

A black and white illustration of a snake coiled around a human skull, set against a dark background with roses. The snake is on the left, its head raised and facing right towards the skull. The skull is in the center, with its eye sockets and nasal cavity visible. The roses are scattered around the skull, some in the foreground and some in the background. The overall mood is dark and mysterious.

PRETTY

DARK

VOWS

RUTHLESS HEARTS BOOK 1

CALLIE ROSE

PRETTY DARK VOWS

RUTHLESS HEARTS

CALLIE ROSE

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[CALLIE ROSE NEWSLETTER](#)

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Books by Callie Rose

RILEY

ONE OF MY many past mistakes liked to say I had a body made for fucking.

He was wrong. Good sex is great for letting off steam, but I've yet to meet a cock—or a man attached to one—who didn't show his true colors in the end and let me down.

This, though? *This* is what my body is made to do.

It's made to dance.

I close my eyes, shutting out the club full of sleazy, married shitbags who come here to pant after my body every night, and focusing instead on the thud of the bass as the pulsing rhythm infuses my limbs.

I arch my back and roll my hips, then release the clasp between my shoulder blades that holds together the barely-there lace of my top, letting the scrap of material flutter to the floor. The music picks up, and I swing around the pole, eliciting a few whoops and hollers from the crowd.

“Hey, Destiny! Over here!” A tatted-up musclehead calls out my stripper name. He's at the edge of the stage, raising his voice to be heard over the music as he beckons. “Come a little closer, baby.”

He's not showing me any cash yet, so I ignore him and wind my body around the cool metal pole in the center of the stage instead. I wrap one leg around it so all that hard steel is right where Musclehead wishes his cock could go, then let my head fall back as I roll my hips against it, waiting for him to get a clue.

His eyes track every move, and he finally licks his lip and pulls out a few bills. “Come on now, quit fucking the pole already and come on over here,” he calls, waving the cash at me as he grabs his crotch with his other hand. “I got what you need right here.”

I smirk at him. Like I haven’t heard that before. Heard it and won’t be falling for it—not ever again. Especially from anyone I meet *here*.

But I still let go of the pole and take his money, because as much fun as it may be to pretend I’m dancing for myself, that’s not really why I’m here.

I’m here for Chloe.

My little sister has no one to look out for her but me. Our worthless dad proves that fact every time he lets one of us down, but now that I’ve finally gotten her out from under his roof, things are going to be different.

Once Musclehead stuffs a few bills into my g-string, I twist away before he can try to cop a feel. Standing back up in my stilettos, I run my hand down the center of my body and turn in a slow undulating circle to survey tonight’s crowd.

Club M is a shit hole that doesn’t exactly attract the highest level of clientele, but it’s Friday night, which means a lot of these guys have just gotten paid. I can work with that.

The edge of the stage is packed, and I drop low at the same time the music does, pulsing to its beat with my knees spread wide as I let my hand slide down my body. More men call out my stripper name, more bills start to litter the stage, and I work every asset I have, determined to bring in as many tips as I can before my shift is over.

When the DJ finally changes the music to signal that my set is wrapping up, I spin myself around the pole one more time, then lower myself to my knees and move into a slow crawl that’s guaranteed to make every man watching beg to get me into one of the private rooms in the back once I step off the stage.

Not happening.

Not tonight.

They don't know that, though, and I make sure to hold some eye contact with every man who has cash in his hand as I advance across the stage, collecting the bills that they've already thrown down for me.

When I finally get to the edge, I roll smoothly to my feet and hook my fingers in the thin straps of my g-string.

The musclehead from earlier is trying to say something, but his hands are empty and I'm not interested in hearing it, so I turn to the man closest to me and tease the stretchy scrap of black lace I'm wearing down to the top of my sleek, shaved pussy.

"Put it right here, Daddy," I purr, even though I'd shoot myself before calling anyone that if he wasn't about to pay me. Biting my lip, I add in a breathy voice, "You know you want to."

And sure enough, he groans and shoves his wad of cash in my g-string.

That'll go right toward your college fund, Chloe. You're welcome.

I could probably get more out of him, but my time really is up. A dancer who goes by the name of Cherry is shooting daggers at me from the edge of the stage, waiting her turn with the pole.

She was friendly enough to me when I first started, but she's been talking shit about me to the other dancers ever since Rob, the waste of space known as my ex-boyfriend, fucked her and then dropped her just to try to make me jealous. I warned her about him, but she wouldn't listen to me.

"You could've left some for the rest of us," Cherry whispers as I head off the stage, and I bite back a satisfied smile as I organize the wad of bills I've collected into a more manageable stack.

It was a pretty lucrative shift, especially for an off night, and now I'm looking forward to getting home and putting my

feet up. Maybe Chloe is watching one of those cult documentaries she loves so much.

A new song blares through the speakers as Cherry starts her set, and I cut down a hallway, heading toward the dressing rooms at the back of the club.

“Hey,” a voice calls out from behind me. “*Hey*, Destiny, hold up, baby.”

Fuck. It’s Musclehead.

Patrons aren’t supposed to be back here, but he must’ve slipped through the door after me. I ignore him, not answering but picking up my pace a little. Before I can reach the dressing room, Musclehead catches up to me, getting in front of me and planting one meaty hand on the wall to block my way.

“Didn’t you hear me?” he asks, his liquor-scented breath gusting in my face. Then he waggles his eyebrows. “Or are you playing hard to get? I like it. You’re a little firecracker, aren’t you, Destiny?”

He reaches for a lock of my dyed hair as he speaks, his fingers brushing over the blue and purple strands. I jerk backward, my jaw clenching. I’m happy to tease men onstage as part of the show, but I hate how some of them are so fucking clueless—and full of themselves—that they forget it’s all an illusion.

“That’s not my real name. And you’re not allowed to be back here,” I say, keeping my voice cool and my spine straight.

“Aw, come on,” he slurs drunkenly, licking his lips. “I could see the way you were eye-fucking me out there all night.” He gestures between the two of us. “You feel it, just like I do. I know it. So why don’t we take this someplace else and see where it goes?”

My hands curl into fists, but I hold my ground, all traces of the sultry flirtation I put on while I’m performing long gone. “Why don’t *you* take it someplace else? Because I’m done for the night, and that means I’m done dealing with assholes like you.”

He laughs, smiling as he steps closer—as if I just told him he probably has the biggest cock in the world instead of calling him an asshole. “Come on. There’s no one else around. You don’t have to—”

He palms the back of my head as he speaks, his other hand reaching up to grope my breast, and my body snaps into motion before I even give it a conscious direction. Bracing one hand on his shoulder, I knee him in the balls, hard and fast.

“*Fuck!*” he shouts, doubling over and cupping himself. He staggers backward, and when he looks up at me again, the drunken leer on his face has been replaced with anger. “You fucking *bitch.*”

Not bothering to point out that he’s the one who touched me first, I rest my hands on my hips, allowing a small smile to tug at my lips.

“Yeah, that’s not my name either,” I tell him dryly. “But you’re getting closer.”

Stepping around him as he groans pitifully, I head to the dressing room to get my street clothes on. Once I’m dressed, I sling my bag over my shoulder and head out the back, wrapping my arms around myself as a gust of cool air ruffles my hair.

As I cut through the alley behind the building toward the parking lot, a low grunt reaches my ears, and I pause for a second, squinting into the darkness as I peer up ahead.

Then I roll my eyes.

Two people are fucking near the mouth of the alley, and just my luck, I recognize them both. Rob, my ex, and a new dancer who goes by Sugar.

Cherry would probably start a cat fight if she saw this, but I honestly have no clue why. He’s not worth fighting over. He talked a good talk and seemed different at first, but I should have known better than to believe it.

Never date men you meet at the club.

It was a good rule, and the one time I broke it only reinforced how necessary that rule is.

Rob has Sugar pinned to the wall, her face shoved against the damp bricks as he takes her from behind. Even if I didn't have a clear view of them, I'd know it was him just from the disgusting grunting sounds he makes, like a rutting pig, as he pounds into her.

My asshole ex is under the mistaken impression that fucking his way through the other strippers here—and doing his damndest to make sure I find out about it—will make me jealous.

It won't, but that doesn't stop him from going even harder when he catches sight of me.

I don't give him the satisfaction of a response as I slip past them, but I can't resist being a little petty. As soon as I get into my car, I rev the engine and swing it around so that my headlights land on the two of them.

Rob winces, holding up a hand as his pale ass shines like the moon under the glare of my headlights. Sugar yelps, shoving him away as she realizes they're not as alone as she thought, and I suppress a chuckle as I peel out, already feeling a bit better.

Maybe he'll finally get the message that I'm done with his bullshit.

The club is only a few miles from the apartment I share with Chloe, and at this time of night, the streets are mostly empty, so it doesn't take me long to get home. She's still awake when I unlock the door and let myself in, curled up on the couch watching TV.

"Hey, sis." She glances up, her brown eyes—a lighter shade than mine—a little fuzzy with sleep. She's probably been dozing, waiting for me to get home. "How was your shift tonight?"

"Not too bad," I say with a shrug, deciding not to mention Musclehead as I toss my keys onto the coffee table and head

into the tiny kitchen just off the living room. “How was school?”

“Eh, not too bad,” she says with a yawn, echoing my words. She cranes her neck to look at me over the back of the couch as I pull some leftover pasta from the fridge and pop it in the microwave. “I’m getting excited for the summer, though. Maybe I can get a job so you won’t have to work as much.”

The microwave beeps, and I grab the plate of pasta, a slightly crusty bread roll, and a fork, then head back into the living room. Nudging Chloe to get her to scoot over, I plop down onto the cushions beside her.

“Abby wants to take me to a punk show over in Clifton tomorrow,” she says as I dig into my food, which is unevenly heated thanks to our shitty microwave.

I frown. “Clifton? You know that’s West Point Gang territory.”

She makes a face, running her hand through her dyed blonde hair. “I’m not going to get in the middle of any gang stuff. It’s just a show.”

“You don’t always get a chance to decide what you’re in the middle of,” I shoot back, my stomach tightening into a knot as I put my fork down. “You know that, Chloe.”

We’ve been pretty lucky, if you can call it that. Our little corner of Halston may be rough, and my job guarantees that I deal with assholes on a regular basis, but I’ve still managed to keep Chloe sheltered from most of the dangers of the city.

And soon, if my luck holds out, I’ll get her off to college and out of here completely.

“Eat,” she says, nudging my plate. “And quit worrying so much. I know things are bad between West Point and the Reapers right now—”

“You do?” I glance over at her, frowning. “How do you know that?”

I'm sure there are parts of Halston that aren't overrun by gangs, but since we don't live in those parts, it's a basic survival skill to keep tabs on what the local gangs are doing. Not paying attention to the way the wind is blowing is a good way to end up dead, but I still wish I could protect Chloe from the ugly side of life.

Fuck knows our dad never tried.

"Um, because I live here?" She rolls her eyes, stealing the dinner roll off my plate. She pulls off a piece and eats it, shrugging one shoulder. "Besides, it's no secret. There was a shooting down by Checkers tonight, and I'm pretty sure West Point took out a few of the Reapers."

"Shit." I swallow hard. "Did you see it?"

I'm suddenly not hungry anymore. Checkers is a little bodega just down the street from us. We run down there all the time.

"Heard it," Chloe says, which doesn't make me feel any better.

If she was here in the apartment, even though we're three stories up and always keep the doors locked, that's still too close. The walls are thin, too thin to stop a bullet, and those fucking gangs don't give a single solitary shit about who gets in their way when they go after each other.

"Quit looking so dire." She gives me a look, pursing her lips. "My point is, the gangs are keeping each other busy. I'm sure it will be fine at the show." She pokes at my plate again. "*Now eat. I know dancing makes you hungry.*"

I'm not nearly as sure she'll be fine in Clifton as she is, but I pick up my fork again anyway. Chloe deserves to have a life, and the world is full of risks no matter which way you look at it.

Besides, she's eighteen now. It's not like I can roll her up in bubble wrap and keep her locked up in this apartment day and night. She'll have to get out there and make a few mistakes someday. The best I can do is just make sure I steer her away from the big ones.

Chloe's phone vibrates on the coffee table, and when I glance over at it, I see our dad's name on the lock screen.

I frown. *Speaking of big mistakes...*

"What the hell?" I glance sharply from the phone to Chloe. "What the fuck does *he* want?"

She sighs, wincing. "He needs money. He called earlier and left a voicemail. I haven't called him back yet. Should I answer?"

"No." I shake my head, the muscles in my shoulders and neck already tensing. "I'll talk to him."

Snatching up the phone as it vibrates its way across the coffee table, I swipe the screen and bring it to my ear.

"Heyyyyy, little girl," Frank drawls before I have a chance to say anything. "Did you get my message? Did you figure out where your sister keeps all that cash she brings home? Your old man's in a bit of jam here."

My jaw clenches. He doesn't know I'm the one who answered the call, and hearing the slimy, cajoling way he speaks to my sister pisses me off.

"Hey, Frank," I say coolly. "You want to explain to me why a grown-ass man has to come crawling to his teenage daughter, begging for money?"

"Riley?" Shock and a hint of guilt resonate in his voice, but he recovers quickly, putting on a falsely friendly tone. "Hey, listen. I don't know if your sister told you, but I've got a situation. Are you girls still living over in those triplexes over at Centerview?"

Dammit. How does he know where we live?

Chloe's been listening in on our call, and her eyes go wide as she shakes her head as she mouths, "I didn't tell him."

I put my arm around her shoulders and give her a quick squeeze as I answer Frank, ignoring his question about our shitty apartment. I don't know how he found out we were living here, but Chloe doesn't have to worry about me being mad. I know it wasn't from her. She may have a softer heart

than she should, but she doesn't want anything to do with our asshole father either.

"I don't care about whatever hole you've dug for yourself today," I tell him. "We're not bailing you out."

Not again.

Mom died fifteen years ago, when I was ten and Chloe was three. I stuck around as long as I could stand it, learning to take care of myself, take care of my sister, and toughen up enough to manage both. But all the way up until the day I got my sister out from under his roof, Frank kept trying to guilt her into "helping" him.

He knows better than to ask me for anything anymore, but the fact that he's still keeping tabs on us, still going behind my back to work on Chloe, has me seeing red.

"Now, Riley," Frank starts. "That's no way to talk to your old man. Raising you girls wasn't always easy, but I put in my time, and I deserve—"

"You deserve jack shit," I cut in, furious. "You're a fucking deadbeat, Frank, and you always have been. You're not getting a damn cent from either me *or* Chloe. Not ever again. Lose her number, because you're done freeloading off us, asshole. You'll have to find another way to deal with your shit."

"Hey, hey, hey! Hold up now," he splutters. "You girls are my *family*. I just need a little—"

I stab at the screen to end the call, cutting off whatever he was about to say.

He's not family. *Chloe* is my family. If I could remove every drop of blood I share with Frank, I'd do it in a heartbeat, but at least I can do this.

I block his number on her phone, then toss it aside. "Don't talk to him again, okay?"

"Okay," she says, shoving her long blonde hair behind her ears.

I frown. "You don't owe him anything, you know."

She twists the hem of her shirt between her fingers, avoiding my eyes. “I know.”

“Good,” I say firmly. “Because he seems to forget that fact all the time, and if he keeps trying to worm his way back into your life, I’ll beat his ass.”

“You’ll have to switch out your mood ring first,” she jokes. Leaning closer, she taps a finger against the small purple gem I’ve got pierced on the side of my nose.

I picked this one to go with my hair today, but I’ve got another one—a black faux-diamond skull—that Chloe always says I wear when I’m pissed the fuck off and ready to do something about it.

She’s not wrong.

“I’m going to bed,” I declare, hauling myself off the couch. I lean down as I pass Chloe, pressing a swift kiss to the top of her head like I used to when she was a kid. “Goodnight.”

“Love you,” she mumbles, reaching up to grab my hand before we separate. Her voice is a little subdued, which tells me just how much our dad got to her.

God, I fucking hate him. But sometimes, I also worry that Chloe is too soft. Not that she doesn’t know what a shitty place the world can be, but I’ve managed to shelter her from most of the worst that Halston has to offer.

I can’t really regret it, though. My little sister will be okay. She’s only soft on the inside, and that part of her... well, it reminds me of some of my best memories of our mom. The ones that would make *me* soft if I didn’t keep them locked away for safekeeping.

But unlike Mom, who died before she ever got the chance, I’m going to make sure Chloe has a chance at something better. And I’ll do anything to make that happen. *Anything*.

Because I love her too.

As far as I’m concerned, in this whole shitty world, my sister is the only thing worth giving a damn about.

MADDOC

“WHAT THE FUCK, what the fuck, what the *fuck?*”

My hands tighten on the steering wheel and a muscle tightens in my jaw as the chant pours out of Logan like frozen smoke off dry ice, his rage as cold as his ice-blue eyes.

He’s poised in the passenger seat of the Escalade like a coiled snake, still and deadly. When I take a corner without bothering to slow the fuck down, no part of him moves, not even his golden blond hair. Nothing except his mouth.

And I want to know the same goddamn thing. What the *fuck* just happened?

