things from my closet so that he can change into dry clothes, and although they're way too big for him, it's a better fit than anything I could've borrowed from the guys.

"Is that better?" I ask as I bundle him up in my mismatched clothes. "I remember your mom said you like to wear pajamas during the day sometimes. This is kind of like that."

"Yeah." He nods, his voice quiet and shy. "I like it."

"Good. Are you hungry?"

He nods again.

"Okay. We'll go downstairs and get something to eat."

I stand up and hold out my hand, and I'm surprised as hell when he takes it. I would've expected him to be more standoffish and distrustful of a bunch of strangers... but then again, he can probably see the resemblance between me and his mom, so maybe it helps that I remind him of her.

"We'll have to get some stuff for him," I tell Ash, who's lingering in the guest room doorway. "Clothes and toys and stuff."

"Yeah." He pulls out his phone, tapping out something on the screen. "I'll start putting together a list."

Downstairs, we find Knox in the kitchen making food. When it's done, I sit Cody in the living room to eat. I find some cartoons on TV for him to

watch, and then I just sort of... hover.

I try to hang out with him, but I have no idea what the fuck to say to kids. I didn't know how to be around them even when I *was* one, and I certainly don't now.

Knox comes in and plops down on the couch next to the little boy, and there's an amusing moment as they size each other up. Cody doesn't seem to know what to make of this massive man at first, but he doesn't shrink away from him.

"How are the nuggets?" Knox asks, nodding to Cody's plate.

Where he got chicken nuggets from, I'll never know, but I guess it doesn't surprise me that he had some in the freezer just ready to go.

"Good," Cody mumbles, and his little voice is almost a whisper.

"Sweet," Knox replies. "I love nuggets. I didn't know what kind of sauce you wanted, so I gave you a little sampler of all the ones we have. I'm a honey mustard kinda guy myself."

Cody picks up a nugget and dips it in the little cup of honey mustard on the plate. He takes a bite and chews thoughtfully and then nods at Knox. "S'good."

Knox grins. "You've got good taste, kid."

It's surprising to watch them together like this. I wouldn't have thought Knox would be the one who knows how to get along with kids. In some ways, the man who proudly wears the nickname "The Butcher of Seven Mile" is the last person I'd expect to get along so well with a four-year-old. But then again, Knox has a goofy personality sometimes, and besides his willingness to carve up a person if they deserve it, he's actually a fun-loving, easy-going guy. Almost like a big kid himself.

The other Kings come in too, and I watch them all interact with Cody. Ash has that easy going personality that makes it easier for him, while Gage and Priest sort of hang back. They all introduce themselves and tell him he's going to be staying with us.

Cody nods, glancing around at all of them warily.

He's just a kid, and he's had a lot going on in the last few weeks, so I can't really blame him for being unsure about all of this. But the guys do their best, talking to him in calm voices and asking him about the cartoons and what things he likes to eat and do.

I like it, watching them with him.

It's all so strange, and I have no idea what our plan is for Cody long-term. But it makes me happy to see him here, to know he's not with Julian anymore, and that none of us will treat him like a pawn or try to drown him in a car like fucking Natalie did.

We spend most of the afternoon hanging out with the little boy, trying to get him used to us.

In the evening, Ash puts together some dinner, and we all eat in the kitchen. Then I take Cody upstairs to put him to bed. I make a mental note that we really need to get him some real pajamas or something, so he's not just sleeping in these same borrowed clothes.

Priest comes to help me, and it's maybe the most surprising how good he is with Cody.

"Do you need another pillow?" he asks the little boy, with a quiet sort of patience that I don't think I've seen him use with anyone else before.

Cody nods, and Priest goes to get him one. He adds it to the bed, smiling a little when Cody grabs on to it and holds it close.

"I put a light by your bed," he tells the boy. "If it's too dark, just tap it, like this."

He demonstrates, tapping the little plastic ball that he set on a stand on the nightstand next to the bed.

When he taps it, it lights up with a soft, white light. I don't think its original purpose was to be a kid's nightlight, but Cody doesn't seem to mind that at all.

"It's pretty," he whispers, tapping it off and then on again.

"It's yours," Priest tells him. "It'll keep the dark away."

My heart tightens in my chest, an unexpected rush of emotion making a lump form in my throat.

I finish tucking Cody in, and we close the door gently once he falls asleep. Hopefully, the fact that he's had such a crazy fucking day will make it easier for him to sleep through the night.

"How did you know to do all that?" I ask Priest curiously as we stand in the hallway.

He shrugs a shoulder, glancing toward Cody's room and then back to me. "Before she died, I had a good relationship with my mom. She had a lot of different parenting tricks she'd use on me when I was a kid. I just remembered some of them."

I step closer to him, resting my forehead against his chest as my arms wrap around him. His go around me too, and we stand there for a moment, just breathing each other in.

“I’m glad you had a good mom,” I murmur. “I’m sorry you lost her. I barely remember mine, but I think she was a good mother too. I think she cared about me and Hannah a lot.”

That seems to be a common theme that threads between me and the four Kings of Chaos. Even if we had people who loved us and wanted to take care of us, we lost them, leaving only the people who wanted to use us or hurt us behind.