But the fastest way to find out is to get to the scene of the crime, so I don’t bother letting any of my own frustration out. I just drive.

“Where?” I bite out as soon as I know I’m in the right neighborhood, my own rage contained by sheer force of will. Not contained in the chilling way Logan’s is, but if I’ve learned one thing over the years that it took to carve out the territory I’ve claimed for the Reapers in Halston, it’s how to stay calm no matter what.

And I’ll be damned if I let myself boil over now.

If my father’s death taught me anything, it was that if you lose control, it’s not the only thing you’ll lose.

So I don’t.

Ever.

Dante glances down at his phone, then points up ahead. “There, Madd,” he answers me. “The fight went down behind the bodega.”

He’s sprawled out in the seat behind Logan, messy, chocolate-colored hair in a state of perpetual bedhead and dark green eyes lazily scanning the neighborhood around us as I barrel through it.

Where Logan is always ready to strike, Dante is the one who reels in his prey with sparkling eyes and a warm smile that never drops, not even when he snaps the prey’s neck.

I’d be happy to unleash him on some prey right now, but I doubt there will be anyone for him to take out when we reach our destination. According to the kid who called in the shooting, the attackers were in and out. A surgical strike. Not an accident or a misunderstanding or a minor dispute, but a focused assault in the heart of our territory.

They were sending a message, and I’m pretty fucking sure I know who “they” are. But another thing I learned from my father’s mistakes is that *pretty fucking sure* isn’t good enough.

I haven’t succeeded where he failed by going into anything half-assed or under-informed.

I pull up in front of the alley Dante pointed out and slam the Escalade into park. Logan instantly goes from total stillness to a cyclone of movement. He explodes out of the passenger door, making a complete circuit of the alley before stalking over to where one of our gang members crouches next to a body on the ground.

Dante and I follow, and Dante nods his chin at a bright red spray of blood across the front of the dumpster we pass. “Pretty.”

My jaw clenches even harder, but it’s not Dante I’m pissed at. He and Logan are my seconds-in-command, my brothers in every way that counts, and they’re the only two people alive that I trust completely. And right now, I appreciate the way that Dante’s mask of laid-back chill helps me keep the calm I need to deal with this shit, just like I appreciate the way Logan

will always slash right to the heart of a fucked-up situation, carving out the information we need with one brutal, deadly slice after another.

“Dead?” Dante asks as we flank Logan and stare down at the Reaper on the ground.

I recognize the slumped man immediately. I know every fucking person who’s sworn allegiance to me, and this man’s name is Jay Lawrence. He’s not muscle. He runs numbers for us.

“No, not dead,” Logan replies evenly.

Jay’s eyes flutter open, just a crack. “Not... yet,” he wheezes, his hand twitching a little where it’s pressed against his stomach.

Dammit. The fuckers gut-shot him.

“What the fuck happened?” I grit out, forcing my hands to unclench. I know Logan’s probably already asked him the same thing, no doubt building a matrix of facts in that deadly brain of his in the time it took me and Dante to walk over here from the Escalade. But I need to hear the answer myself.

“West Point,” the kid who called in the attack spits out, his chest heaving as he confirms my suspicion.

The kid is roughed up a little, and even if it takes me a minute to place him—Levi Blau, his uncle was loyal to my father but got taken out a year before he did—I’ll make sure West Point pays for that too.

Reapers take care of their own.

I take care of my own.

“West Point, huh? You sure about that?” Dante asks Levi, scratching his chin. He gazes around the alley, rocking back on his heels, then lets out a low whistle. “Pretty far from home to find a few weasels running loose.”

Levi scowls. “Oh, I’m fucking sure,” he says as he starts to pace back and forth next to Jay, every word getting more agitated as he starts to gesture with his hands. “Even if they hadn’t all been wearing those pussy-ass rings, they started this

shit by talking about all the ‘renovations’ Austin had in mind for the neighborhood.”

He comes to a sudden stop, throwing his arm out to take in the whole street as he indicates this section of our territory.

My lip curls at his mention of the gaudy gold rings with the initials *WPG* that the West Point gang members have to earn or die trying to; a three-fingered spread more like brass knuckles than jewelry. And if the fuckers who initiated this attack were acting on Austin McKenna’s orders, then yeah, it was definitely West Point.

Dante snorts, folding his arms over his chest. “Renovations? By fucking *West Point*? Never gonna happen.”

He’s right. It will never happen on my watch. But for a moment, the burning rage rising up in my gut makes it hard to keep my own temper in check.

I carved this territory out of *nothing*, and the three of us have fought, killed, and bled for every fucking inch of it. Even if I didn’t already have a personal reason to hate McKenna, there’s no way I’ll ever let any of it go.

Austin may think he’s taunting us by fucking around like this. That he’s just feeling things out and trying to get under our skin. But what he’s actually done is bought himself a war with a down payment of blood. *Reaper* blood.

“Stabilize him,” I tell Dante, tempering my rage as I nod down at Jay. The gut shot is bad, but he’s a fucking Reaper. One of *mine*. He’s not bleeding out today.

Dante squats down to do it, and I jerk my head toward the back door of the little bodega.

Logan disappears inside it like smoke. If there’s anything useful in there, whether it’s a witness statement or a bullet casing, he’ll find it. He’ll also clean the place up, leaving nothing for the cops to discover.

Not that Halston’s finest bother responding to many 9-1-1 calls in this neighborhood. They know better.

But another lesson I learned from my late father is that the fastest way to fuck yourself over is to assume shit will go down in your favor. It never does, not when it matters, and if anyone shows up to investigate this bullshit other than me and mine, Logan is the one I trust to make sure that investigation ends up dead in the water.

“Walk me through it, Levi,” I bite out, focusing all my attention on him now that I know Dante and Logan are handling the other priorities here. “Everything that happened.”

Dante starts humming something under his breath, improvising a quick field dressing with the trained hands of someone who knows everything there is to know about human anatomy. But I know he’s still absorbing every word as Levi rattles off what he saw. Which boils down to a handful of West Point members strolling right into our territory—*my* territory, *Reaper* territory—and going on a rampage of property damage, harassment, and vandalism until they finally got the attention they’d been looking for.

Until they finally found someone to hurt who would get *my* attention.

My shoulders are so tense they feel like steel, but the more details Levi gives us, the calmer I get.

Jonas Gray, my father, was heavily involved in the criminal underworld of Halston, but he still failed to make a real mark for himself... and that was because his vision wasn’t big enough.

It was because he made mistakes, and because every fucking one of us reaps what we sow.

Including, sooner or later, Austin fucking McKenna.

Austin is opportunistic, arrogant, and bold. And he may be swinging his dick around right now, but he’s also too fucking stupid to realize mine will always be bigger.

He doesn’t understand the three truths that keep this city’s heart beating.

The three truths that are in my blood.

The three truths I used to carve something for myself out of nothing.

The three truths that will turn the Reapers into the legacy my father deserves.

One, territory is power. Two, *loyalty* is power. And three... information? That's not power. Information is what you use to weaponize power, and every word out of Levi's mouth is arming me to the teeth.

"There's still a bullet inside," Dante says, straightening up from where he's been crouching over Jay and wiping his bloody hands on his black jeans. "He needs to see Payton."

He cocks his head, waiting on me to decide if we're done with Levi yet or if I want him to take Jay in to get that taken care of.

But Levi's told us everything he knows, so I grunt, jerking my chin at the kid to dismiss him, my attention moving behind him to where the brick of the building was torn up by the bullets that didn't hit Jay.

I scowl, because that means I'll have to leave Logan here to take care of it.

"Come on now," Dante says to Jay, grinning as he hauls him upright. "Time for you to go play doctor."

Jay is dead weight. Dante's arms bulge, and Jay curses up a storm, all the color draining from his face, but between Dante and Levi, they manage to get him into the back of the Jeep Levi has parked at the other end of the alley.

"You know where to find Payton?" Dante asks Levi. The kid nods, and Dante pats the hood twice. "Take Jay in. She'll fix him up."

"Get Logan," I tell him as soon as they drive off, scowling at the blood stains on the ground. "Let's see if we can track these fuckers."

"Got it. Be right back."

Dante is in and out of the bodega in a flash, Logan on his heels, and the three of us head back toward the Escalade, then

peel out in the direction Levi told us the West Point members ran after they took Jay down.

“They’re getting too fucking bold,” I grit out, my eyes scanning the empty sidewalk. There’s nothing to track, but I’ll leave behind my seconds and let them do some deeper digging, poking around to find out if anyone heard or saw anything useful.

“Sounds like it’s time to remind West Point who owns this territory, Madd,” Dante says, his lips curving into the type of smile that would only seem friendly to someone without any self-preservation instincts. His eyes glint, and he rubs his hands together. “We gonna do something about that? Go hunt some weasels?”

“Have to,” Logan says, his whole body as tense as a tightly coiled spring. “Can’t have them encroaching.”

I take a breath then let it out through my nose, forcing my jaw to relax. I’m still fucking furious, but that’s just fuel to bank for later use.

Right now, it’s time to weaponize some of that information I’ve been gathering.

We’re not the only ones Austin has been fucking with lately, so maybe this blatant attack on our turf will inspire some of his other enemies to help us push back against him before he turns his sights on them.

“Who can you meet with in the 17th Street Gang?” I ask Dante.

“Ruiz, Tyson, Masters.” He ticks the names of a few 17th Street gang members off on his fingers, then grins, reading my mind like he often does. “Finally time to strengthen our ties over there, Madd?”

I nod sharply.

“Allegiance,” Logan murmurs, staring off into space the way he always does when his brain is working overtime. “With *all* the gangs that hate West Point. Not a bad idea.”

“Make it happen, Dante,” I say, nodding at the burly man as his piercing green eyes meet mine in the rearview mirror. “Start with Ruiz. We need to fortify our fucking territory.”

“And then...” Logan trails off, shooting me a glance.

I nod, knowing that just like Dante, he’s picked up on the thoughts surging through my mind. He’s connected the dots and realized that the attack tonight changed everything.

We need to fortify our territory first—every street, sidewalk, and building that we control. And then...

Then we won’t just make West Point pay.

One way or another, we’ll fucking destroy them.

RILEY

IT'S A TUESDAY NIGHT, so instead of a DJ, I'm stripping to a mix from the 90s that the manager at Club M has a serious hard-on for. It's the same one he always plays on slow nights, and it's definitely not taking me out of my head.

"Show me your ass, Destiny," grunts a guy with a beer gut and a stained t-shirt, waving a couple of ones at me from the corner of the stage.

Ones. Fucking Tuesday nights. But every dollar adds up, so I give him a sultry look as I trail my hand up the steel pole I've been working. I circle the pole once, then grab it with both hands and thrust my ass back to give him some good spank bank material for when he's all alone, back in whatever hole he crawled out of tonight.

"Fuck, you're hot." Licking his lips lasciviously, he pulls out a few more bills.

I turn back to the pole and roll my eyes, thankful that the club is too cheap to have mirrors behind the stage. But Beer Gut is right about one thing. I do look hot... although why I bothered with the black garter leg wraps that crisscross my thighs tonight, I don't even know. They look sexy as hell and pair well with the O-ring choker and black, stainless steel-heeled stilettos I'm wearing, but their main benefit is that they'll hold more bills.

In other words, a waste of opportunity on a Tuesday.

Still, a girl's gotta have her fun where she can, and since I've also got a spiked steel hoop in my nose—which made

Chloe raise her eyebrows when I left the apartment earlier since she calls this one my ready-to-start-some-shit mood ring—that about sums up how I’m feeling tonight.

There’s no real reason for me to be in this kind of mood. I’ve just been... *restless* lately.

Maybe I’m just waiting for the other shoe to drop with our dad, because there’s no way in hell I expect him to actually respect the fuck-off I gave him on the phone Friday night.

Or maybe it’s just that I’m ready for something to fucking *happen*. Something to break the boredom of the kind of Tuesday night that I can already tell isn’t going to net me enough to make it worth it.

The music rolls into a remix of some old rap song that Beer Gut Guy was probably jerking off to a decade before I was born, and I go through a few moves on autopilot while I scan the half-empty club.

What I should be doing is trying to catch the eye of anyone who looks like they’ll wave more than a one dollar bill at me, but honestly, I’m just looking around because I’m fucking bored and tired of making eye contact with Beer Gut.

It’s slow as shit, though. Sugar is on her hands and knees on the smaller stage, dry humping the stage floor for a couple of boys who look too young to know what to do with their dicks, the bartender is busy trying to talk one of the girls into sucking his cock for free drinks on her break, and at the two-top over by the staff door in the corner, a couple of men knock back shots and ignore all the dancers, which means they’re doing business.

My gaze starts to skim past them, but it lingers for a moment on the bigger of the two—the one with dark, tousled hair and ink winding over his arms in intricate patterns.

Damn. He’s hot as hell.

Two bearded Daddies in motorcycle leathers saunter up to my stage and block my view of the tattooed man, and I earn a few more bucks gyrating my pussy in their faces for the next few songs.

When they finally head over to the bar, my eyes drift back to the two-top.

The men are still there. The smaller one is hunched over the table, his fingers drumming on it nervously as his mouth moves a mile a minute, but the hot one looks so chill it's almost like he's not paying attention to whatever the other guy is getting so intense about. He's tipped back in his chair with one arm draped over an empty seat next to him, sprawled out as if he owns that corner of the club now, and as his hooded gaze moves lazily around the room, the sexy-as-fuck little smile hovering over his lips makes me want to lick them.

His eyes meet mine, and something electric shoots through me, making the hip roll I'm in the middle of turn into something fucking filthy, just for him.

His gaze locks on to me instead of moving on, and I stare right back at him as I run my hands up my body to cup my breasts like an offering.

The corner he's sitting in is shadowy, but even so, I catch the glint of approval in his eyes as he watches me, momentarily distracted from whatever discussion he's been having with his table partner.

I swing around the pole without looking away from his heated gaze, then drop down and roll my body back up the hard steel, showing him what he's been missing way over there in the corner.

His lips tip up a little more, and he raises the shot glass he's been toying with. He still hasn't taken his eyes off me, and for a second, I think he's going to toast me with it.

Instead, he brings it to his lips and tips his head back, downing it in one go. Then he shakes his head like he's trying to clear it before turning his attention back to the smaller man, who's still talking.

“Squeeze your tits!”

Beer Gut Guy calls out to me, leaning closer to the stage as his tongue hangs out of his mouth, and I jerk slightly, my own attention wrenched back to what I'm doing.

Shit. What am I doing?

I follow his drunken directive, doing a half-assed job of fondling my breasts in a suggestive way as I try to get my heart rate back to normal and talk some fucking sense into myself.

It doesn't matter how restless I've been feeling lately. There's no way I'm hooking up with anybody I meet at Club M again—not after the shitshow dating Rob turned out to be. It's not worth breaking my rules. Not even for someone as gorgeous as the man in the corner, covered in sexy ink that I'm dying to see under better light.

But that doesn't mean I can't give us both a little treat by dancing for him. Hell, I don't think I can *help* dancing for him, not with the way my body is suddenly buzzing with awareness.

I may have heard this outdated playlist a million times, but even though I don't look over at the two-top again for the rest of my set, I work my pole to it like I'm trying to earn Chloe's college tuition all in one night.

It pays off.

Half the patrons who were lingering deeper in the club end up crowding my stage, panting over the way I'm bumping and grinding for them. They stuff my g-string, leather garters, and boots so full of cash that I'm pretty sure I'll walk out of here with the kind of money I'm usually lucky to make on the weekends.

And the whole time, even though I don't let myself look again, I swear I can feel the man at the two-top watching me.

Or maybe I'm just imagining it, indulging in a fantasy as I replay the moment when our gazes met, his gaze hooded and a cocky half-smile tilting his lips.

By the time my set ends, I'm no longer just restless. I've worked myself up so much that I'm feeling full-on *reckless*... so I finally look back over at the two-top in the corner.

He's gone. They both are.

Dammit.

“Whatever,” I whisper under my breath, pissed that I even let myself hope he would still be here.

I slip off the stage as the next dancer strides onto it, stretching out my tired muscles as I head for the dressing room. I worked harder tonight than I normally do on a Tuesday, and I can feel it in my body.

After changing quickly, I head outside, slipping out the back door and into the alley like I always do. But as the heavy metal door closes with a thud behind me, the hair on the back of my neck prickles.

I whip my head around just as the musclehead who followed me to the dressing rooms on Friday night steps closer, blocking my way back into the building.

“Hey, bitch,” he says in a hard voice that’s stone-cold sober this time. “Remember me?”

“No,” I lie, mentally cursing myself for being too distracted to pay attention to my surroundings. “Should I?”

I raise an eyebrow as I ask, crossing my arms over my chest and trying to project an unimpressed vibe. I suddenly wish I’d bothered to put a bra on under my tank top, just to have an extra layer between us.

“Oh, I think you do remember me,” he drawls, crowding into my space. He glowers down at me, his thick eyebrows drawing low over his eyes as his hands ball up into fists. “We got some unfinished business, Destiny.”

“Pretty sure you’re wrong,” I say, lifting my chin even as my heart starts to pound faster. “So why don’t you fuck off?”