That’s why the four of them ended up building their own family, creating a little unit more unbreakable than even the bonds of blood.

And although I was terrified of it at first, afraid to let my guard down, I’ve become a part of that family.

Now Cody has too.

“We should let him get some rest,” I murmur, leaning back at last and taking Priest’s hand.

He nods. “I’m sure he needs it.”

We head back downstairs to where the other Kings are, and something comes over me as I look at all of them. They really are a family, and now this tight-knit little family is expanding. They’ve taken Cody in for no other reason than because he matters to me, and thinking about that fact does strange things to my heart.

I care about them, more than I can say. More than I know *how* to say.

But I want to show them how I feel.

So when they all look up as Priest and I enter the living room, I don’t hesitate. I just crawl onto Ash’s lap, straddling his hips as my knees sink into the couch cushions on either side of him.

He raises his eyebrows, but before he can make a joke or a teasing comment the way he usually does, I kiss him, putting all my feeling into it.

Kissing him like I mean it.

RIVER

I KEEP KISSING ASH, and I can feel and hear the sounds in the room change as the other men take notice.

Knox is already sitting on the couch with Ash, and Priest comes to sit on Ash's other side. While my mouth moves with Ash's, Knox and Priest let their hands wander, tracing up my back, into my hair, down to my ass.

It feels like home, having them touch me the way they are. It feels like how things are supposed to be.

Ash groans into the kiss and I can feel him getting hard under me already, so I grind down against him. He bucks up, meeting me in the middle, and then presses his tongue past my lips, seeking out the heat of my mouth.

Fingers slip under the hem of my shirt, and I don't know whose they are, but it doesn't really matter. Any and all of them are welcome to touch me as they want, and my body reacts with my nipples hardening and my pussy pulsing with need already.

The kissing and touching only gets hotter and more intense, and I can feel my pulse racing as calloused fingers come up and pinch my pierced nipples hard. I gasp into Ash's mouth, and he chuckles lightly, reaching around to grab my ass with both hands so he can drag me in to grind harder against him.

Before we can get too into that, I nip at his bottom lip and then slide off his lap. I drop to the floor in front of him, and he spreads his legs to accommodate me.

His cock presses against the front of his pants, making it clear he wants more, so I undo his fly and get his cock out, feeling it hot and hard in my

hand.

My mouth waters at the sight of it, and I don't waste any time before dipping my head and taking him into my mouth. The tension in the room gets even higher as I do, bobbing my head and swirling my tongue around his length.

It's everything I said I would do that day when I described how I would blow him, and then some. Because now it's not out of spite or wanting to rile someone up. Now it's just because I really fucking want to be going down on him.

The others clearly like watching this, and I like giving them a show, letting them see how into it I am.

Knox and Priest are still on either side of Ash, and I take one hand off Ash's cock and slide it over so I can rub and stroke Knox through his pants. My other hand mirrors it, finding Priest already half hard too.

I keep my mouth busy, bobbing on Ash's dick, taking him as far down as I can and working up to take more and more each time.

Soon enough, touching Knox and Priest through their pants isn't enough. I need more. I need to touch them and feel their skin on mine.

I start undoing Priest's fly with my fingers, not even looking and just going by feel. On the other side of Ash, Knox catches on to what I'm doing, and he shoves his own pants down, getting them out of the way so his cock is free.

"Fuck yes," he groans, and I can hear the lust in his voice. When I get my hand around his cock, he bucks into it, and I give him a little squeeze.

"River," Priest moans, and he sounds close to being wrecked already.

I love it. I love hearing what I do to them, how into it they are. I love how Ash threads his fingers into my hair, taking a little bit of control over the blowjob, enough that he can press me down lower when I take him down and keep me there for a second before letting me up to breathe.

It might have been hard to focus on three of them at once before, but right now they're all I have my mind on. The way Knox and Priest feel, the silky texture of their dicks against my palms. The way Ash tastes, the salty tang of his precum dripping against my tongue.

Knox keeps bucking his hips, and Priest wraps his hand around mine, helping me jerk him off like he's done before. He seems to like the connection of doing that, the way we're in this together, and he moans again, his breathing already ragged as he strokes his cock with our hands.

I feel powerful like this, spread between them, making them all feel good. I know what they like, and I get more and more into it, losing myself and any thread of a thought beyond taking more of them and moving my hands and mouth faster.

Ash bucks up, hitting the back of my throat, and I swallow, humming around his dick. His fingers tighten in my hair, and now it seems like he just needs something to hold on to for a bit.

“Your mouth, River,” he groans. “Your fucking mouth. Knew from the moment I saw you that you’d be perfect like this. So fucking good for us.”

That’s what I want. To be good for them and to them. Because they’ve been so good to me.

I could easily lose myself to this, but then I feel someone yank my pants down over my ass from behind.

Gage.

He runs his hands over my bare ass, cupping and squeezing it like he wants to savor the feeling. His fingers slide down my crack, teasing me and lighting a path of heat and desire in its wake. All I can do is moan around Ash’s cock, and the way he shifts his hips in response is proof that he likes the vibrations of that.