My mind races as I speak, trying to figure out the best way out of this. He’s blocking my way to the door, and I’m still several yards away from the mouth of the alley. It wasn’t that hard to take care of this guy the other night when he was sloppy drunk, but there’s a clarity in his eyes that makes me certain he isn’t drunk tonight. He’s just pissed. And it won’t matter how dirty I can fight when he’s sober and has got, what, at least eighty pounds of muscle on me?

As if he can see me working out my odds in my head, a slow smile spreads across Musclehead's face, sending a chill through me.

"Nah," he drawls. "I don't think I will fuck off. Not until I get what I want."

I knew exactly what he wanted when he was drunk, stupid, and horny. Now he just looks straight-up mean, and adrenaline floods my system in a nauseating rush.

He reaches for me, and I slap his hand away. Lunging forward, I go for the same move I used last time, hoping that if I catch him off-guard, I might be able to get a good hit in before he can stop me.

But he's too quick when he's sober, and this time, he's expecting it. He twists to the side when I try to knee him, then punches me in the chest with an open palm, hitting my sternum hard enough to knock the wind out of me. I wheeze for breath, staggering backward and colliding with the brick wall of the building, and he crowds my space, grabbing my left breast through my tank top hard enough to make me cry out.

"Jesus, *fuck*," I gasp, clawing at his wrist in vain as I try to get him off me.

"Yeah, that's right," he croons, a vicious sneer in his voice. "Now you're getting it."

"Let me go, you fucking *pussy*," I pant, my stomach filled with hot rage.

Pinning me to the wall with the weight of his body, he shoves a hand between my legs, his hot breath wafting into my face. "Oh, you talking about this pussy?"

"Fuck... *off!*"

The rough texture of the wall bites into my skin as I writhe and twist, trying to get some leverage to shove him away from me.

But before I can, someone grabs him from behind.

Two large, inked hands fall onto his shoulders, yanking him away from me so fast that I stumble forward and almost trip over him when those same hands throw him to the ground.

“What the fuck?” Musclehead grunts, his voice strained as he lands with a thud.

He tries to push up to his feet, only to be slammed right back down again. And this time he stays down, thanks to two rapid-fire kicks to the ribs from a large boot. Before he can recover from the kick, the boot presses against his throat, pinning him in place as he groans pitifully and tries to roll out of the way.

I stare down at the man on the ground and then slowly raise my eyes to look at the one who’s got him pinned, rubbing my sore boob and trying to get my breathing under control as adrenaline pounds through me.

“Oh my god,” I whisper as my eyes lock with a pair of startlingly green ones.

It’s him. The gorgeous man I spent all night dancing for—whether he knew it or not.

“God? Nah, I just go by Dante,” he says, shooting me a cocky smirk.

“Get... the fuck... *off* me,” Musclehead wheezes from the ground, flopping like a fish as he tries and fails to move the boot off his throat. “You’re a... a fucking *dead* man.”

My rescuer—Dante—ignores him, choosing instead to keep his attention entirely focused on me. “You done working now, princess?”

“Yeah,” I say, disbelief still filling my voice. I can’t believe he stayed. *And thank fuck he did.*

“That’s good,” Dante says, a lazy smile hovering over his lips. “I was hoping I’d catch you after you got off.”

“Did you... hear me, mother...fucker?”

The piece of shit under Dante’s boot sounds like he can’t get enough air, and I can’t find it in myself to feel sorry for him about that.

“Someone’s... about to... to fucking *die*... if you don’t... move... your fucking... *foot*.”

Dante finally looks down at him, cocking his head to the side like he’s examining a trapped bug.

The guy on the ground must not be as dumb as he looks, because even though Dante is still wearing that sexy little half smile, Musclehead’s eyes widen and he goes completely still, like prey who just realized he’s in the sights of a predator.

“You think someone should die here? That can be arranged,” Dante tells him in a tone so mild that it almost sounds friendly.

Almost. But it’s definitely not.

“What should we do with him?” Dante asks, shifting his attention back to me as the man he’s holding down makes a gurgling sound.

I blink, surprised he’s asking me. As satisfying as it is to hear the man who tried to assault me gasping for breath, I don’t really want things to escalate. Management at Club M is a lot more focused on keeping the clients happy than protecting the dancers, so if Musclehead decides to sue for getting his ass kicked outside the club, I’m sure I’ll end up paying for it somehow.

I don’t know what Dante sees on my face as those thoughts race through my head, but even though I haven’t actually given him an answer, he nods.

“All right.” He removes his boot from the shitbag’s throat, then casually slams it into the guy’s ribs again. “Go on then. It’s time for you to fuck off now.”

Musclehead scrambles away, clutching his throat with one hand and his ribs with the other as he bolts for the parking lot like his ass is on fire. Dante doesn’t even watch him go. Instead, he takes a couple of long strides toward me, closing up the distance between us until the spicy, smoky scent of whatever bodywash he uses tickles my nose.

“You all right?” he asks.

“Yeah,” I breathe, tilting my head up to meet his gaze. I’m five-foot-eight, nowhere near a tiny little thing, but he’s still got at least five or six inches on me.

“Good.” His voice is a rough burn as he hooks a finger through the O-ring in the choker I still have on and tugs me a little closer.

The action somehow seems to go straight to my clit, the leftover adrenaline in my system shifting to arousal as my pulse starts to race for an entirely new reason.

“Thank you for that.” I lick my lips, my hands landing on his hips as I nod in the direction where my attacker ran off.

“My pleasure,” he murmurs, giving me one of those hooded-eyed smiles again. His eyes are dark green, such a striking color that I almost wonder if it’s real.

Maybe it is, because this man is *all* color. I want to trace his tattoos with my fingertips, or bury my hands in his messy chocolate brown hair. He caught my eye when I saw him sitting at that table in the corner, but up close, he’s more than just sexy. He’s one of the most breathtaking men I’ve ever seen.

He chuckles like he can read my thoughts, and when his fingers caress my throat under the choker, goosebumps scatter over my skin.

Fuck good decisions. Life is too short, and I need to erase that awful encounter between me and Musclehead with something fun. Something just for me.

So I tip my head toward the staff door at the back of the club. “Come with me?”

“Nah, I’ll make sure you come first,” he says with a wink that makes my clit throb. It would sound like a cheesy line coming from anyone else, but from this man, it just sounds like a promise.

Heart pounding, I lead him back into the club, but I don’t take him to the dressing room. Tuesday nights might be slow, but there will still be a few girls wandering in and out of there until the club closes.

Besides, the dressing room isn't where I've got a bottle of Crown Royal stashed, and the least I can do is offer him a drink for coming to my rescue.

Or at least... I can start with a drink.

"You got a name, princess?" Dante asks as I lead him into the storage room at the opposite end of the building.

He sits down on a stack of crates in the small room, watching as I pull out the bottle of booze I keep stashed behind another crate. There are no glasses to go with it, so I take a drink from the bottle, humming as the whiskey burns down my throat.

"It's Riley," I say as I pass the bottle over. I should probably just give him my stripper name, but for some reason, I really want to hear him say my real name in that deep voice of his.

"Riley," Dante repeats. He rolls the word over his tongue like he's tasting it, and I was right—it sounds incredible. "I like it. It suits you."

"Thanks," I say as he takes a swig and then passes the bottle back. I drink again, letting it burn its way down my throat and pool in my belly to mix with the heat already brewing there. Then I cock my head at him, giving him an assessing look. "I've never seen you here before. I'm guessing you didn't come for the entertainment tonight."

"Nah. Business meeting," Dante says, just like I thought. He reaches out and pulls me closer by the hips, spreading his legs so that I'm standing right between his thighs. "Is that what you brought me back here to talk about? Whether I came for the entertainment or not?"

I shake my head. "No. I just wanted to thank you."

We're close enough that his chest brushes against me as he stands and takes the bottle back, keeping one hand wrapped around my hip in a surprisingly possessive gesture.

He takes another drink, then sets the bottle aside and grips my chin, tipping my head up.

“You already did that, princess.” His thumb moves across my lips, teasing them open. “Got any other ideas?”

He doesn't wait for my answer, and when he leans in and replaces his thumb with his mouth, he tastes just like I expected him to.

Like good whiskey, bad decisions, and exactly what I fucking need right now.

RILEY

DANTE'S HAND circles my throat as he plunges his tongue into my mouth like he owns it, tipping my head back and holding me exactly where he wants me.

Fucking hell, he's good at this.

I run my hands up the hard planes of his chest and lock them around his neck, and he makes a low sound, almost like a purr, as our kiss deepens. I suck on his tongue, tunnelling my hands up through the back of his short hair to keep him close, then gasp softly when he bites my lower lip like he's reminding me who's in charge.

His hand splays across my ass, yanking me into his crotch, and I make a hungry sound as I feel his cock growing against me like a bar of heated steel.

A thick bar. The man is fucking *huge*.

I hook my leg around his to pull our hips even tighter together because I want to feel more of it. He chuckles against my lips when the friction starts to feel good enough to make me moan, then breaks away from my mouth, stroking my throat as he stares down at me.

“Need something, princess?” he asks, using the hand he's got on my ass to encourage what I'm already doing and grind us together even harder.

“You know I do. Isn't that why you're here?” I shoot back, staring him down as my breath starts to come faster.

His eyes blaze with heat, the green almost eclipsed by black, and his answering smile isn't playful or charming this time. It's fucking filthy.

Then his lips crash down on mine again. He almost bows me backward with the force of his kiss, like he's trying to consume me. Inhale me. Imprint himself on me in some permanent, atomic-level way.

The music from the club beats through the walls like a pulse, pounding with the same rhythm as my clit. The same rhythm as the throbbing ache in my abused breast from the fucker Dante took down a few minutes ago. The same rhythm as the way I'm rocking against his body.

It all blends together as he takes control and takes me out of my head.

"Shit, I love how fucking wild you are," he groans, forcing my head back to bite at my jaw before moving lower. Staking his claim with teeth, lips, and tongue as he sucks on my neck in a way that has me gasping out his name.

He slides his hands under my tank top, pushing me back a little so he can shove it up and out of the way. His eyes rake over me with approval when he sees that the tank was all I was wearing.

"Gorgeous."

He thumbs my pebbled nipples, shooting hot sparks down to my pussy, then pulls my tank the rest of the way off and tosses it aside.

"I like this too," he adds, running his hand down my dyed purple and blue hair before wrapping it around his fist.

My scalp burns a little when he tugs on it, forcing my head back and then trailing his fingers down my throat like he's mapping out the marks he's probably left there. He runs his fingers back and forth over my choker, then drags them down to my chest, his eyes following the same path.

"So fucking beautiful," he murmurs. "Even hotter than you looked on stage."

He palms my left breast and squeezes it, the pressure just firm enough to make me gasp. When he tweaks my nipple, I hiss at the sharp burst of sensation as my pussy floods with wet heat.

“Too much?” he asks, arching a questioning brow at me as he keeps playing with my breast.

“Fuck, no,” I whisper, rolling my hips against him like he’s my stripper pole. “Don’t stop.”

He laughs, low and dirty, then puts that hot mouth of his back on mine and uses his grip on my hair like a leash as he walks me backward toward the wall. He presses me against it and grinds against me, holding my arms over my head with one hand as he plays with my body, grinding against me and kissing me like he’s got all damn night.

But as much as I like the idea of this going on forever, my clit is throbbing greedily, my pussy clenching like a second pulse, reminding me how badly I want to feel this man *everywhere*.

“Come on,” I pant, finally ripping my mouth away from his as I rock against him, my hands straining against the hold he’s got on my wrists. “Fuck. *Dante*.”

“Mmm, that’s right.” He gives a little hum, his hooded eyes dropping to my lips. “Say my name just like that.”

“*Dante*.”

I put more emphasis on the word this time, although I’m not sure if it sounds more seductive this way, or if it just sounds like I’m seriously considering punching him if he doesn’t give me more.

His low chuckle vibrates against me, but he drops my wrists, running his hands over my hair again. He drags the strands forward to spread them over my shoulders, draping my dual-colored locks down around my breasts and rubbing the silky hair against them.

“You’re a goddamn work of art, you know that?” he rumbles.

That's actually one of the better compliments a guy has ever given me, and I might even blush a little if he didn't have me so worked up that I feel like I'm about to go crazy if he doesn't fuck me already.

So instead of using words this time, I grab his dick through his jeans.

He grunts, his eyes flashing with heat, then he pulls my hand away and pins it against the wall again.

"Patience, princess," he says with a deliciously hungry smile. He winds his other hand around my hair and tilts my head to one side, then drags his nose along my neck, breathing me in with a groan. "Neither one of us is leaving this room until you've been good and fucked. But you don't get to decide when that happens. And do you know why?" he whispers when he gets to my ear, tightening his grip on my hair.

I shiver, and it's definitely not because I'm cold.

"Because you think you're in charge," I breathe, trying to give a taunting lilt to my voice—although just saying those words makes me feel like I'm about to combust.

Dante chuckles, that languid smile spreading over his face again, although his eyes still glint like a predator's. "Close, but you got one word wrong. I don't think it. I know it. Do you need me to show you?"

As soon as the final word leaves his lips, he spins me around to face the wall, fast enough to make me dizzy, then presses that big, hard body of his against my back, pinning me in place.

I can feel the throbbing beat of the club music working its way inside every inch of me as his hands start to roam over my body like he owns it.

My stomach flutters with anticipation as I push my ass back against him. "Yes. Fucking show me already."

I feel his chuckle as much as hear it. "You're fucking demanding."

A strangled sound somewhere between a laugh and a moan leaves my mouth, because he's one to talk.

But he's also not wrong.

It's been a while since I had sex with anyone, and given that the last dick I had anything to do with was Rob's, it's been even longer since a man has actually pressed all the right buttons to work me up.

Dante licks the skin under my ear, and hot sparks shoot through me. Then he grinds his cock into my ass, clamps his teeth down, and *sucks*.

I let out a ragged noise, a full-body shudder going through me that almost feels like coming.

"Oh god, yes," I pant as soon as I have air again.

"Nah. I told you, it's just Dante." He reaches around to palm my pussy. "Say it."

I roll my hips against his hand, hoping he'll give me more pressure, but he doesn't. A frustrated groan gets stuck in my throat. "Asshole."

He laughs, removing his hand entirely, and I almost smile. He's clearly enjoying making me desperate for him, and despite the fact that I'm not sure how much longer I can take being edged like this, I like it too.

"Fine," I relent, craning my neck to narrow my eyes at him. "Dante."

"That's a good girl." He grins savagely, rewarding me by rubbing my clit through my pants, hard and fast enough that he could almost push me over the peak just like this.

"Fuck, fuck, *fuck*. Right there. Don't stop."

I moan, planting my hands on the wall and resting my forehead against it as he gets me close. I've forgotten everything else about tonight—the great tips I made, the altercation with Musclehead, all of it. The only thing that exists is the scent and feel of the man behind me, his deep voice and confident touch, like he's all my dirtiest fantasies come to life.

“Not such a princess now, are you, wild thing?” he murmurs, dark laughter in his voice. He pushes my hair to the side and kisses the back of my neck, still working me over with those rough, demanding, talented fingers of his. “You’re wet for me, I can smell it.” He buries his face in the crook of my neck and draws in a long breath. “I can feel it.” He drags his fingers up and down the front of my pants, right over my pussy, keeping me right on the edge. “You’re soaked right through.”

I whine before I can stop myself. He’s right. I am. For him.

For that thick cock he keeps grinding against my ass.

I push against the contact between us, going up on my toes and working myself against his fingers, my own fingers splaying over the wall as I try to get him to give me what I really need.

Dante chuckles, the low, dirty sound stroking me all over. “You’re a good fucking dancer, princess. Watching you on stage had me a lot more distracted than I should’ve been. But *this*? Watching you ride my hand is a thousand times better than watching you ride that pole.”

“I was... imagining it was your cock,” I whimper, the truth pulled out of me before I can stop it.

“Fucking hell.”

His hand stops moving for a moment, his forehead resting against the back of my head as if he’s trying to get control of himself. When his fingers move again, they expertly pop my pants open and reach inside. He slides his hand under the scrap of material covering my pussy, and a groan rumbles in his chest.

“You’re shaved,” he growls, sliding his fingers up and down my slick folds before pushing one inside me. “Goddamn, that’s fucking hot.”

He adds a second finger and starts fucking me with them. Not deep enough at this angle, but hard and fast enough to be pretty damn close to what I need.

“Dante,” I breathe, liquid arousal pooling low in my belly.

“You’re so damn wet for me,” he whispers in my ear, still working his fingers in and out of me. “So fucking tight. You’re going to feel incredible on my cock.”

His words go right to my clit, making it throb against the heel of his hand. I’ve never been with a guy whose voice alone—and the filthy things he says—could get me off all on their own, but between his touch and the things he keeps murmuring in my ear, he’s got me balancing on a knife’s edge of pleasure, desperate to hurl myself over to the other side.

“Please!” It bursts out of me. “I can’t... fuck. Just... make me come. Please.”

“How could I deny you when you beg so nice?” he groans.

Then he pinches my clit.

“Oh god!” I half groan, half scream, the orgasm white-hot and utterly brutal when it hits. So blindingly good as it slams through me that I feel like I’m floating.

“Fucking hell,” Dante grits out. “You want me to be your god, baby? Because I’d love to see you on your knees for me.”

I whimper an incoherent response, my whole body quaking so hard from the climax that it’s a damn good thing he’s here to hold me up. He grinds the heel of his hand against my clit to keep it going, whispering filthy, depraved promises in my ear until I sag back against him, the aftershocks finally calming down enough to let me catch my breath.

Not that he gives me much of a chance.

The second the orgasm finally stops rolling through me, he drags his slick fingers away from my pussy and turns me around to face him, pressing me up against the wall again. He tugs at my clothes, and it’s a fucking miracle he doesn’t tear my pants when he yanks them down to my thighs.

“Yes,” I gasp, already wanting more. That was one of the best orgasms of my life, but I have a feeling it’ll be eclipsed by the feeling of coming while he’s inside me.

He gives me a hot smile. “Don’t worry, princess. We’re not done here.”

He reaches between us to unzip his own pants, freeing his cock—and holy shit, it really is a beast.

He thrusts it against me, hands digging into my hips as he stares down at the smooth, rounded head rubbing over the front of my g-string. The silky material is soaked through, wet with my arousal, and he slides that monster against it with a filthy curse, right over my swollen clit.

Once, twice... and then his patience snaps.

“Kick off your shoes,” he orders, barely giving me time to do it before he has my pants all the way off.

He lifts me up, hitching one of my legs around his waist and pulling my g-string to the side to slip his cock into place.

He groans—or maybe we both do—then drops his head to suck hard on my neck as his hips rock forward in short, shallow thrusts that don’t quite penetrate.

Oh fuck. It’s torture. It’s *fire*.

“Do it,” I beg, writhing against him. “Give it to me.”

“Yeah,” he agrees, his breath ragged. He wraps a hand around his cock and slides it through the folds of my pussy again. “Look at that. You’re so fucking wet. Gonna feel fucking incredible.”

We both look down. The scent of sex is so thick in the air that I can taste it with every breath, and he’s right about how drenched I am. I’m so slick with it that it’s dripping down his cock.

I can’t look away.

“Oh god,” I breathe. “Fuck me.”

I feel like I’ve been hypnotized by the sight of his dick, my inner walls already clenching in anticipation of the stretch. All I want is to know what it’s like to have that thing inside me.

But thank fuck one of us is thinking a little more clearly than I am, because even though the low moan Dante lets out tells me he’s just as turned on as I am, he pulls back instead of doing what I begged him to.

Setting my feet on the floor again, he fishes a condom out of his wallet and rolls it on as our ragged breaths fill the space between us. As soon as he's sheathed, he snaps the thin cords of my g-string like some kind of fucking caveman and tosses the ruined panties aside, not even bothering to see where they land as he lifts me up and wraps my legs around his waist.

His cock notches at my entrance again, and this time, there's no hesitation.

Holding me in place with his hands firm on my ass, he bottoms out in one smooth thrust.

RILEY

“OH FUCK,” I gasp, my eyes rolling back. “*Yes.*”

“Hell, yes,” Dante echoes, resting his forehead on mine and staying there for a minute, breath ragged, and muscles locked. Every inch of his body vibrates with coiled tension as he grits out, “You feel even better than I expected.”

So does he. He really is big. He fills me up so damn well I almost can’t stand it. And I definitely can’t stand it if he doesn’t—

“Move,” I gasp, rocking against him. “God, I need... need...”

“I’ve got you,” he grunts, pulling back and then slamming deep enough to knock the breath out of me.

He goes from zero to sixty, setting a hard pace as if he’s trying to ruin me with his cock. And honestly, he might get his wish. Because not only is it big, but he actually knows how to use it.

“Shit, princess. You take me... so... fuckin’... well.”

He wraps a hand around the back of my head, pinning me to the wall while he does his damndest to pound me right through it. He’s not trying to show me who’s in charge anymore. He doesn’t have to. Not when my body slams into the drywall with every word and I’m making noises that I’ve never made before in my life.

“Oh fuck, oh Jesus, Jesus *fuck*, Dante.”

His cock is working some kind of magic that has a whole stream of I-don't-even-know-what spilling out of my mouth, but I'm too busy holding on for the ride to give a shit what I'm actually saying.

I can feel every hard inch of him, inside and out, and his thick, inked-up biceps flex under my hands as he slams into me again, hitting it just right.

“Louder, wild thing,” he orders when I gasp. “Take what you asked for. Let me hear it.”

Hell, the whole fucking club probably hears it.

And it's not just the desperate sounds he's got me making. Not just the wet slap of his hips or the hot, filthy way he grunts as he pounds into me. He's fucking me so hard that shit is tipping over and falling off the supply shelves around us. Shit that breaks. Shit that, if anyone ever finds out I was back here, they'll take out of my earnings.

Not that I care about that right now.

“Fuck!” I gasp as he hits a spot that sends a jolt through my entire body.

“Good?” he asks, not slowing down at all.

“Harder,” I pant. “Is that... all you've got?”

Dante laughs as my pussy starts to clench and ripple around him, then he tangles his hand in my hair and slams into me so hard that I cry out.

The noise pours from my lips just as the club music in the distance pauses for a set change, and Dante captures my loud cry with his mouth. When the thumping beat vibrating the wall he's got me pressed against picks up again, he sucks on my tongue with a groan as I buck against him.

He paused balls-deep inside me when the music did, and now he grinds his hips in a circle that forces his cock in even deeper. His thick length is throbbing right up against my g-spot, so close to forcing another breath-stealing orgasm from me that I can almost taste it.

“Faster,” I demand. “I just—I need—”

“Goddamn, I love how greedy you are,” he mutters. “You need it hard, princess? You want to make sure I’m all you feel tomorrow? You want to think of me every time you take a step? I can do that.”

As he speaks, he starts fucking me again like he means it, knocking the air out of my lungs with every thrust. I cling to him, doing my best to keep my drooping eyelids from falling shut completely as my muscles shake from the exertion of holding on.

But then he stops, pulling out so abruptly that it leaves me gasping.

“Wha—?”

Before I can finish speaking, he spins me around to face the wall, pressing me roughly against it.

“*Shit*,” I curse, the word punched out of my chest.

“You’re so fucking incredible,” he rasps. “Your body is pure fire.” He grabs my hips, yanks them back, and slides back inside me from behind. “And fucking you is... goddamn. It’s perfect.”

He bottoms out with a single, brutal thrust, and I instantly forgive him for pulling out earlier.

“This tight little pussy is gonna kill me,” he grunts, his fingers digging into my hips.

Hearing the strain in his voice pushes me even higher. He’s close to losing it too, and it’s hot as hell to hear.

He reaches around and finds my clit, forcing a filthy sound out of my throat.

“Milk me,” he orders, his touch just as demanding as his voice.

It’s too much and exactly what I need all at once, and my inner walls clench and release around his fat cock, doing just what he told me to. Milking it until he’s the one making depraved sounds.

He holds me in place, pressing my upper body into the wall as his cock punches into me again and again, his breath an inferno on the back of my neck as he grunts with every thrust.

“So... fucking good,” he rasps. “Just like that. More, princess. That’s it. Now scream for me.”

He clamps his teeth down on my shoulder, his cock spearing me so deep that I swear I can taste it, and it’s over. I don’t just scream for him, I come so hard that it feels like he really did break me.

Waves of pleasure keep washing over me as he fucks me through it. I can’t move and don’t want to. Not now, not ever again, not even after he slams into me one more time and fills up the condom with a hoarse shout, then finally goes still, breathing hard.

Our breaths sync after a long moment, his body hot and hard and musky with our sex as his weight presses me against the wall.

I close my eyes, lost in the afterglow. All the restlessness I’ve been plagued with lately disappears for a minute, melting into a little slice of bliss that can’t last—but that was definitely worth breaking a few rules for.

“Holy shit,” I breathe, the words coming out slow as molasses.

“You took the words right outta my mouth.” Dante pushes my hair to the side and kisses the back of my neck with a low chuckle, then slaps my ass and pulls out.

The sharp sting makes me bite back a smile, my entire lower body tingling.

“I gotta admit, princess, I’m glad my business meeting ended up being here tonight,” he says, sliding off the condom and tossing it into a little trash can in the corner as I turn around to face him.

“Me too,” I murmur as he tucks himself away and zips up his pants.

Dante passes me my pants like a gentleman, and I pull them on bare, then snag what's left of my g-string off the floor and dangle the scrap of sex-scented material in front of his face.

“Not so glad you cost me these,” I say, arching a brow.

That's a lie. Sacrificing a pair of panties for the hottest sex I've ever had was totally worth it.

Dante chuckles, snatching the destroyed g-string from my hand and pocketing it before I can stop him.

“Memento,” he says with a wink. “I forgot to pick up a postcard in the giftshop, so this will have to do.”

“You're an ass.” I snort, trying not to grin, then look around. “Where's my top?”

His eyes heat up a little, and he moves in, wrapping one of those big, inked-up arms around my waist as he palms my breast. “You sure you want it? This is a good look on you.”

His hands on me feel a little too good, so I laugh and shove him away. Too good isn't what I'm here for. This was a one and done, and it needs to stay that way. Especially because it already feels like he got to me more than he should have.

I just needed some stress relief, and he delivered. But now...

“We need to get out of here,” I tell him, spying my tank top hanging from a tipped-over case of cleaning supplies on one of the shelves.

I step over to grab it and slip it over my head, and Dante nods, a little smile hovering over his mouth.

“Sure thing, princess.”

But instead of leaving, he grabs the bottle of whiskey and takes another swig.

He doesn't swallow it. Just lets the bottle dangle from his hand, sauntering over and crowding me up against the shelf behind me with a look in his eyes that makes me want to fuck him all over again.

“Dante,” I start, my pulse speeding up as I rest a hand on his chest.

He shuts me up by kissing me, letting the whiskey pour into my mouth as he wraps a hand around the back of my neck and holds me in place.

It’s possessive and dominant and hot as hell, and I moan, molding myself against him as my body throbs in response.

I swallow the whiskey, and he takes my mouth by storm.

No, not by storm. He’s a fucking tsunami. All that laid-back charm and lazy flirtatiousness is the deceptively gentle swell you’d see moving over the surface out in the deep. But once it hits the shore?

He’s not just intense, he’s fucking devastating.

I wrap myself around him, and he bites at my lips, devouring me like he’s starving. Kissing me like he’s trying to memorize my taste. Taking what he wants like he needs to get enough to last the rest of his life.

Or maybe *I’m* the one trying to get enough. Because the truth is, this man isn’t just a bad decision. He could easily become a dangerously addictive one.

Something crashes out in the hallway a few seconds later, loud voices moving past us, and I finally snap out of it when Dante laughs ruefully, his mouth curving against my lips as our eyes open at the same time.

“Gotta go,” he whispers, tightening his grip on the back of my neck for a second. Then he kisses me hard one more time, sighs, and steps back. “We good?”

“Golden.” I grin at him, my body still humming as proof of how true that is.

I’m halfway tempted to give him my number, although I have a rule about doing that too. But I’ve already broken the rule about not hooking up with anyone else here at the club, and even though I wouldn’t mind a repeat of what happened tonight, I know it’s probably better if this stays a one-time thing.

Still, I'd be lying if I said I didn't consider it.

"I'd tell you to be good," he drawls with a wink, "but I have a feeling that's not really your style."

I laugh, because even though neither of us knows more about the other than our names, he's not wrong. "Guess you figured me out."

His eyes roam over me appreciatively, his eyelids dropping to half-mast as he runs his fingers over my cheek. "I'd say so."

He tucks a purple strand of my hair behind my ear, then lets his fingers drift down, tracing designs on my neck. Trailing them over all the spots where he sucked... bit... marked me.

He presses on one, and I drag in a sharp breath.

His eyes whip up to meet mine, his fingers hovering over my skin, and I can't look away. Something hovers between us, and when I swallow hard, I know he can feel the movement beneath his fingertips.

After a long moment, he gives me a languid smile and drops his hand.

"Looks good on you," he says. "Thanks for making my night, princess."

And then, saving me from my own stupidity, he leaves.

The breath I didn't even realize I was still holding whooshes out of me, and I turn away from the door and do a slow scan of the room. It's good that he's gone. That was... intense.

I stash my bottle of Crown Royal out of sight again and straighten up a few things that fell over while he rocked my world. Then I quit, because I'm not a fucking housekeeper and I really need to get out of here. The sex was...

I mean, yeah, it was insanely good, but also too much. *Too* intense, based on the way I got a little too caught up in it.

I'm just glad Dante's not a regular like Rob. It means I'll probably never see him again, so now I can check off my bad

decision for the night and get on with my life.

I close my eyes for a second, inhaling the scent of sex and musk and his distinctive, spicy aftershave. Then I snap them open, force him out of my head, and slip out of the supply room.

Thankfully, I don't run into anyone else as I leave the club. Musclehead is nowhere to be seen as I head to my car and slip inside, and I take a second to smooth down my sex-tangled hair before I turn the key in the ignition and peel out.

As usual, Chloe is still awake when I get home, curled up in her favorite spot on the couch. She glances up at me as I open the door, and her eyes immediately zero in on the hickeys on my neck.

Her jaw falls open slightly before she snaps it shut with a smirk. "Guess it worked, huh?"

"What worked?" I ask, closing the door behind me and locking it.

"Your mood ring," she clarifies, coming up behind me and turning me around to face her. Her eyes skip from one mark to the next, darting over my throat, my collarbone, and the spot where he bit my shoulder. Then she arches an eyebrow. "Good night, sis?"

I roll my eyes. "It was a Tuesday. Slow as shit."

The look she gives me almost makes me laugh. "It doesn't look like it was a slow one," she says pointedly.

I smirk, unable to stop myself. "I guess you could say it ended well."

"Yesss! Tell me everything," she exclaims gleefully. Then she frowns. "Unless you ended the night with Rob, because—"

"Oh, hell no." I cut her off, making a gagging noise. "But I'll have to tell you tomorrow. I need to shower and get some sleep."

"Oh, come on..." Chloe puts on the pouty face that's served her well since we were little kids, blinking hopefully at me.

I chuckle, but it turns into a yawn. Tuesdays really are slow, and it's no later than I'm used to getting home, but Dante wore me the fuck out.

I ruffle Chloe's hair and brush past her, stifling another laugh when I hear her mutter something about what a party pooper I am.

Part of me is tempted to skip the shower and let Dante's unique smoky scent linger on my skin for a little longer, a reminder of what turned out to be a pretty damn incredible night. But I head to the bathroom anyway, turning on the spray and stepping under it when it reaches a lukewarm temperature.

By the time I finally towel off and crawl into bed, the only reminder of Dante I have is the lingering memory of his hands on my body, and how exhausted I am—in a good way, for once.

RILEY

A LOUD BANGING sound drags me out of a deep sleep.

My eyes snap open, but it takes me a second to make sense of anything as I sit upright in bed, my eyes darting to the clock.

Eight in the morning?

“Jesus,” I mutter, squeezing my eyes closed again and rubbing my temples with a groan. With the hours I work, this is definitely not a time of day when I’m ready to deal with anything at all.

But the banging on our front door doesn’t let up, so I guess I’ve got no choice.

I roll out of bed and shake off the last dregs of a dream I don’t really remember, still feeling a little disoriented. Fortunately, adrenaline helps me feel more alert by the time I wrap a robe around myself and make it out to the living room.

Alert... and wary. There’s no way that kind of ruckus means anything good, especially not in our neighborhood.

“What is it?” Chloe mumbles, emerging from her bedroom with a yawn.

I let my hand hover over the top deadbolt as I check the peephole.

“It’s Frank,” I mutter, not entirely surprised. Our dad’s a worthless asshole who doesn’t deserve the title of parent, but he can also be persistent as hell when he thinks he’ll be able to squeeze something out of someone.

I grimace. His face is sweaty and his eyes look a little panicked, so this will be about as fun as getting a Brazilian.

“Are you going to let him in?” Chloe asks, hovering behind me.

I can’t tell if she wants me to or not, probably because she hasn’t made her mind up about it herself. It’s one of the many reasons I had to get her out of his house and have made sure we have as little contact with him as possible ever since. Chloe knows he’s a deadbeat, but her heart is too big, too hopeful.

Frank doesn’t deserve it... but he’s always happy to take advantage of it.

“Riley? Chloe?” he calls out before I can decide whether to tell him to fuck off through the door or let him in so I can say it to his face. “You girls home?”

Without giving me a chance to answer, he starts pounding on the door again.

“Guess I am,” I tell Chloe, rolling my eyes as I start opening the locks. Letting him stay out in the hall causing a ruckus is likely to attract more problems than it will solve.

I finally fling the door open, and he stumbles forward mid-knock, grunting as he catches himself on the doorframe.

I glare at him, but his eyes dart right past me and settle on Chloe.

“Hey, little girl,” he wheezes, giving her a sickly smile and wiping at the sweat beading on his forehead with a nasty-looking handkerchief he pulls from his pocket.

“Hi, Dad,” Chloe answers, crossing her arms over her chest and shrinking away from him.

That does it. My protective instinct surges inside me, and I step between them, cutting off his view of her.