Gage’s mouth finds my pussy from behind, and I moan again, closing my eyes for a second while I adjust to the feeling of him eating me out in addition to everything else that’s going on.

There’s so much sensation. So much pleasure coursing through me, and it steals my breath, making it hard to keep my rhythm with pleasuring the other guys.

Luckily, they don’t seem to mind too much. When I glance up at them, they’re all just as blissed out, wrapped up in the situation as much as the contact with their dicks.

The arousal builds inside me, and I keep working Ash’s cock in my mouth. Drool and precum spill past my lips when I lift my head, messy strings connecting my lips to his cock. Ash’s eyes go dark and heated at the sight, and he lifts his free hand to swipe his thumb over my bottom lip, gathering that mess and pushing it right back into my mouth.

I moan deeply, and my pussy pulses from that gesture. That just makes Gage work his tongue in deeper, going from teasing my clit to sliding right into my hole.

I catch my breath and then get back to sucking Ash off, trying to keep eye contact with him to see when he's close to falling apart, but it's hard to do when there's so much going on.

I edge closer and closer to that point of no return, and I want to touch my clit, to give myself that last little push over, but my hands are currently busy.

Of course, Gage understands what I need. I push back, grinding against his face, and he chuckles. The sound is muffled by my wet pussy, but I feel it when he does. He starts licking me in earnest, lapping at my pussy from hole to clit, finding that sensitive bud and toying with it with the tip of his tongue.

Heat builds in me, spreading out from my core. I feel myself shaking a little, the fine tremors that come right before I'm about to lose it. My stroking and sucking lose anything even resembling a rhythm, and I jerk when my orgasm plows into me.

I writhe in place, trying to stay a little quiet at least. It just feels so fucking good, and Gage licks me through it, keeping those aftershocks rolling through my body until I can barely breathe. If it weren't for the fact that I'm already on my knees, I would have collapsed onto the floor under the weight of all the sensation.

I pull back from Ash and struggle to catch my breath for a second. I want to feel them all come too, but before I can get back to it or suggest we keep going, Gage slaps my ass lightly and pulls back.

"We should take this to the bedroom," he says, his voice low and husky. "I want to fuck you properly, and I don't want a fucking kid walking in on it."

I nod and move to get up, but before I can even get to my feet, Knox grabs me around the waist and picks me up. He slings me over his shoulder with ease, my pants still bunched around my thighs with my ass out.

He doesn't even bother putting his cock away, just carries me up to my bedroom.

The others follow, and I can feel the heat hovering around us like a cloud. It doesn't matter what room of the house we're in. If we're all together, then the mood just follows, I guess. It helps that they all have a great view of my ass and my soaking pussy with the way Knox is carrying me.

He throws me down onto the bed when we reach it, and I bounce a little as the other three come in and close and lock the door.

I barely have time to get my bearings before they're all climbing up onto the bed after me. Hands and mouths wander over my skin, and I shiver, breathing hard and arching into each touch.

Someone shoves my shirt up over my tits, baring my nipples for them all to see. Fingers pinch the perky buds and then a hot mouth seals over them, teasing the silver rings with a warm, wet tongue.

Priest.

He nips lightly at my sensitive flesh, and I shudder and turn into the kiss Knox is pressing to my mouth.

Gage's fingers are in my hair, carding through the silver strands, and I'm quickly losing track of everything as each touch and sensation blends into the next, becoming this tidal wave of arousal that threatens to suck me under and keep me there. Not that I'm complaining.

My eyes flutter closed, and my hands slide out, trying to touch them all back in turn. My fingers slide over whatever they can reach, and the room is filled with the sound of my moans. I breathe their names, each one an almost plea for more, even though I don't know who's doing what anymore.

It doesn't matter. All that matters is that I have them here, and I want them to make me feel good so I can make them feel good in return.

All of a sudden, there's the shock of an ice cold tongue on my pussy, and I yelp in surprise, my eyes flying open.

"Holy shit!" I hiss breathlessly. "What the—"

I look down to see Ash grinning. He's got an ice cube between his teeth, which he must've grabbed from the kitchen while Knox was carrying me up the stairs.

"You like that, killer?"

"Yes," I moan, my clit throbbing hard. "I've never felt something like that before."

"Good. I figured a little ice might be fun." He waggles his eyebrows at me. "Since you're so hot, I thought you might need something to cool you down."

I start to roll my eyes at his awful pun, but before I can, he dips his head again, making me arch off the bed.

"Fuuuck!" I whisper-scream.

He drags the ice over the skin of my inner thigh, leaving a cold, wet trail that really is a perfect contrast to the heat and warmth that's been building. His tongue feels even colder when he goes back to licking my pussy, and I shiver. The temperature play makes me ache at my center, and I twist and moan on the bed.

The others don't stop their onslaught either. That mouth switches between my nipples, licking and biting until they're so sensitive that just a gust of warm breath over them is enough to have me shaking and moaning for more.

Ash keeps licking me, and Gage and Knox keep touching me, and it's enough to make me come again, right then and there.