“Get the hell out of here, Frank,” I demand. “I told you the other night to leave us alone.”

“Oh, come on now,” he says, running a hand over his stringy dark hair. “Don’t be that way. Can’t I visit my two

favorite girls once in a while?”

“If by visit, you mean stop by to pull your usual crap, then no.”

“I don’t know what you mean,” he insists, his eyes darting to Chloe.

He knows just as well as I do that she’s the easier mark, and he’s right, because she instantly caves.

“What are you doing here, Dad?” she asks. “Is everything okay?”

“Course it is, ’course it is.” He pulls out the stained handkerchief again and dabs at his face. “I just, uh... just wanted to see how life is treating you two. School out for the summer yet, Chlo?”

She shrugs one shoulder and shakes her head. She’s got a few weeks left, and she knows just as well as I do that he doesn’t actually give a shit. The only thing he’s accomplished by asking her for a piece of information he should’ve already known is to prove what a bad father he is.

He glances back over his shoulder, then shuffles a few more feet into the apartment. “And how about you, Riley? Got any, uh, plans for the summer?”

What I’ve got is zero patience for this bullshit, and the antsy way he’s acting is setting my teeth on edge.

“Did you miss the part where I told you to leave?” I ask coolly. “I don’t care what kind of trouble you’ve gotten yourself into this time. You’re not welcome here.”

He laughs nervously, as if any part of what I just said was a joke.

Chloe takes a step sideways so that she can see him again. “What about you, Dad? Are you still, um, what was it? Something about selling car parts?”

He grimaces, although it might have been meant as a smile, and waves a hand in the air. “Yeah, no, uh, the import-export thing, it... well, guess you could say it sort of fell

through.” He clears his throat and glances back over his shoulder again. “I’ve moved on. Am moving on. Er, trying to.”

“Oh? To what?” my sister asks.

Frank starts spinning some bullshit answer, and I roll my eyes. Whatever pie he’s got his fingers in now, it’s pretty much guaranteed to “fall through” just like his little chop shop did. Probably because he’s always too busy trying to figure out how to score a quick buck to actually work for a living.

I’m done waiting for him to get to the inevitable point. In fact, the way he hasn’t gotten to the point yet is starting to give me a bad feeling. That, and the fact that he’s still sweating.

Whatever’s got him so nervous, I want no part of it.

“We don’t care,” I interrupt, cutting him off mid-sentence. “And like I said, it’s time for you to leave.”

This apartment may not be much, but it’s the home I’ve made for Chloe and me. Our safe space. And I’ll be damned if I let him ruin that.

“Well now, I can’t... can’t do that yet,” he says, swallowing hard. He glances over his shoulder again, looking strung out and haunted. “I’m sorry.”

The heavy sound of footsteps filters in from the hallway outside, and I grimace. The last thing I want to do is air our dirty laundry in front of the other tenants in our shitty building, so I grab Frank’s arm and push him bodily toward the door.

“Get out,” I hiss. “Now.”

“I’m sorry,” he repeats, whining and stinking of sweat as he grabs onto the doorjamb and resists when I try to shove him through it. “I had no choice. I got... I got in too far over my head.”

“Not our problem.”

Frank swallows. “You gotta understand, I couldn’t come up with the money any other way. They were gonna kill me, Riley.”

As he finishes speaking, a small group of men appear in the doorway behind him... and my breath catches as I realize that they're all armed.

"Riley?" Chloe says from behind me, sounding just as scared as I'm suddenly feeling.

The newcomers push Frank aside and then brush right past me as they barge into our apartment.

The last one inside is a man with dark, slicked-back hair, hazel eyes, and a long, straight nose. There's a cruel twist to his lips as his gaze flicks around the room, and he grabs my arm in a bruising hold, then turns toward Frank. "This Chloe?"

Ice fills my veins. *Fuck.*

"Yes," I lie at the same time that Frank proves exactly how spineless he is by pointing to my sister.

"No, Chloe is that one," he mutters.

The low-browed brute standing next to her yanks her against his side with a leer.

She screams, and the sound cuts right through me. I twist out of the tight hold the dark-haired man has on me and lunge toward Chloe.

But before I can reach her, the man who's holding her draws his gun in a smooth motion. He points it at my head, and the sound of the safety clicking off makes my footsteps stutter, freezing me in place.

I stare down into the little round hole at the end of the barrel, my pulse jacking up so fast that I'm dizzy with it.

"R-Riley?" Chloe whispers, her voice shaking as bad as my knees are.

I swallow hard, my gaze shifting slowly from the gun to the man holding it. He's got a jagged scar on the back of his hand, but what catches my eye more than that is the fact that he's wearing three gold rings spread across his pointer, middle, and ring finger.

Shit.

Those rings scare me almost as much as the weapon in his hand does. Because I know what they mean.

West Point.

“Let her go.” I force the words out, my voice hoarse. “Please. Whatever this is about, we... we’ve got nothing to do with it.”

The dark-haired bastard who grabbed me near the door saunters over, casually pushing the man’s gun down and out of the way.

“Chill, Brett,” he drawls. “No value in damaged merchandise.”

I gasp, air rushing into my lungs like a million tiny daggers. My bones feel like they’ve liquified from a mixture of relief and lingering terror. I’m no longer staring down the barrel of a gun, but that doesn’t mean we’re safe.

“Whatever Frank’s done, it has nothing to do with Chloe and me,” I repeat, turning my attention to the dark-haired one, since he’s obviously in charge. “Let her go.”

He laughs, stepping forward and running a single finger down the neckline of my robe.

“You’re right about one thing,” he says with a hard smile that doesn’t reach his eyes. His finger travels all the way to my navel, and he tugs at the belt holding my robe closed. “*You* don’t have anything to do with this.”

The belt comes undone, and I stiffen, my whole body going tense. I’ve got more on under the robe than I wear when I strip, and he doesn’t even look as it falls open, but I still feel violated.

The man leans in, lowering his voice almost conspiratorially as he adds, “At least, you won’t have anything to do with it if your dear old dad is telling the truth.”

“I am,” Frank blurts, nodding so hard that sweat droplets spray off his chin. “Yeah, Austin, ’course I am. Would I lie to you? I wouldn’t do that. Nuh-uh. Never.”

I belt my robe closed again as soon as this Austin asshole's attention shifts back to Frank, my hands shaking a little as I do it.

"You sure about that?" Austin asks, his eyes narrowing at Frank. "Because that hasn't been my experience so far. You'd better not be thinking about going back on our deal now."

When Frank wipes the handkerchief over his face again, his hand is shaking too.

"I-I'm not, I'm not," Frank stutters. He points at my sister, who's gone white as a sheet. "That's her. That's my little Chloe. Pretty, right? Just like I said. Just like I promised. Promised and delivered."

"No," I whisper, a sick feeling curdling my stomach. "What the fuck are you talking about? No one's delivering anything."

Austin ignores me and gives Chloe the same coldly lascivious once-over he just gave me.

"She'll do," he says after a minute, which makes Frank let out a sigh of relief and Chloe whimper, turning her big, pleading eyes on me.

"No!" I say louder.

I still don't know what exactly is happening here, but I know for damn sure whose fault it is. I whirl on Frank, my hands tightening into fists.

"You fucking piece of shit," I hiss. My nails dig into my palms, but I barely feel it. "Why have you been talking to these gang bangers about Chloe? Why did you bring them here? How could you... why... what..."

I can't breathe. Can't get the words out. There's no air left in the room, and the sick feeling inside me is threatening to suck me under.

"Now, Riley..." Frank starts.

I lunge for him, a wash of red filling my vision, and he lifts his hands up to ward me off and scrambles backward.

Someone grabs me before I reach him, twisting my arms behind my back so I can't move.

"Enough of this shit," Austin says, snapping his fingers at his minions. "Let's—"

"No," I blurt before he can say *go*.

Brett is still holding on to my sister, and even if I don't know everything that's happening here, I know enough. They're not just planning on leaving. They're planning on leaving with Chloe.

I can't let that happen.

I have to protect her.

I ignore the burning in my shoulders as I twist around in the grip of the man holding me so I can look at Austin. "Listen, I don't know what Frank told you—"

"Don't fight it, honey girl," Frank cuts in, dabbing his sweaty face again. "This is the only way."

I jerk against the goon holding me, my head whipping back toward Frank. "What the fuck did you get us into?"

He clears his throat. "Austin here, he... uh, he invested in, well, we were... business partners." Austin snorts, and Frank scrambles to correct himself. "Not partners. I was just an investor. He was in charge, of course, but now there's... there's been a problem."

"A money problem," I whisper, my mind racing. He must be talking about the chop shop he set up a year or so ago. The illegal one that he was apparently stupid enough to get the West Point Gang to invest in.

Frank nods, his head bobbing up and down like his neck can barely support it. "Things fell through with the, uh, with the operation."

"Enough," Austin cuts in impatiently. "Your father owed us money. Money he couldn't pay. Luckily for him, he convinced us he had something else of value to sell that would cover it."

Oh, fuck. Chloe. He means *Chloe*.

Frank sold my sister to cover his debt.

“Father of the fucking year,” one of the West Point men mumbles with a dark laugh.

“No! You can’t take her!” I blurt. “Please,” I add, my voice harsh with desperation. “I’ll do anything.”

“Riley,” Chloe sobs before the man holding her slaps a meaty hand over her mouth. Her eyes go wide, tears welling up and spilling over as she shakes her head.

“Take me instead,” I whisper, my throat going tight at the muffled sound of her whimper.

“Ah. Very touching.” Austin gives a mocking laugh. “But I think I’ll pass. Your sister is younger, and that means she’ll be more profitable. Besides...” He gives me a cold smile that doesn’t reach his eyes. “You’re too fucking mouthy.”

I bite my tongue so hard it almost bleeds, holding back the curses I want to hurl at him.

I have to. I have to show him that I’m not mouthy.

“Please,” I repeat, my voice hoarse and the words physically painful. “I’ll do whatever you want.”

He rakes his eyes over me again, then shakes his head.

“Nah.” The cool dismissal in his voice punches the air out of my lungs. “I think we’ll stick with the one we already have. Frank? You’re paid in full. Let’s go.”

“No!” I shout, doing my best to wrench away from the thug holding me.

“You really want to keep fighting, bitch?” the man whispers in my ear, pressing something cold and hard against my ribs.

His gun.

I go still, gasping as the horrible truth sweeps through me. There’s nothing I can do. If I try to fight my way out of this, I’ll only get myself killed.

Me and Chloe both.

Brett still has his hand over her mouth, and her eyes stay locked on to mine as they hustle her toward the door.

She can read me like a book, and even though she's quaking with terror herself, she subtly shakes her head. She knows as well as I do that there's nothing I can do right now that won't make it worse.

"Let me... let me say goodbye," I rasp. "Please. She's my sister."

Austin snorts, but he doesn't say no, and the burly man holding Chloe takes his hand off her mouth and shoves her toward me.

"Be quick," he grunts as Chloe flings herself into my arms, shaking.

I hug her against me, squeezing tight and whispering promises I'm not sure I'll be able to keep into her ear. But I lied. I'm not going to say goodbye. That's too fucking final, and I *will* fix this.

I'll find a way.

I have to.

"I'm going to see you soon, okay?" I whisper, cupping her face and wiping her wet cheeks. "I've got you."

She nods, her breath hitching. "I know." She swallows, the doubt in her eyes breaking my heart. "I love you, Riley."

I bite my lip and nod, because if I open my mouth again, I'm going to lose it.

And then Austin yanks her away. He jerks his chin at his men, and a second later, they're gone. All except Frank.

The apartment is deathly quiet... or maybe it's loud and I just can't hear it. I can't hear anything. Can't think. Can't feel.

Frank's shoulders slump, and the tiny movement catches my attention. In a flash, all the fury I've been holding back explodes like shrapnel, ripping me apart inside.

I wheel on him, my fist already drawing back. I hit him hard in the face, and his head whips to one side.

“You fucking asshole,” I scream, tears clogging my voice as I punch him again. And again. And again. “You worthless—piece of—shit.”

He scrambles backward with his hands up to protect his head, shuffling toward the door like the spineless coward he’s always been, bleeding all over the carpet runner Chloe picked out.

He sold her.

Fucking *sold* her.

“Riley, now, h-h-hold up,” he stammers, cowering away from me. “This was the only way. You gotta understand—”

“I’ll never understand,” I cut him off viciously. I shove him backward just as he makes it to the door, driven by a fury so pure it feels like lightning. “Don’t come back here. Not fucking ever.”

He opens his mouth, his lip swollen and teeth smeared with red, and my jaw clenches.

I can’t stand to hear anything else from him. Can’t stand to see him. Can’t stand that he’s here and Chloe’s not.

“Not ever, Frank,” I repeat before he can get a word out, shoving him out into the hallway. “Don’t speak to me. Don’t let me see you. Don’t even dare to fucking breathe any of the same air that I do, that *Chloe* does, or else I’ll do what that West Side prick didn’t have the balls to.” I narrow my eyes, and his face goes white. “It would be easy,” I hiss. “Because you’re already fucking dead to me.”

He believes me. I can see it in his eyes.

Good.

He gives me one jerky nod before I slam the door in his face. The loud banging sound cuts through the air like thunder, leaving silence echoing in its wake.

“Oh god,” I whisper, all the adrenaline draining from me as I sink to the ground, leaning against the door. I don’t bother to throw the deadbolts. It doesn’t matter. They didn’t work. They didn’t protect Chloe.

I didn’t protect her.

A ragged sob tears from my lips, and I cover my mouth as hot tears pour down my cheeks in an unstoppable wave.

For a brutal, endless slice of eternity, I cry like I never have before, drowning in it. Grief, terror, and rage fill me... until finally, a white-hot hatred rises up above everything else, burning bright enough to pull me back from the darkness.

I swipe angrily at my cheeks, chest heaving, and shove everything but the hatred aside. None of that is going to serve me now.

There’s a reason why I didn’t say goodbye to Chloe. Because this isn’t the end.

Standing up, I curl my hands into fists and force my heart rate to slow so that I can *think*. I’ll do anything to get my sister back. I just have to figure out what.

I want to force Frank to make this right, but I dismiss that thought as fast as it comes. That idea isn’t just stupid, it’s hopeless. He’s weak, and even if he didn’t already have a history of letting me and Chloe down, it’s clear there’s no way he can stand up against The West Point gang. They’re brutal, powerful, and feared in this corner of Halston.

And I’m nobody.

Not in their world.

I can’t go up against them, and I’ve never had anyone to turn to for help, but...

West Point has enemies too.

My heart is suddenly racing again, because the idea that’s slowly beginning to form in my mind is reckless and insane. It’s the kind of thing Chloe would rip me apart for even thinking of.

But it's also the only option I've got.

I push away from the door and race into my bedroom, fumbling for my phone with shaking hands. I don't care how insane this is. I don't care about the risks. All I care about is getting Chloe back.

"Tai?" I say when the call finally connects after a thousand rings.

"Fucking hell, Riley," my dealer groans, sounding half asleep. "Gonna charge you double. What the fuck time is it, the crack of dawn? You're gonna have to wait. I don't deliver until—"

"No. I'm not calling for weed. I need information."

He snorts. "Not what I sell, babe."

I hear the sound of bedding rustling and the low murmur of a woman's voice in the background, and instead of trying to cajole him, I cut right to the chase.

"Where do the Reapers crew hang out?"

"What?" Tai suddenly sounds a lot more awake. "Why the hell would you ask me that?"

My knuckles ache from how hard I'm clutching the phone, and I lick my lips, staring at the wall as agitation churns inside me. "Because I know you keep tabs on gang activity around here."

"Yeah, so I can make sure not to cross them." He blows out a breath. "I'm small time, but the Reapers? Fuck. They're not."

"I know. I'm counting on it. So tell me where I can find them, okay?"

"No. Not okay." His voice takes on a sharp edge, and the background noise fades, as if he went into a separate room. "What's this about? Because you seriously don't want to fuck with those guys."

He's right. I don't.

But I have to.

I close my eyes, and the look on Chloe's face when West Side dragged her out of here is all I can see behind my eyelids. "Tai. Please."

He's quiet for so long that I almost think he's cut off the call. But finally, he lets out a frustrated groan.

"Shit. I don't want to know what this is about."

It wasn't a question, but I reassure him anyway. "You don't need to worry about your name coming up. I promise I won't mention it. Just tell me where I'm likely to find them, and then you can forget we ever talked."

He hesitates for another half second, then reluctantly rattles off the name of some bar in a part of Halston I've always steered clear of. He gives me a few other sketchy locations I can check if I don't find them there, then sighs again.

"Hey, listen. I know it's none of my business, especially since I never told you any of this, but... be careful, okay?"

"I will," I promise, even though we both know it's a lie.

Then I hang up and drop the phone, glancing down at the scrap of paper where I hastily scribbled the addresses he gave me. I'll start with the most likely one tonight, then work my way down the list. And if I don't find what I'm looking for, I'll start from the top all over again.

I won't stop until I find the Reapers.

Because they're the only chance I've got.