I cry out, wordless and needy, arching and trembling under the force of it. This one hits me even harder than the first, and my toes curl from the intensity of it.

"Good girl," Gage says. "So fucking good. You want more?"

I open my eyes to look at him, and he's standing beside the bed, watching me with those intense green eyes. Even though I literally just came, my body still aches. Two orgasms, and I haven't had any of them inside me yet, and I want it.

I want it so fucking bad.

"Please," I moan, reaching for him. "I need..."

I barely have the breath to speak at all as I come down from my orgasm, but Gage knows what I want. He grins, slow and almost wicked.

"Anything for you, baby girl," he tells me and starts to strip.

He's so fucking hot, and my gaze stays locked on his body as he reveals it bit by bit. The men all have scars from their various escapades, but I like the way they look. Those imperfections and marks just make them seem more human, more harshly beautiful in my eyes.

Once he's naked, the guys swap positions so Gage can lie down on the bed, and I climb on top of him, straddling him and sinking down onto his hard cock. I'm so wet that it happens easily, my body accepting him like he belongs there.

Gage puts his hands on my hips, and I ride him, bouncing up and down, rolling my hips in undulating circles.

"Fuck," he curses. His fingers dig into my hips, and I hope it leaves marks. I hope I can look down at them tomorrow and remember this. "Look at you," he pants. "You're so fucking—"

He breaks off with a moan when I slam back down on his lap, riding him hard and fast.

I can feel the others watching, their eyes intent on the bed. When I turn my head to look, I see Knox standing off to the side, his hand wrapped around his cock while he strokes it.

He grins when he sees me looking and flashes me a wink.

“You’re so sexy like this,” he murmurs gruffly, the tattoos on his forearm rippling as he grips his shaft harder. “Riding that cock like you need it. Like it’s all you want.”

I moan and keep going, but before I can hit my climax, Knox comes over and lifts me off Gage’s cock, plucking me up like I weigh nothing. I make a disappointed noise, and he just laughs and tips me onto my back with my head hanging off the edge of the bed.

Then Knox crawls up onto the mattress and settles between my legs. He thrusts into my pussy, and even though it’s already wet for him, his size makes it a bit of a stretch.

“So tight,” he groans, sounding almost delirious, like he’s high on me.

Upside down, I see Ash come over, cock in hand. Before he can even say anything, I open my mouth for him, and he slides right in.

Having both of them in me like this makes me shiver with pleasure, and I lie there while they fuck me, using my pussy and my mouth with rough, demanding movements.

Knox grabs my thighs and spreads my legs wider, almost painfully so, and I let him, moaning around Ash’s cock in my mouth. Knox doesn’t really do *anything* gently, and I can tell he’s past the point of holding back. He rams himself into my pussy, hitting a deep spot that makes me writhe on the bed.

“Shit, that’s good,” he grunts, thrusting harder, his pelvis slapping against mine.

Ash fucks my mouth, but thankfully not with the same amount of force. He draws himself back slowly and then pushes back in, and I try to move my tongue along the underside of his cock to give him more sensation.

He moans my name and grins down at me.

“You look like a damn sex goddess,” Ash pants. “You’re perfect at this. Just fucking made for it. Made for *us*.”

His words go right to my head, and I arch up a bit, meeting Knox in the middle of that next thrust.

I feel fingers on my clit, working me up even more, and I try to arch into the feeling of it, hungry for more even though I already have two cocks in me. Those fingers don't stop at my clit, though. They press inside my core a little, where Knox is fucking me, stretching me almost painfully.

But I like the burn. I like the way it feels to be so full, to be overwhelmed by these men.

Gage's deep voice floats up over the moans and sounds of me sucking Ash.

"Would you let two of us fuck you here one day?" he asks, his voice darkly sinful. "You take us so beautifully together, in your ass and your pussy. Would you let us both fuck your sweet pussy? Would you open yourself up to let us in like that? Let us split you open on our cocks?"

His dirty words rile me up even more, along with the feeling of his fingers inside me. The question puts the image in my mind, and I can't help thinking about them in different combinations, working themselves into my pussy until I'm so full I can barely stand it.

Gage doesn't seem to be waiting for a real answer, which is good since my mouth is occupied, but I moan for him all the same.

I'm so worked up, so desperate to come, and I feel Priest's mouth come back to lick and suck at my nipples, playing with the piercings.

All of them have some part of me, and I feel so connected to them. It's enough that I can't hold back anymore, and I come hard, nearly choking on Ash's cock.

I go tight around Knox, and he hisses as he goes over the edge too, filling me up just seconds before Ash finishes in my mouth.

Spurts of cum hit my tongue, and I take a second to catch my breath, swallowing everything Ash gave me. They pull out, leaving me shuddering and empty while I recover from the force of my orgasm.

Then I roll over, getting up to kneel on the bed.

Priest is right there, and I press him down to his back, sinking down onto his cock. Gage steps up and teases my ass, and I shiver at the feeling of it before looking down at Priest, trying to gauge if this is something he's okay with.

This is still new for the two of us, even if he's been involved when it's been all five of us, so I want to make sure I'm not pushing for too much too soon.