RILEY

IF THE REAPERS are going to be at the bar Tai mentioned, it's not going to be until after dark, so I have several hours to kill before I can begin my search. It's hell waiting around all day, trying not to think about what Chloe is going through, but I distract myself by doing as much research on the gang as I can. When seven o'clock rolls around and the sky starts to darken to an inky indigo, I finally head into the bathroom to get ready.

If there's one thing I know how to do, it's get men to say yes to me. But these aren't just men. They're ruthless men. Criminals. Killers.

My hand shakes as I apply eyeliner, jerking the small brush across my eyelid in a jagged black line.

"Dammit," I mutter, dropping it into the sink and squeezing the edge of the counter until I get ahold of the trembling. I have to be in better control than this.

I tilt my head to inspect the damage, then make quick work of fixing it. After spending the last couple of years on stage, I can do my makeup in my sleep, but tonight, no amount of makeup can hide the truth.

My eyes are too wild. I feel strung out, and it shows.

I do the best I can anyway, going a little heavier on the concealer than usual to try to hide the slight puffiness around my eyes from crying.

Finally satisfied, I head into the bedroom to get changed, then survey myself in the full-length mirror on one wall.

I smooth my hands down my thighs, twisting to the side to get another angle. I decided to go with something that walks the line between badass and sexy, and I feel like I'm dressed for battle as I take in my black leather pants, motorcycle boots, and fitted white shirt with a distressed calfskin jacket over it.

Something still isn't quite right, though, and it takes me a minute to realize what it is.

My mood ring. Fuck.

My hands start shaking again as I unfasten the small teardrop-shaped blue gem I slipped into my nose piercing after my crying jag this morning. It's a sentimental piece of jewelry, something Chloe gave me right after I moved her out of our dad's house, but it reminds me too much of her, and I can't afford to cry anymore.

Stepping toward the dresser, I open the chipped music box I can still remember our mother humming along to and riffle through my options. There's only one that fits.

I fit the black faux-diamond skull into my piercing and step back to get the whole effect in the mirror.

"Uh-oh," I can almost hear Chloe saying, laughing as she gives me shit. *"That one? Looks like you're pissed off and ready to do something about it, sis."*

She's right.

Or she would be right, if she were here.

With one more backward glance in the mirror, I turn on my heel and head out.

The dive bar I go to first is the one Tai told me would be my best bet, since apparently the leader of the Reapers spends a fair amount of time there with his seconds. Unlike the West Point Gang, the Reapers don't wear flashy jewelry or, like some of the other small-time gangs in Halston, make their members get tattoos to show their affiliation.

That doesn't matter. If they're as dangerous as their reputation says, I'm sure I'll be able to figure out who they are.

I pull up outside the place, taking in the flickering neon sign in the window that reads *Clancy's*. The bar isn't anything special, clearly a dive that's been around for a long time and seen better days, and the door sticks a little as I yank it open and step inside.

Music pours from the speakers, providing a background for the hum of conversation and clinking glasses. Several grizzled looking men are hunched over glasses of whiskey or beer at the pocked wooden bar, but I ignore them, scanning the rest of the place quickly.

There.

My heart lurches as my gaze lands on a table near the back. Three men are sitting around it, and even though no one else in the bar is paying them overt attention, there's a subtle energy in the way everyone avoids eye contact with them that shows just how very aware of them each and every person in here is.

Two of the men are facing the door, and one has his back to me, but none of them looked up when I entered.

I take a breath, grateful to have a few seconds to get a read on them and convince myself again that I can make this work before I approach their table.

From the digging I did today and the bits and pieces I've overheard from people in our neighborhood, I recognize one of the men right away.

Maddoc Gray.

The leader of the Reapers.

I've heard people talk about him, and I have no trouble picking him out as the hard-looking man on the right. The dark lines of a few swirling, intricate tattoos are faint shadows poking out from under his white shirt, and his hair is so dark it's almost black. More tattoos decorate the backs of his hands, the inked designs curling over his fingers. There's a calculating look on his brutally handsome face as he nods along with whatever the leanly muscled man at his side is saying, and even from a few yards away, his eyes are striking,

The irises are a light, frosty gray near the center, transitioning to something stormy and dark at the outer edges. He bleeds power and dominance, saturating the air around him.

The man on Maddoc's left is blond and lean, his muscles as perfectly defined as his jawline. There's something about him that's almost *too* perfect, nothing out of place, making him look like a statue that somehow came to life. He radiates a deadly sort of intensity as he listens to something Maddoc is saying, his ice-blue eyes narrowing just slightly.

The third man has his back to me, but even though I can't see his face, I can tell he's just as broadly muscled as the other two—maybe even more so. He's got even more tattoos than Maddoc does, covering nearly every part of him that I can see.

They all look like they could snap me in half without even breaking a sweat. Not that they'd need to, since I'm sure they're all packing and could put a bullet between my eyes just as easily.

Adrenaline floods my system. The idea of walking over there, of getting anywhere near these men, has my palms sweating and sends my pulse into overdrive.

But I don't have a choice. I found exactly what I came here looking for, and I can't bail out now. So I force my feet to move, one step and then another carrying me closer and closer to the table at the back.

The big man with all the ink shifts in his seat as I approach and finally looks my way, the first one to take notice of me. Our gazes lock, and I almost trip over nothing.

Fuck.

I know him.

It's the man I broke my own rules for.

It's Dante.

His eyebrows shoot up in surprise as recognition crosses his face, and my heart skips a beat.

Dammit. I had no clue that I was getting laid by a goddamn Reaper last night. I had no idea who he was or who he associated with when I begged him for his cock.

His lips twitch the tiniest bit at the corners, something hot and possessive flaring in his eyes, and I swallow, all the nerves I just shoved down flaring to life again like a swarm of angry locusts.

Maddoc and the other man are still talking, but Dante's gaze moves over me lazily, snagging on the hickeys I covered so carefully with makeup before coming here tonight.

I know he can't see them. There's no way—not in this lighting, not with my makeup skills—but the way his eyes pause on each one makes me doubt myself for a moment.

My fingers twitch, but I force myself not to touch the places he marked me, even though I swear I can feel them start to tingle. My feet feel like lead, and I'm dying to turn and run as those locusts spill into my bloodstream, buzzing through every inch of me until I'm on the edge of panic again.

But I can't.

I can't walk away without at least trying.

Dante hasn't said a word, but Maddoc and the man with flat, ice-blue eyes both stop talking at the same time and look over at me, absolutely nothing about their gazes welcoming in the least.

Forcing my feet to keep moving, I walk up to the table, keeping my eyes locked with Maddoc's.

"What?" he finally says, the gravelly tone of his voice sending a shiver down my spine.

"Maddoc Gray? I've got a business proposition for you."

He doesn't even blink, but the lean man next to him goes motionless, his body so still that it's unnerving as every ounce of his focus locks on to me. Dante, on the other hand, stays sprawled out and so relaxed that I'd almost think he wasn't paying attention... if I couldn't feel his eyes drilling into me too.

I ignore them both and keep my eyes on Maddoc. He's the one who matters right now.

He looks me up and down without changing his expression, cold and uninterested. The silence lingers for a long moment before he speaks.

"No, you don't," he says. Then he turns back to his men, dismissing me.

Dammit.

"How do you see that playing out without pissing off The Six, Logan?" Maddoc asks the man next to him, obviously picking up the thread of the conversation I interrupted as if I'm not still standing right fucking here, and when the other man's—Logan's—eyes flick my way, I get the sense that whatever they're talking about, Logan doesn't approve of Maddoc airing it out in front of me.

After giving me a quick, appraising glance, Logan lowers his voice and murmurs a reply that I don't even try to follow, dismissing me as thoroughly as Maddoc did.

When I shift my attention to Dante, he gives me a bland look in return, no sign at all of the heat that flashed in his gaze a second ago.

I feel like an idiot standing in front of their table while they ignore me as if I'm invisible. But I lick my lips and force myself to forge ahead.

"I need your help," I say, a little more forcefully this time.

Maddoc and Logan carry on as if I haven't even spoken, and after the tiniest hesitation, Dante follows their lead, leaning forward to join the conversation they're having.

Goddammit. They can't turn me away. Not without at least hearing what I have to say.

I slam my palm down on the table, the loud smacking sound cutting across the noise of the bar. A few people glance our way before quickly turning back to their drinks, and my heart pounds like a drum, a sudden surge of adrenaline making my voice shake a little when I speak again.

“I said I need your help. And I’ll make it worth your while.”

Maddoc turns his gray eyes on me, and if I thought Logan’s were icy, they’ve got nothing on the cold look this man pins me with. “And I said... not interested.”

“I don’t care if you’re not interested,” I say bluntly, and it’s true. I’ve got nothing at all if I can’t save Chloe. “I need you. My sister—” My throat tightens, but I swallow hard and keep going. “My sister was taken by the West Point Gang this morning. I need your help getting her back.”

“Why?” Logan demands at the same moment Dante speaks.

“West Point?” His brows draw together, and he drums his fingers on the table top. “You sure about that, princess?”

I’ve suddenly got their attention, all three of them fully focused on me.

“I’m sure.” My voice is tight as I nod. “They were wearing...”

I hold up my hand and run my fingers over the base of my knuckles, and the three Reapers nod. I don’t even have to describe it with words. Of course they know about the gold rings that West Point members wear.

“And I caught two of their names,” I add. “Brett and Austin.”

Logan goes unnaturally still again, and Dante stops drumming his fingertips against the table.

Maddoc’s gaze sharpens like a knife.

“Austin,” he repeats in a cold voice. “Austin McKenna?”

I’m wound so tight I want to snap back with something snarky about not having remembered to ask for his ID, but I resist. Now that I’ve got their attention, I need to get them to say yes to helping, not piss them off even more.

“I don’t know,” I answer honestly. “He has dark hair, wears it slicked back, and scowls a lot. He’s pretty tall, maybe

six foot even?”

“Definitely sounds like McKenna,” Dante murmurs.

I swallow hard. “I’ve heard that the Reapers... don’t get along with West Point,” I say, my heart trying to pound its way out of my chest as all three of them react subtly to my words.

It’s the first time I’ve actually called them out as being Reapers, and for a second, I wonder if it was a mistake.

Then Logan leans forward. “And what exactly is it that you’ve heard?”

He doesn’t blink, and the leashed intensity in his gaze is mesmerizing and terrifying at the same time.

Shit. I need to make it clear that I’m not a threat to them. Bringing up West Point is treading perilously close to the line of sticking my nose into gang business.

“Nothing,” I say quickly. “And I don’t care about any of that shit. I just need to get Chloe back. I’ll... I’ll do anything to help my sister.” I lay the envelope of cash I brought on the table in front of Maddoc. “I can pay you.”

It’s everything I could scrape together in a day. Everything I’ve set aside for Chloe’s college and our living expenses. I wasn’t kidding, though. I’ll do anything, and if they need me to come up with more money, I will.

But Maddoc pushes the envelope back toward me like it’s offensive.

“We’re not fucking mercenaries,” he growls. “And I don’t know who the fuck you are, or why you think you can just show up on our turf and try to hire us out to do whatever the fuck you want, but—”

“I do,” Dante drawls, cutting in on Maddoc’s rant.

Maddoc turns to glare at his second, and Dante raps his knuckles on the table and smirks.

“I know who this chick is. Her name is Riley. She dances at Club M. We fucked last night after my meeting with Ruiz.”

Something twists in my stomach at the blunt way he lays it out, like it was just some average, run-of-the-mill, forgettable hookup. I never expected to see him again, but still, his tone pisses me off.

Logan and Maddoc both narrow their eyes, staring at me in a way that makes the hair on my arms stand up.

“That’s a hell of a coincidence,” Maddoc murmurs in a low voice.

“You told her where to find us?” Logan asks Dante, cutting his gaze sideways.

“Course not.” Dante scoffs, and it pisses me off even more for some reason. Then he turns a speculative eye on me, cocking his head to the side as his fingers start drumming the table again. “Maybe West Point sent her.”

“Fuck you,” I bite out, the same fury that made me want to rip Austin’s eyes out this morning rising up too hot and fast for me to censor it. “I fucking hate West Point. They took—”

My breath hitches, but I power through anyway, blinking back the rage induced tears that burn the back of my eyes.

“They took Chloe. I’d die before I’d do anything for those assholes.”

“And yet you just told us you’d do anything to help your sister,” Maddoc throws back.

“Not that,” I insist in a hard voice. “Never.”

He smirks. “So... you lied.”

“I—”

“You wouldn’t do ‘anything’?”

“No, that’s—”

“You wouldn’t help West Point out if it would get your sister back?” Maddoc leans forward, and I’m not just pissed, I hate him a little bit right now.

I feel more trapped by his burning stare than I did when Musclehead pinned me to the fucking wall outside the club

and tried to assault me, but even if Maddoc would let me get a word in edgewise, I can't tell him to go fuck himself. Can't punch that cold, suspicious look off his face.

I still need his help.

But if he's too stubborn to even listen to me, if he won't help me get Chloe back, then I'll be back to square one with no other options.

"I've got nothing to do with West Point," I insist. "All I want is—"

Maddoc holds up a hand, and my mouth snaps shut, my jaw clenching. He jerks his chin toward an empty booth. "Go wait over there. We need to discuss your proposal."

I hesitate. I want to stay and fight for this. Fight for Chloe. But just like with every other shitty thing in my life, I don't really have a choice.

I give Maddoc a stiff nod, then do what he told me to and walk away, taking a seat at the booth he indicated with my heart lodged in my throat.

Please take the deal. Please.

MADDOC

I LEAN BACK as I watch the girl, Riley, walk away.

This night just took a very unexpected turn.

I make it a point to know what's going on in my territory, which means there's no way in hell I should have been caught by surprise twice in less than a week. And the fact that both the shooting and this Riley woman have ties to West Point? Calling that a coincidence seems pretty fucking unlikely, but whether it's a setup to be avoided or an opportunity to be exploited is yet to be determined.

I narrow my eyes, tracking her movements as she settles into the booth I told her to sit at. Her hair shimmers blue and purple, like a butterfly's wings, as she shifts it over her shoulder. She's fucking gorgeous, but in truth, that's not her most interesting feature. She's clearly smart enough to know that coming here was a risk, but the way she holds herself—head up and back straight, like she's got balls of fucking steel tucked away in those tight little pants of hers—tells me she's not one to let fear stop her.

“She seem overly interested in your meeting with Ruiz last night?” I ask Dante without taking my eyes off her.

“Not even a little bit,” he answers, staring over at her the same way I am.

I blow out a breath through my nose, glancing between my seconds. “Still a hell of a coincidence.”

It's an invitation for them to share their opinions, and I'm not surprised that right away, I get a disgusted hiss from

Logan.

“Coincidence?” he repeats, his angular face set like stone as he glares over at her. “In my experience, there’s no such thing.”

He thinks she’s a honey trap, and the coiled tension in his body promises pain and retribution if his suspicions prove true.

It’s clear he sees her as a threat to us. Neither that belief nor the icy hatred in his eyes comes as a surprise, since it’s not like Logan would trust a woman even under the best of circumstances. And having Riley barge in here just as we were discussing retaliation against West Point? Definitely not what anyone would call the best circumstances.

But just because Logan’s response is predictable doesn’t mean he’s wrong.

Of course, it doesn’t mean he’s right either, and my jaw clenches as I scrub a hand over it.

“Dante?” I prod. “Your thoughts?”

He’s watching Riley with pursed lips and his head cocked to the side. He was quick to say she wasn’t acting suspiciously last night, that she wasn’t overly inquisitive about the meeting with the rep from the 17th Street gang, but the way he hums quietly to himself, drumming his fingers on the edge of the table, tells me he’s replaying whatever went down between them to see if there are any cracks in her story.

“Nah, I don’t think so,” he says after a minute, disputing Logan’s opinion. “I believe her about the sister. I think that’s why she came.”

I nod. The threat of tears paired with all that fiery determination? Yeah, Riley definitely sold the part about the sister. Sold it well enough that I believe her too.

But that still doesn’t make it our problem to fix.

Austin fucking McKenna, on the other hand, is definitely becoming a problem we need to fix, so even if she wasn’t sent

by West Point, we'd be fools to ignore any situation he's involved in.

Dante is clearly thinking along the same lines, because he adds, "West Point's been giving us a hell of a hard time lately. Everywhere we turn, they're in the way. How many of our recent deals have they fucked with?"

"Too many," Logan bites out. "They're trying to break into our territory. Taunting us. Goading us."

"But I still think this thing with Riley is something else," Dante says in a deceptively lazy drawl, heat flashing in his eyes as he glances back over at her.

I don't necessarily disagree, and I can't blame him for the heat either... but Logan scowls.

"Quit thinking with your dick," he snaps. "That's obviously what McKenna wants here."

Dante raises his eyebrows. "Setting Riley up to infiltrate our ranks? Nah. He's not that smart."

Dante would know more about the subject than most, but his argument clearly doesn't satisfy Logan. The blond man leans across the table, narrowing his eyes.

"If McKenna really took her sister, it was for a reason," Logan insists, keeping his voice low even though every last person in this place knows it's a good idea to give us our privacy when we show up.

Well, every one of them except Riley.