When our gazes lock, though, I see only heat in his eyes. I flash him a smile, my stomach fluttering.

Then I arch my back, giving Gage more access. He uses the slick wetness between my legs to help stretch my ass open for himself, and just the feeling of him working me looser, getting me ready, makes my pussy drip even more.

I don't know how I have the stamina to keep going. I don't know how my body keeps finding more and more things to want from these men, but it does. I'll always be starved for them, always hungry and ready.

"Greedy girl," Gage murmurs roughly as I start to bump back against him, urging him to go faster. He sinks into my ass, filling me up completely, and I hang my head for a second, breathing through the sensation of being claimed like this.

I can't move for a little while, but that doesn't stop Gage and Priest from starting to find their rhythm. Gage slides in and out of my ass slowly, taking his time to make sure he doesn't hurt me. And Priest lifts his hips, grinding into me and hitting that spot that makes me see stars, even though I just came.

That's enough to get me going, and I rock between them, starting slow and easy.

Their pace is controlled and gentle, and their hands roam over my body. Priest reaches up to grope my tits, squeezing them and slapping gently at them, just enough to make me moan for him. Gage slaps my ass and drags his nails up and down my back, and that adds a layer of sensation to this that I really like.

As often is the case with these two intense men, things ramp up quickly, though. It's like Gage is fire and Priest is ice, and they both burn just as intensely.

After a bit, I don't even have to move myself. They move me between them, fucking me in tandem. Priest drags me down onto his cock, and Gage pushes forward, switching between shallow thrusts that keep me twisting on the edge of that pleasure and deep ones that rock me to my very core.

I lose myself in the feeling of being fucked hard by both of them, my head swimming with pleasure.

"You're so tight," Gage grunts, and he slaps my ass harder this time, leaving a handprint behind from the feel of it.

I bite back a wail of pleasure at that, and he does it again, chuckling breathlessly.

“I know how much you love this,” he pants. “I know you can’t get enough. Say it. Tell us how much you love it.”

I open my mouth to obey, but no sound comes out. I barely have the breath to breathe, let alone talk, but they don’t let up. Priest pinches my nipple hard, and I cry out, not sure whether to pull away or lean into more of that delicious flare of pain.

“Say it,” he urges me, his voice hard and commanding. “We want to hear it.”

“I—I love it!” I manage, the strangled words rushing out of me. “I fucking love it. It feels so fucking good. Please!”

“Please what?” Ash taunts from where he’s watching. His cock has softened slightly since he just came, but it’s still out, and heat still burns in his amber eyes. “Tell them what you want.”

“Fuck me! Harder. More. Please! I’m so... ahh!”

It’s difficult to make sense when they’ve got me on the edge like this. Gage and Priest plow into me, working my body up into a frenzy. The pleasure builds and builds, and I’m caught between them, being fucked hard and loving every goddamn second of it.

I think about what Gage said about having two of them in my pussy, and I don’t even know how I would survive that.

But god, I’d damn sure be willing to try.

Priest chokes on a moan, and I look down at him in time to see him fall over the edge into his orgasm. He bites his lip and comes hard, his face flushed and his neck muscles straining.

“River...” Gage’s fingers dig into my flesh, and he comes apart too, groaning my name as he loses it.

They both stay buried inside me, and after a moment, deft fingertips find my clit. I look down and see that they’re Priest’s fingers, and he teases that little nub for just a second before rubbing it with purpose. He alternates between that and pinching it, giving me just the right push I need to send me over the edge once more as well.

I shudder hard, and I don’t have the breath left to scream when I come again. This orgasm makes my vision go blurry, and it seems to go on forever, leaving me shaking and out of it until I can catch my breath and come down.

We all collapse on the bed, exhausted and fucked out. I'm sticky, but I love the fact that they all came in me in one hole or another. It feels fucking good.

"We need to get a bigger fucking bed," Ash says, sounding tired but with his usual good humor.

I chuckle just as tiredly, feeling completely sated.

He's not wrong, actually.

Because the thing that just happened between all of us?

I want that to happen again and again.

GAGE

IT'S hard to say things go back to normal after Julian and Natalie's deaths, but they at least settle into a rhythm. After the fast pace of the days leading up to us pulling off our final phase of the plan, the days after it seems almost slow and lazy.

Which isn't a bad thing.

I come downstairs in the evening almost a week later to see River sitting on the couch, watching TV. I'm glad she's able to have this downtime after everything that happened, and seeing her relaxed and content makes an unfamiliar feeling of peace settle over me.

"I'm about to head to the club," I tell her, catching her attention. "Do you want to come with me?"

She looks up and smiles, her blue eyes lighting up with excitement. "Sure. I'd like that."

"Is the kid down?"

She nods. "Yeah, he went to sleep right away. I think all this new environment stuff is still wearing him out."

I nod because that makes sense. It's been very, very strange having a kid in the house, but I don't hate it. It's just taking some getting used to. If it were any other kid but this one, one that means something to River, I probably wouldn't like it at all, but as it is, we're all settling into a new normal.

Knox fucking loves the little guy, entertaining him in ways that would probably have PTA moms freaking out. Ash gets along with him too, showing him card tricks that make the little boy's eyes light up with

wonder. Even Priest, who's usually the stiffest and most reserved of the four of us, softens around Cody.

It's not something any of us expected, but we're making it work because it matters to River.

"Let me just change really quick, and then I'll be ready to go," River says.

She hops off the couch and runs upstairs to change out of the t-shirt and sweats she's been lounging around in, and the two of us get in the car and head toward the club, leaving the others to keep an eye on Cody.

"Do you keep everything separate at Sin and Salvation?" she asks as we drive over. "Like, all the legit stuff stays on one side and everything else has its own side?"

"We try to," I tell her. "There's some crossover, just because sometimes we need money from one side to cover something on the other, but it's better when it can all be separate."

"In case someone gets too nosy?"

"Exactly. That way everything on our club's books is legit, and if anybody ever digs into our business, they can trace all the money back to whatever legal source it came from. No questions, no doubt."

She nods thoughtfully at that. "That has to make you pretty popular with people who want to use your services for the not legal stuff, right? Since there's less chance you'll get busted."

I smile because she's clearly excited about being more involved with everything, and she has good instincts where this kind of shit is concerned.

"Basically, yeah. We have a good reputation, and no one's ever tried to call us out for shady practices or anything. It's pretty safe to trust us to smuggle or launder or whatever else people need. There's always something in this city."

River nods again, and I know she understands that fact better than most. She's had to rub elbows with or fight off a lot of the people who keep the criminal underground of Detroit alive and well.

We talk about some of the different things the other Kings and I have done on the more illegal side of our business, and I explain the different connections we've made because of it. Events like the one at Alec Beckham's mansion are always good for networking and getting our name out there, and I tease her that one day it would be nice to go to one of those events and not end up in the middle of a shit storm.

She laughs, shaking her head. “Maybe the next one will be business as usual now that we’ve taken out the trash.”

“We can hope,” I tell her with a low chuckle. “I have ideas and plans for the future, and we’ll need people who can help us get there. Having that money from Julian will help us expand our empire.”

“Is that what you want?” she asks. “An empire?”

“We want to be major players,” I tell her with a shrug. “We want to have a solid foundation. So that if anyone wants to fuck with us, they’ll think twice because we’re not just a handful of thugs or something. We’re woven into both the legit community and the underground in ways that they can’t tackle without bringing shit down on them. That means stretching out our influence and trying to make moves that bring in more money and more power. We need powerful friends and people who owe us favors. And we need to have our hands in more avenues than the ones we’re in now.”

River nods, taking that all in. “That sounds like a good idea. And a great way to use the money.”

I glance over at her. “I’m glad you think so. I was thinking about opening a second club. It would give us more legit business and also another establishment that we could smuggle things through and use as a cover for other shit.”

She seems enthusiastic about that, drumming her painted nails against the center console as she tilts her head. “What made you decide on a club as a front in the first place?”

“I like the atmosphere,” I admit. “The way people can come and just move to the music and let everything else go for a little while.”

“Hm.” She scrunches up her nose. “You know, that’s not the answer I thought you’d give, but I like it.”

She grins at me, and I can’t stop my lips from curving up at one side. I’ve let River see my demons, just like she’s let me see hers. I guess there’s no harm in letting her see the other sides of myself I usually keep hidden.

We get to the club after another few minutes, and when I lead River inside, it’s packed as usual.

People are dancing and drinking, and the bass of the song blasting through the speakers thumps and thrums through the whole place like a pulse.

Usually, I head right to the back when I get here, ready to dive into a night’s worth of business and paperwork and whatever else is waiting for

me.

I go to usher River back to the office, but she puts a hand on my arm, stopping me.

“Wait,” she says, grinning as she half shouts over the music. “Dance with me.”

“What?”

She pulls me to the dance floor, where there’s already a crush of people bumping and grinding and having a good time.

“Dance with me,” she says again, pressing her body against mine so that her tits rub against my chest.

I honestly can’t remember the last time I just... danced in this club. I’ve been too busy running the damn place, taking everything seriously and watching out for my family. It hasn’t left a lot of time for anything else.

I can feel the bartender, who knows me pretty well by this point, staring in surprise as I give in and pull River even closer to me, moving to the music.

It’s definitely not something the old me would have done, but I’m not that person anymore.

Because of the woman in my arms.

River laughs, a free, delighted sound, and starts moving her body to the beat. The song changes to a slower one, and something flashes in her eyes as her movements change with it. She works her hips, swaying with the beat, looking so damn sexy I can’t help but pull her against me so I can move with her.

It’s so easy to get lost in this. In the music and the way her body gyrates against mine.

She moves so freely, like she doesn’t have a care in the world right now other than grinding against me. It’s so far from how she looked before, either when she was tightly wound and angry at everything and everyone or when she was blank and numb right after her sister’s death.

Now there’s a teasing smile on her face, and she lifts our joined hands and spins under them, ending up impossibly closer when she comes out of her turn.

I dip my head and kiss along her neck, and she tilts her head to one side, giving me more space. I can barely hear it over the beat of the music, but she hums with pleasure, her eyes fluttering half closed as we keep dancing.