I smirk, throwing another glance her way as Dante and Logan argue quietly. I know for sure that she can't hear us from where she's sitting, but when she notices me staring at her, she holds my gaze and lifts her chin as if in challenge.

Something about the wild, almost feral glint in her dark brown eyes makes me want to keep looking, but I drag my focus away from her and turn back to my seconds.

"If West Point sent her, what's their end game here?" I ask them both, interrupting their argument for the moment.

“We’ll... find out,” Logan finally says, his face pained with the effort of admitting he doesn’t see it either.

“But does it matter right now?” Dante asks with a grin, leaning back in his chair and crossing his arms over his broad chest. “We know they’ve got her sister. We use Riley, we’ve got the perfect chance to hit them back.”

I snort. Not because he’s necessarily wrong, but because he’s too fucking sold on the idea already.

Definitely letting his dick do at least part of the reasoning for him.

“The downside is that Logan might still be right,” I remind him, looking for the holes in Riley’s story so that I can poke at them. “This whole thing really could be a trap. Even if it wasn’t set up by West Point, any other gang who wants to take us down could be calling the shots.”

“Nah,” Dante insists, shaking his head. “I would have caught on last night.”

“Unless they targeted her after you fucked her,” Logan says. “Or *because* you fucked her.”

Dante cocks his head, narrowing his eyes as he thinks it through. I know the club he went to last night, and it’s a fucking dive that lies in the kind of unclaimed territory where the smaller gangs fight for scraps and keep each other busy and out of our hair. In other words, it’s as close to neutral territory as you can find in Halston, which is why he chose it.

But neutral territory also means anyone could have been there... seen Dante with Riley... and decided to use it.

“You gotta admit, it’s pretty fucking convenient that she shows up here with her sob story plus *this* bullshit”—I shove the fat envelope of cash she left on the table in Dante’s direction—“right after she hooked up with you last night.”

He leans forward, his grin turning a little savage as he picks up the envelope and taps its edge on the table, then holds it out to me. “All the more reason to accept her offer, Madd. If another gang is trying to use her to fuck with us, we need to keep her close.”

I take the envelope, trying to get out of my own way and think about what he said.

Logan makes a noise in his throat. “You just want her close enough to keep your cock warm.”

“Hey, I’m not above multi-tasking.” Dante lifts an eyebrow. “You should try it sometime.”

“Pass,” Logan says with one of his patented icy glares.

The big tattooed man shrugs, not affected in the least by our friend’s reaction. “Your loss.”

Logan’s glare turns into something even glaciers would retreat from. “Not all of us are ruled by our dicks.”

Dante smirks. “And not all of us have mastered the art of *being* such a dick,” he says... then waits for it.

No one can get under Logan’s skin quite like Dante can.

And there’s no one, other than me, who Logan would defend faster if there was a threat.

It takes a couple seconds, but then Logan’s lips finally twitch. It’s only the barest hint of a smile, but for a man like him, it’s practically a shit-eating grin. “No need to shower me with compliments. You can save that garbage for her.”

He jerks his chin in Riley’s direction, and Dante laughs.

“Ah, come on now, have a little more faith in me. I’m pretty sure I can find a way to sweet talk her a little better than *that*.”

Logan rolls his eyes. “Sounds like you already did that last night.”

“Fuck yeah, I did,” Dante says as his grin turns a little feral. My cock reacts to the idea of what he must have done with her to put that look on his face, and he glances over at me like he has some kind of sixth sense, raising his eyebrows in a clear question. “Wouldn’t mind doing it again either,” he adds. “As long as Maddoc decides to say yes so I’ve got the chance.”

Logan looks to me too. I know he's still against the idea of us getting involved with Riley's problems. That's just as clear as how enthusiastic Dante is to bring her into the mix. But the reason we work, the reason I never doubt their loyalty, is that they both know I value their opinions, but that the choice is ultimately mine.

I made the Reapers out of nothing.

I put the Reapers first in everything.

And I lead the Reapers, have the loyalty of my gang, because every fucking one of them respects those two facts.

But this time, I'd be lying if I said I weighed it all out before coming to a decision. There's something about this girl that pulled me in from the moment she walked in the door, and I think I knew even before I sent her away that I was too intrigued to say no to whatever she had on offer.

But the other thing I know?

If saying yes turns out to be a fucking mistake, my seconds have my back. We'll do this on my terms, and no matter what goes down, we'll find a way to use it and come out on top.

We always do.

We always will.

And that's why the Reapers will always win.

RILEY

I'VE BEEN STARING at an ugly gouge in the top of the table I'm seated at for what feels like an eternity, but I still couldn't say whether it's the shape of a slash or a starburst or a fucking three-headed alien. It's just a place to rest my gaze while my mind spins a million horrifying scenarios that I can't seem to shut off, no matter how hard I try.

West Point has had Chloe for more than twelve hours.

My stomach clenches into a knot so tight that I feel sick, and I grit my teeth, forcing the nausea down. I get it under control and peek through my hair at the Reapers. This time, none of them are looking at me.

Good. They didn't see my moment of weakness. I can't afford to break down in front of them.

Which means the last thing I should be doing is letting myself think too hard about what Chloe might be going through right now... and Maddoc Gray really is an asshole, because he's left me no choice but to do exactly that.

I don't know if it's a power play or if they've really got that fucking much to discuss before coming to a decision, but he's left me alone too long with nothing but my own thoughts, and the worries that are trying to choke me.

I may have done everything I could to stay under the radar of the local gangs up until now, but that doesn't mean I'm completely ignorant about the kind of businesses they're involved in, or the kind of use they might have for a girl "bought" from someone like our father.

I squeeze my eyes closed, as if that will block out reality.

It doesn't, and knowing that Chloe is in the hands of those thugs right now feels like I'm swallowing razorblades with a chaser of Jack.

When I glance over at the men's table again, Maddoc is looking at me once more. He pins me with those piercing gray eyes and gestures me back over.

I swallow, my stomach somehow twisting itself into even more of a knot as I press my palms against the table and rise to my feet.

They've decided.

Trying to keep my features controlled, I throw my shoulders back and walk over to their table, using everything I've learned from being on stage to project confidence. I doubt they buy it, since they already know I'm desperate. Still, nothing good ever came from looking that way.

I keep my focus on Maddoc as I come to a stop in front of their table, since he's clearly the one who matters here, but his hard-edged features give nothing away.

"Well?" I finally ask after a long moment of silence.

"You're gonna come with us," he says, flipping the envelope I gave him between his fingers as he stares at me like that's supposed to make sense.

Where is probably the question I should ask—or at least *why*—but as my heart jackrabbits, hope warring with fear inside me, the only thing I want to know is what it means for Chloe.

I lift my chin, crossing my arms over my chest. "Does that mean you're going to help me?"

He stops flipping the envelope, then taps it on the table and slips it into his pocket. "Maybe."

"What the fuck does maybe mean?"

His eyes go hard. "It means we don't know whether you were sent here by McKenna, so we're not letting you out of

our sight until we figure that out.”

My jaw drops. “What the... I’m not... I need...”

I can’t believe they still think I might be working for that monster. The thought makes me so mad that I can’t even form a coherent sentence, and Maddoc doesn’t wait for me to get my shit together.

“You’ll be staying with us until we decide whether or not we can trust you,” he cuts in. “Then... we’ll see.”

I’m still reeling from the implication that I might be working with West Point, so it takes me a second to catch on to what he means. When I do, my heart lurches, fear rising up to swamp the anger.

Stay with them? No. No way.

I start to back up, glancing behind me as I prepare to bolt for the door.

“You really don’t want to do that,” Maddoc murmurs, his voice calm and commanding in a way that’s far more terrifying than if he’d tried to physically stop me.

Which he can. Any of them can, and I know it. Maddoc doesn’t move, Dante is still sprawled out in that deceptively relaxed pose he seems to favor, watching me with hooded eyes, and the other man, Logan, looks like coiled fury, tracking my every movement with those unnerving, icy eyes of his. None of them have even stood up from the table yet, but a part of me knows if I run for it, they’ll stop me.

“*You* came to *us*,” Maddoc points out as adrenaline sharpens my senses, my breath coming hard and fast. “Maybe we’ll help you, maybe we won’t. We’re gonna need more information to decide.” He leans forward, and I swear I can feel his gaze spear right through me. “But if you make a scene right now or try to run, you’ll regret it.”

My stomach twists. Fuck. I knew it was a risk coming to the Reapers, but I had no idea it would backfire on me like this. I had no intention of putting myself so completely at their mercy, and I’m not sure I can handle it, but I believe him. I *will* regret it if I fuck this up.

The one thing I have going for me is that I truly am not working for West Point. If Maddoc is telling the truth about that being their concern, they're not going to find anything. And once they figure that out, hopefully they'll decide to help.

Any humiliation, fear, or degradation I have to live through will be worth it if I can get Chloe back, so I force my heart rate to settle down and unclench my fists, then give him a slight nod.

“Okay.”

“Good. Let's go,” he says, tossing some cash on the table as the three of them rise to their feet. I swallow hard as I notice the distinct shape of a gun tucked into his waistband.

I look away.

“Come on, princess,” Dante says, crowding against my side and taking my arm.

Logan glares at me, sandwiching me in from the other side, and I can feel Maddoc's body heat crowding me from behind as we head to the door.

“Seriously?” I grumble.

I try to shake Dante's hand off, glaring up at him, but he just tightens his grip and gives me a *what are you gonna do* look, shrugging one muscled shoulder.

We leave the bar, and I don't bother asking about taking my car since it's clear they were serious about not letting me out of their sight.

They shove me into the back of a shiny black Escalade, and as my ass hits the leather seat, it suddenly strikes me how far out of my depth I am. Coming to them in the first place wasn't much of a plan, but I've been running on pure terror all day. My half-assed idea of asking for help is *all* the plan I had.

I have no idea what to do now, and I'm definitely no longer in charge.

The only thing I can do is go along for the ride and hope like hell that it will end with me getting Chloe back.

Maddoc slips into the driver's seat, and Dante and Logan settle on either side of me in the back. As we pull away from the curb and head in the opposite direction of my apartment, I realize I have no idea how long they plan on keeping me... but it didn't sound like it would be a short-term stay.

I clear my throat. "Can we at least swing by my place and get my stuff?"

"No," Maddoc answers without turning around. "If you tell us where you live, I'll send someone by to grab a few things, but we're not chauffeuring you around."

No, they're fucking kidnapping me.

I glare at the back of Maddoc's head, and next to me, Dante chuckles.

"We'll make sure you have what you need," he murmurs, his body heat burning into my side as he slings an arm over the back of the seat behind me.

"All I need is help getting Chloe back," I whisper, stiffening my spine and pulling away. But Logan is right there on my other side, both of them taking up too much space, and there's nowhere to go.

Dante's leg brushes against mine, and I jerk my eyes up to meet his, unsure if the contact was deliberate or not.

Banked fire burns in his eyes when he glances down at me, a contrast to the bland, indifferent expression he wore in the bar when he told his two friends about our hookup. For a split second, my body reacts to the way he's looking at me, a rush of remembered heat pouring through my veins.

It feels impossible that I fucked him less than twenty-four hours ago. Honestly, it feels like an entirely different *lifetime*. Nothing is the same now. Everything is so much more complicated. So much more dangerous.

I look away, pulling all my limbs in tight and trying not to notice that Logan has his eyes on me too.

These two are like fire and ice, and I don't know how to handle being sandwiched between them.

Logan's face is set in a cold, hard mask that doesn't take away from his sleek good looks but does absolutely terrify me. I have no idea what I did to make him hate me so much, or what kind of bullshit he's sitting there assuming about me, but while I have no doubt that any of these three men would kill me without a second thought if they uncovered something to make them doubt me, Logan is the only one who looks like he might actually enjoy it.

I suppress a shiver and do my best to pretend neither one of them exists until we finally pull up in front of a surprisingly nice house in a neighborhood I never would have pegged as the home of the Reapers. These guys are clearly doing well for themselves. Not that surprising, I guess, based on rumors about their gang's activity.

Maddoc pulls into the driveway, and I glance around as the three of them lead me into the house.

The entryway is clean and bright, with nice lighting and a broad stairway leading up to the second story. But the windows look like they've been reinforced to be bulletproof, the doorway we walked through has an industrial style lock, and off to the right in what's probably supposed to be a living room, I'm pretty sure I see a gun lying on the coffee table.

Panic rises up in a sudden wave as the lock on the door clicks into place behind us. I'm on the Reapers' home turf, in their inner sanctuary, and I'm sure they're not going to let me leave until they're good and ready.

Shit. What the hell am I doing here?

I whirl to face Maddoc, trying to keep the fear from showing on my face as I cross my arms over my chest. "Okay, I did what you wanted. Now start working on getting my sister out."

He raises his eyebrows, seeming surprised by my sudden outburst, but I don't stop. I can't. All of my panic is pushing at the inside of my chest, demanding that I do *something*. I need to make sure the risk I took was worth it.

“*Now*,” I insist. “I came with you. You’ve got me. Now give me your word you’ll help me.”

Dante hums under his breath, and Logan’s eyes narrow. The two of them have been flanking Maddoc, and now they each step forward at an angle, surrounding me roughly between three large bodies.

“That’s not the way this is going to go, butterfly,” Maddoc murmurs. “You’re not the one calling the shots here. If we help you—and like I told you, that’s still up for debate—we’ll work to get your sister out on our own time, doing it our own way.”

“She’s my sister. I get a say in—”

“No.” He cuts me off. “You don’t.”

“Listen—”

“*No*,” he repeats, a hard edge to his voice this time. “And if you want that help you keep begging us for, then you’ll shut your damn mouth unless I ask you to open it. Or maybe we’ll change our minds about even considering giving you our help.”

My stomach feels like it drops right out of my body. An acidic, coppery taste coats the back of my tongue as bitter disappointment edges out the fear churning inside me.

“I should have known,” I mutter, shaking my head in disgust. “You’re too fucking scared of West Point to actually go after them. Is that it? Then I’ve got no reason to be here. Either promise me you’ll help me go up against Austin McKenna or let me go, because—”

“Strip.”

“I—what?”

He didn’t even yell, but the single word almost knocks me off my feet. Those cloud-gray eyes of his burn a hole right through me, and even though he hasn’t made a move, I flinch.

“I said, strip,” he repeats, his voice a low growl. “You should know how. Isn’t that what you do for a living?”

I swallow. What the actual fuck? Is he trying to humiliate me? Trying to remind me that he's in charge here?

Even though the anger still simmering in my veins wants me to tell him to go fuck himself, I don't. I've already admitted that I'll do anything for Chloe, and I meant it. I'll even do this if I have to.

Still, I hesitate, because Maddoc is wrong about one thing. I may be a professional stripper who's used to undressing on stage for a bunch of strangers... but this is nothing like that.

There are no lights. No costume. No music. Just me and these three ruthless men.

"If I have to tell you again," Maddoc says after a beat, "it's not gonna end well for you."

I clench my jaw, hating the shiver that goes through me at his unyielding tone. I know I have to do it. I've already let my agitation and anger come close to fucking this up, but the Reapers really are my only chance. Maddoc hasn't explicitly refused to help me, but if I piss him off any more, he probably will. Hell, he'll probably *kill* me.

My skin prickles under the men's unblinking gazes, but I refuse to look at either of Maddoc's seconds-in-command. I'm sure I'd see Logan coldly gloating, and Dante... god, I don't even know what kind of expression I'd see on his face. Trying not to imagine it, I kneel down and unbuckle my boots, then stand again and kick them off.

I make no effort at all to be sexy as I shrug out of my calfskin jacket and let it drop to the floor. The cell phone I've got in the pocket clunks against the floor, and I wince as I peel off my white shirt, hoping like hell that the screen didn't crack.

I tug the shirt over my head and toss it down onto the growing pile on the floor, my movements quick and efficient. It's like ripping off a Band-aid, and I can't afford to lose my nerve.

I didn't bother with a bra tonight, and even though I've been topless in front of more men than I can count, I suddenly

feel naked and vulnerable in a way that I never have up on stage as my nipples pebble from the sudden exposure to cool air.

Gritting my teeth, I try to ignore the feeling as I shimmy out of my tight pants. Leather pants are a bitch to get in and out of even at the best of times, and when I hear Logan scoff behind me and mutter, “You’re not very good at this, are you?” I’m seriously fucking tempted to turn around and sling them at his head.

Instead, I kick them to the side and refuse to turn around, even though I can feel both Logan’s and Dante’s eyes boring into me from behind.

When I’m almost completely naked, I stand in front of Maddoc, hands on my hips and chin raised. “Happy?”

“Not even close,” he murmurs, his eyes flicking down to the panties I’ve left on. “Those too.”

They’re a high-cut, pale blue silk the exact color of the teardrop-shaped nose ring I chose not to wear tonight, and although they cover more than the g-strings I wear at the club, it somehow feels like they hide less.

Or maybe that’s just because they’re the last thing separating me from complete submission to Maddoc’s will.

Hooking the waistband of my panties, I slip them down, losing my last layer of armor. When I’m completely bare, I straighten, trying to pretend my heart isn’t racing.