I run my hands over her body, curving down over her hips and then up over her ass. She laughs breathlessly at that, but I can tell she likes it. I know she wants more.

There's a part of my brain that thinks about the pile of paperwork on the desk that still needs to get done, but I shove it away. Business can wait for a little longer.

As we move together, we're close enough that I can feel it when River's phone vibrates in her pocket. She makes a face and reluctantly pulls away to look at it.

I can tell she wasn't expecting whoever it is to be calling, because her lips curve down in a frown.

A spark of worry lights in my chest, and I jerk my chin toward her phone. "What is it?"

With her bottom lip trapped between her teeth, she turns the phone around to show me the screen.

Agent Carter is calling.

RIVER

GAGE QUICKLY LEADS me to the back where their office is so I can take the call without screaming over the music.

My stomach churns with anxiety as we step into the office. I'm worried this has something to do with Natalie's death. Maybe we didn't clear up the scene well enough and it got linked to us somehow. Or maybe the FBI somehow found a way to link Julian's death to us.

All sorts of things flash through my mind, but I take a deep breath and answer the call.

"Agent Carter," I say, trying to sound surprised and nonchalant. "What's going on?"

I brace myself for probing questions about where I was on the day of Natalie's death, or for him to start asking me for details about the Kings or something.

"I need to talk to you," Carter says, getting right to the point.

He seems agitated and different from normal. Usually he's very put together, and he asks his questions in that way that's cool and businesslike.

But now he just sounds... weird.

"We *are* talking," I tell him. "You're talking to me right now."

"No," he says, letting out a breath. "In person. Soon."

"I don't have any more information for you. I don't know anything else about Julian."

"It's not about that," Carter tells me, and it sounds like he's barely keeping it together. "There are things you need to know. Things I should have told you before. Or maybe not. Fuck. I don't know."

It almost sounds like he's talking to himself at the end, like some kind of internal debate is coming out.

It just adds to the strange, distracted way he's talking, and worry cuts through my stomach like acid.

"You're not making any sense." I shake my head, tightening my grip on the phone as I glance over at Gage. "What do I need to know?"

"I want to meet with you in person," Agent Carter insists. "We can talk then. I can't say this over the phone."

I hold Gage's gaze, knowing he's close enough that he can hear Carter's voice through the phone's small speaker. He looks as concerned as I feel, but we both know that we pretty much have to go.

Saying no or hanging up isn't really an option, because whatever Carter wants to talk about, it either already affects us or it will, whether we try to avoid it or not.

Gage nods, and I let out a messy sigh.

"Okay," I say, tapping my foot in agitation. "We can meet."

"Tonight?" Carter asks immediately.

"Yeah, okay. Give us an hour."

"Fine. One hour. Meet me at the docks." He gives me directions to a specific spot near the river, and we agree to meet there.

As soon as I hang up, Gage drags his fingers through his dark brown hair.

"I don't like this," he mutters. "What the hell does he want with you now? Why this clandestine meeting? Something feels... off."

"All of it feels off," I reply, chewing on my lip. "That's not how Carter usually is. Something's got him spooked or rattled or something."

"I'll call the others," Gage says. "I want them all there as backup. And I'll have one of our people go to the house to watch out for Cody while we get this over with."

"Thanks."

I'm grateful as hell for his offer—both for the fact that the Kings want to have my back, and that he knows I wouldn't want the little boy left alone in the house.

We head for the door and make our way out of the club, getting back in the car as Gage arranges for someone to keep an eye on Cody, then calls the other men to tell them what's going on. They say they'll head out as soon as the impromptu babysitter shows up and meet us at the docks.

“Knox says that Harley will help watch Cody too,” Gage tells me when he hangs up, rolling his eyes. “We’ll try to make this quick.”

We’re both silent as Gage drives us to the spot where Agent Carter told us to meet him. I chew on my lip as I stare out the window, unable to stop my mind from racing. I can’t even guess what this could be about, and that makes me nervous.

I’d hoped that my conversation with Carter in the park would be the last time I ever saw him. He was useful for what we needed to accomplish at the time, but the last thing I want is to get tangled up with some fed.

Knox, Ash, and Priest arrive at the docks at almost the exact same time we do, since they had a shorter drive than we did.

“What the fuck is going on?” Knox asks, sliding his gun smoothly out of his holster and glancing around warily.

“We don’t know,” Gage says shortly. “That’s what we’re here to find out.”

Sticking close together, we leave our cars behind and walk out onto the wooden dock. There are two long, wide walkways that jut out over the river, connected by another walkway at the end so that the whole thing forms a rough U shape over the water. Little waves lap against the dark wood, gleaming in the dim, distant light from the street lamps back near the road.

Agent Carter is waiting for us at the end of the dock where one walkway meets the intersecting one, his broad shoulders squared and his arms crossed.

He doesn’t have a weapon drawn, so that’s good, I guess. The Kings are all armed and alert, and I can practically feel the tension vibrating like a live wire among our little group. It’s clear none of us feel comfortable with whatever is going on.

Carter even *looks* different when I see him. Usually, he’s all about a professional presentation—tucked in shirt, neatly put together hair, shiny shoes. Now he looks like he’s been through something rough and has barely come out the other side in one piece. There are bags under his eyes, and his hair is a mess. His shirt is stained and only half tucked in, and his eyes dart around as we approach him.

He uncrosses his arms, agitation written in every line of his body, and it doesn’t go away as we come to a stop in front of him.

“Alright, we’re here. Just like you asked. What the fuck is going on?” I demand, not wasting any time on pleasantries.

“Have you ever wondered who put Ivan St. James’s body on display like that at the gala all those weeks ago?” he asks, blurting the words out in a strained voice.

My brows pull together in a frown.

It’s not an answer to my question at all, and I don’t understand what he’s getting at. I also didn’t think Agent Carter knew who did it, since he came by the house asking us questions about the incident after it happened. That was the first time we met him, actually.

Unless he figured it out between then and now.

“Yeah, of course I wondered,” I tell him, narrowing my eyes. “But we had other pressing shit to deal with, so we never figured it out. Why? Do you know who it was? What does this have to do with us meeting tonight?”

Carter’s fingers clench and unclench, forming fists before straightening out. He still seems agitated, even though he’s come to a standstill a few feet away from us, no longer pacing.

“Maybe it would have been better if you’d found out who it was,” he says. “Or maybe it wouldn’t have made any difference. I don’t know.” He shakes his head. “He’s been watching you. He saw what you did to Julian.”

My stomach tightens at that. “Who are you talking about?” I ask, not even bothering at this point to deny that I did anything to Julian.

Carter takes a breath, and his Adam’s apple bobs as he swallows. “Have you ever heard of the Kyrio Society?”

It almost seems like a nonsensical question, and I shake my head because I don’t know what else to do at this point. “No. I don’t know what that is.”

“Right. That’s because you’re not supposed to,” he says. “No one but a very few people even know it exists.”

None of this is making any sense, but the longer he speaks, the more worried and weirded out I get.

“What the hell are you talking about, Carter?” I demand, sick of his rambling half-answers.

“The Kyrio Society controls a lot of what happens in this city. They operate behind the scenes, the people behind the major players. Criminals, big and small, do their thing in Detroit. Selling drugs, smuggling illegal goods, getting into turf wars, fighting for territory. But behind it all,

unbeknownst to most of them, the society members are pulling the strings.” He takes another deep breath and lets it out. “Ivan St. James was in the society, one of the most powerful people in all of Detroit. There are seven members, and his death left an opening. Julian Maduro wanted in.”

Julian wanted to join a secret society?

I knew he was trying to work his way into the upper echelons of the Detroit elite, but I had no idea he was also trying to join some powerful, clandestine criminal organization.

Carter sounds as serious as a heart attack about all of this, and it leaves me reeling a little while I try to keep up with everything he’s saying.

“Why are you telling me this?” I press, studying his strained face.

“Because you’ve caught the eye of the society,” he replies, shaking his head. His usually styled hair is unkempt, a lock of it falling over his forehead. “And you don’t want that. Believe me. I can try to help you, but you have to help me.”

“What do you mean?” I ask, my heart pounding heavily now. “Help you with what? And how the fuck do you know all of this?”

He bites his lip and drags his fingers through his hair, looking almost desperate. “Because I’m in the society too,” he tells me, his jaw clenching. “And I want out.”

What?

I open my mouth, half a million questions on the tip of my tongue. There’s so much I want to know, and I’m about to press Carter for more answers, but before I can get a word out, his body jerks hard.

His face goes slack, and then he crumples on the wooden slats of the dock, limp and lifeless.

My stomach drops down to my feet, a rush of adrenaline chilling my veins.

Fuck.

Someone just shot him, but I didn’t hear it or see anyone.

The Kings all react immediately, drawing weapons and closing in around me as they scan the dimly lit docks around us, trying to find the source of the threat.

“I wouldn’t do that if I were you,” a voice says, rising out of the shadows where the dock meets the shore.

My gaze whips toward the sound of the voice, and I blink as I see someone moving toward us, back-lit by the street lamps in the distance.

“I have men posted all around,” the voice continues, smooth, masculine, and collected. “If any one of you shoots, you’ll all be dead before you can pull the trigger again.”

As he finishes speaking, the man takes another step forward, and at last, I can make out his features. He’s middle-aged, with light brown hair and an aristocratic face.

A face I recognize.

Alec Beckham.

RIVER

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

But what the fuck is he doing here?

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

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

Yeah. Me neither.

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

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

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

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

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

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

Alec just keeps smiling, unhurried and unbothered.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

We know too much now.

He *can't* let us live.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

My heart almost stops as I process his words.

Orchestrated hundreds of deals...

Oh. Fuck.

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

He ripped my life away from me.

He ripped Hannah away from me.

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

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

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

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

My stomach rolls.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Alec speaks again before I can say anything.

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

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

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

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

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

What the fuck?

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

I shake my head, feeling numb and desperate.

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

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

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

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

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

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

But there's nothing.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

I have to kill one of them.

But I *can't*.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

A loud *bang* cuts through the night.

And as Gage falls, my own heart stops.

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