Maddoc eyes me with a hard expression, his gaze locking with mine for an extended moment before slowly working its way down over my body. I track the movement of his eyes, watching the way they flick back and forth lightly as he takes in every inch of me.

Somehow, his careful perusal makes me hyper aware of him.

Of being naked for him.

Of how fucking big he is, and how very much I’m at his mercy. He’s not just in control of this moment, but of his

whole organization, including the two men at my back.

He could tell them to do anything right now. Tell *me* to do anything. And he'd get his way.

He comes closer, invading my space, and it's the hardest thing I've ever done to keep my shoulders straight and my legs locked. To keep my breathing calm even as my heart tries to pound its way out of my chest.

"You came to us for a reason," he says, stopping so close to me that I have to tilt my head back to maintain eye contact. I can feel his body heat radiating into my bare skin, and it makes my nerve endings prickle. "You came because we're the fucking Reapers, and you know what that means in this city."

"That's right," I whisper hoarsely, then clear my throat. "I did."

"We didn't get where we are by being stupid, and we sure as fuck didn't do it by being trusting." He spits out the last word like it disgusts him, his full lips curling into something like a snarl. "You say you want our help against West Point? You're fucking ballsy for waltzing into our territory with McKenna's name on your lips, and goddamn lucky that I ever let you get this far. But I meant what I said at the bar. We don't know if we can trust you... and this is step one in finding out."

Before I can ask him what he means, his inked hands are on me. Touching me. Running over my skin like he fucking owns it.

"Asshole," I grit out between clenched teeth.

He doesn't stop. "I have to check."

"For what?" I ask as he palms my ass, running his fingers down the crevice. "You really think I have McKenna tucked up there?"

"A wire, a weapon," Maddoc answers, his callused fingers moving over my body with a clinical thoroughness that makes me want to knee him in the balls the way I took care of that musclehead at the club the first time he cornered me.

“Do you see a fucking wire anywhere?” I grit out instead. “Jesus, this isn’t *Red Sparrow*.”

“No, I don’t see one,” he replies without any inflection, sliding his hands around my hips and cupping my pussy. He pushes two fingers into me. “That’s why I’ve got to check.”

No warning. No request. Just his thick fingers in my most intimate place.

My breath hitches, adrenaline bursting through my veins. I try not to move, but maybe Maddoc can see the way my legs are shaking, because he loops his free arm around my back, holding me against him as he presses his fingers deeper.

My arms are stiff at my sides, but my fingers curl and straighten as all the air in my lungs seems to get trapped there. I’m still a little sore from fucking Dante last night—he’s big, and it had been a while—so maybe that’s what makes my body respond the way it does.

Heat floods my lower half, my inner muscles clenching around Maddoc’s fingers before I can stop them. His head is tilted down, allowing him to watch my expression as he searches me, and I can’t help but notice the way his pupils widen and expand, turning his gray eyes even darker.

Can he tell I’m getting wet? Can he feel that?

His fingers press deeper, and maybe it’s an accident or maybe it’s not, but the heel of his hand grinds against my clit.

Fuck.

My fingers curl all the way into fists this time as I fight to suppress the shiver that tries to run through my body. Maddoc’s nostrils flare slightly, just the tiniest flicker.

Then, finally, he pulls his fingers out. “Turn around.”

“What?” I blink, the relief I was about to feel evaporating in an instant.

He doesn’t ask me again, just does it for me. He spins me in place where I stand, and suddenly his hard body is pressed against my back as I stare at Dante and Logan. The two of

them watch as Maddoc cavity checks my ass, his fingers already slick and wet from being inside my pussy.

“Spread your legs,” Maddoc commands, his arm tightening around my waist to keep me in place. “Wider.”

“Fuck you,” I hiss, but I do it.

I wish I could close my eyes, but I can't. It would be too much of a show of weakness, and besides, I'm afraid that if I cut off that sense, it would only heighten my other ones. So I stare defiantly back at Logan and Dante, doing my best not to think about what this must look like to them.

Logan's face is impassive, his gaze cold as it burns into me, but there's a slight flush high in his cheeks that matches the one I feel in my own. Dante, on the other hand, isn't even trying to hide his reaction. His eyes are hooded and dark, roving over me with a possessive familiarity that makes my pulse race.

Maddoc only uses one finger instead of two, thank god, thrusting slowly in and out of a hole I've never let any man enter before. Twisting inside me to make sure I haven't smuggled in some fucking C4 at West Point's bidding or something. His arm is still around me, his fingers splayed over my ribs, and I can feel the roughness of his callouses as he adjusts his grip, holding me tighter as he presses his finger a little deeper.

“She's clean,” he says after another moment, pulling his finger free and taking an abrupt step back.

I wobble, then lock my knees so I won't collapse into a heap.

Maddoc walks around me and gathers up my clothes, then tugs my phone out of my jacket pocket.

“You're dismissed,” he says, speaking to me without looking at me. “Logan, take her to her room.”

I'm still naked, but I'm not going to give him the satisfaction of fighting him about that when he's already thoroughly humiliated me. But my phone? I need it, and not just because it's my only link to a world where I'm not

controlled by the whims of the Reapers. What if Chloe manages to reach out to me somehow?

“Wait. I need—”

My voice breaks off as Maddoc’s head jerks up and he finally meets my eyes. His expression tells me everything I need to know, and since I don’t actually have a death wish, I snap my mouth shut and follow Logan when he heads up the stairs.

The tall blond man doesn’t say a word, just leads me to a room on the second floor and gestures me inside, then closes it behind me with a soft finality that feels infinitely more frightening than if he’d thrown ten deadbolts.

There aren’t any, not on the door, but that doesn’t change anything. I press my naked back against it and wrap my arms around myself, thankful for the small mercy of being alone as the shakes set in.

I came to the Reapers for help for my sister, because she’s not in a position to help herself. Not as a prisoner of the sadistic head of the West Point Gang. But even without any locks on my door, I can’t escape the sickening dread that fills me at the thought that I might not be able to help her at all.

Not when I might have ended up just as much a prisoner as Chloe.

DANTE

“CHECK THESE FOR ANY TECH, then get rid of them,” Maddoc says, tossing Riley’s clothes at me as she follows Logan upstairs.

I catch them without commenting on the way his jaw clenches as he watches her leave, even though it takes some serious willpower not to give him shit about the way she so obviously got under his skin.

I hide my grin by lifting the soft leather of the sexy-as-fuck jacket Riley had on up to my face and drawing in her scent. It’s a fucking aphrodisiac, making my body remember exactly what it felt like to be buried inside her last night.

Guess I don’t hide my grin well enough, though, because Maddoc’s eyes zero right in on me, narrowing into slits.

“What the fuck are you doing?” he growls.

I’d be lying if I said a part of me doesn’t want to fuck with him just for the fun of seeing whether or not he’ll actually lose his cool and throw down. But now isn’t the time for that, as fun as it can be to let loose with my brothers now and then. Work some aggression out of the system.

I can’t help goading him a *little* bit, though.

“Just checking for bugs, like you said. Can’t have West Point listening in, can we?”

“Go do it right,” Maddoc grunts, seeing right through my bullshit but not rising to the bait. No need to guess why.

His gaze slides back toward the stairs and his jaw subtly clenches again.

I'd say he takes shit too seriously sometimes, but that relentless intensity of his is why the Reapers have dominated where so many others have fallen, so even if I like to poke at it sometimes, I definitely can't fault it.

I'm pretty sure he doesn't actually believe I'll find anything in Riley's clothes any more than I do. Still, we both know better than to take chances like that. A gut feeling is all well and good, but at the end of the day, it's only cold hard facts that can actually be counted on.

And the fact is that none of us know for sure why Riley really came to us.

Maddoc was right. It's a hell of a coincidence. But then again, sometimes shit really does go down like that.

Madd is still trying to death-ray the staircase with his eyes. It's entertaining as fuck to watch, so I stay right where I am as I sort through Riley's clothes, doing a preliminary check for any listening or recording devices and getting another whiff of her scent for my efforts.

My cock sits up and takes notice, twitching with interest in my boxer briefs. The sex last night was fucking incredible, and that seductive lily and vanilla scent of hers has already embedded itself into the pleasure centers of my brain.

But it's more than just that.

Riley intrigues me.

She did last night when she caught my eye while she was dancing, then even more so when I saw the fire in her eyes as she fought off that juiced-up fuckhead who attacked her outside the club.

And I saw that same fire in her again when she walked into Clancy's tonight.

I grin, glad Maddoc is still preoccupied so he doesn't ask about it. She really is a princess, though. Not a pampered one,

but a regal one. A fucking warrior princess who doesn't back down, not even from Madd.

And that backbone, the spark in her, the way she pushes through her fear and keeps on coming, daring life to try to push her down again? Not gonna lie, that shit gets my cock going at least as much as her tight, fuckable little body does. Maybe even more, since hot bodies are a dime a dozen.

But the contrasts in her... those get to me.

The world is a dark, shitty place, and I grew up knowing exactly how deep that darkness goes, since no one can hide how tainted by it they truly are when they're locking eyes with their own death.

When you've watched enough men stare down the moment of their demise, you see the truth. You see the darkness. And you fucking appreciate... not the light, but the *bright*.

The color that exists around that darkness.

The life.

That's what the fire is. That's what Riley brims over with. And that's what I'm drawn to, like a moth to a flame.

It's probably also why my brothers... well, let's just say they're reacting to her too.

My grin turns into a smirk. Maddoc is *still* reacting, judging by the look on his face. It's been a while since I've seen him so affected.

His hard stare turns into a glower as Logan comes down the stairs a minute later—alone this time and clearly pissed the fuck off, no surprise there.

“You got something to get off your chest?” Maddoc asks, blocking his way when it looks like Logan's gonna try to keep it all bottled up inside like he usually does and storm straight out the door now that he's done his duty.

Logan gives Madd a chilling look that lesser men have literally shit themselves over. Usually right before Logan ended them.

But Maddoc doesn't even blink.

They have a tense, silent standoff, and Logan breaks first. Not because he's weak, but because sometimes he needs Madd to break him. Something I'll never say out loud, obviously. But I mean, shit, if Logan didn't have the two of us in his life—people who know him well enough that we understand when to leave him the fuck alone so he can stew in his ever-present rage, versus when he's better off getting shit off his chest—he'd probably snap and go nuclear at some point.

And sure enough...

"I can't fucking believe you agreed to this," Logan spits out after about two seconds of stewing.

Maddoc doesn't respond other than with a raised brow, and Logan's body goes so still he's practically vibrating as he stares Madd down.

I try really fucking hard not to laugh.

Okay, I don't try that hard.

Or at all.

Neither one of them breaks their stare-off to give me shit about it, so I gather Riley's clothes against my chest and lean against the door jamb to watch the rest of the showdown.

Maddoc is as immovable as a mountain, and Logan's still vibrating. Where some guys rage out, Logan always rages *in*. Seeing it in action always makes me think it's a goddamn miracle his bones don't crack from the constant tension. It's entertaining as fuck, though, especially when he goes head to head with Maddoc.

"That it?" Maddoc asks him, calmly enough to spark the tinder.

"Why is she even here?" Logan demands, his hands curling into tight fists. "What the fuck is in it for us by taking that risk?"

Maddoc wouldn't take being questioned like that from anyone else, and Logan would sooner suck broken glass than disrespect him in public like that. But here? In this house,

Maddoc is still our leader, but he's also our best friend. Our brother.

"You know why she's here," Maddoc finally answers, before Logan's head can explode from the pressure he never seems to have a good relief valve for. "Whatever actually happened with her sister, West Point was involved. And that means—"

"It means what?" Logan interrupts in a low voice. "That we get to fuck with them a little?" He scoffs. "At best, it's a waste of fucking time. At worst, we're playing right into their hands. What we should be dealing with is the way they've been invading our territory and undercutting our business. We're going to let them get away with that while we spin our wheels over some useless girl?"

Maddoc's eyes go hard. "You know we're not."

"But that's my fucking point," Logan shoots back. "We've got serious issues to deal with. Reaper issues. What the fuck do we care about what happens to the sister? She doesn't fucking matter."

"She does to Riley," I throw in, not quite sure why I'm speaking up.

Logan turns those icy blue death rays of his on me. "So? *Riley* doesn't matter either," he says coldly.

I've got no comeback, because he's right. He's also really fucking predictable since, from what I've seen, he's never gonna consider anything female worthy of mattering.

And he's sure as shit not gonna trust one.

Of course, none of us actually trust Riley—or anyone besides each other—but for some reason, it still makes me bristle to hear Logan say that shit about her not mattering. The reason, no doubt, being that my dick still remembers how perfect it felt to be balls deep inside her... which is no good reason at all.

I push away from the wall. Enough entertainment. It's time I got busy doing what Maddoc told me to and making sure Riley's clothes are clean.

But Logan doesn't get out of my way, so I guess the fun's not over yet.

"Chill," I tell him, which has Maddoc snorting in the background since it's one word we all know is the polar opposite of any state Logan is capable of existing in.

Logan's eyes narrow. "Not while she's under this roof."

I bite back another grin. Yup, *both* my brothers are definitely reacting to her.

"The only reason you're pissed about having Riley land in our laps like this is because you're the only one of us who hasn't noticed how fucking gorgeous she is," I say, just to rile him. Well, that and because it's true. "But you're welcome to take the stick out of your ass anytime, you know. Maybe try having a little fun once in a while?"

We've gone round and round on this particular topic more times than I can count, and this time, Logan doesn't blink. He barely fucking moves.

Which makes the punch he lands in my face feel like it comes out of nowhere.

That's the brother I know and love. My head snaps to one side from the precision of the blow, and I laugh and flip him off, feeling a little high on the rush of adrenaline that comes after the burst of pain.

Logan rolls his eyes, and I lick away the coppery taste of blood from the corner of my mouth. We both know he'll never thank me for giving him an outlet for all that bottled up bullshit he carries around inside—just like he's not gonna come out and verbally appreciate Madd pushing him like that—but hey, I don't need him to skywrite his gratitude. I'm happy just knowing I've done my part for the greater good.

I turn toward the hall leading down to the basement, but before I can leave the two of them to it, Maddoc grabs my shoulder, his other hand landing on Logan's.

"Maybe Riley's sister doesn't matter," Madd says. "Maybe she does. We're not going to know until we dig a little deeper here, and that's my call to make."

He gives us each a hard look, and we both nod.

“Good,” he says with a sharp nod of satisfaction once we’ve both acknowledged his authority. He let Logan say his piece because Logan needed to, and because he’s smart enough to know that both Logan and I sometimes see shit that he doesn’t. But he’s right. Maddoc’s not just our chosen brother, he’s our leader. I’ve got no problem with the fact that his word is Reaper law, and under all that hissing and scratching, neither does Logan.

Maddoc has earned the right to our loyalty ten times over, and he’s got it from both of us until the grave.

He drops his hands from our shoulders and glances back toward the stairs with a calculating look in his eyes. “If you think Riley’s sister doesn’t matter, Logan, then it’s highly likely McKenna feels the same.”

We all trade looks. Sounds like an opportunity.

“What are we gonna do about that?” I ask.

Maddoc’s grin is fucking predatory this time. “One thing I learned from my father is that it’s the seemingly inconsequential things that often yield the biggest results. It’s the little weaknesses an organization doesn’t even realize it has that are the easiest to exploit. And even if she doesn’t matter, taking Riley’s sister back from them will fuck with McKenna’s head.”

I like it already, but Logan scowls.

“And what if Riley becomes *our* weakness?” he asks.

“She won’t,” Maddoc says flatly, his tone daring us to disagree. I can tell Logan is about to do just that, but before he can, Madd’s eyes go hard and he lays down the law. Reaper law. Inviolable. “We’ll do this thing for us, keep her close because it’s smart, but that’s it. She doesn’t get her hooks in us. We don’t have sex with her. None of us.”

“Too late,” Logan says, giving me a pointed look.

Maddoc clearly isn’t amused. “From here on out, it doesn’t happen again. Sex will just cloud our judgment.”

That's bullshit. Sex is just sex. And sure, it's a stone cold fact that fucking her was the best I've had in, shit... a long damn while. But still, getting my dick wet has never affected my head, and it's never going to.

I know Madd's history, though, so I keep my mouth shut and give him a lazy smile, agreeing to his edict. If I need some relief, I can provide that with my own right hand. And if that's not enough, it won't be a big thing to go find it elsewhere, no matter how fucking convenient it might be to get it closer to home while Riley is under our roof.

Logan looks like he's swallowed a whole lemon, but I'm pretty sure it's not because he's being denied the chance to bang our new houseguest. More likely, he's pissed about the whole "under our roof" part. I'm sure nothing that Maddoc said has changed Logan's point of view, but he drops it for the moment and fucks off to go do whatever else is on his agenda for today.

I can tell this little conversation has managed to defuse his rage enough that he's not about to go out and carve anyone up, so I still call it a win and am more than happy to fuck off myself for a while and get shit done without the two of them breathing down my neck.

That's the thing with being closer than brothers. I'd lay down my life for either one of those two, but not gonna lie, sometimes I'm also glad this place Maddoc invested in for us is big enough that we're not always in each other's back pockets.

Besides, he gave me a job to do. I think I know what I'll find—a whole lot of nothing, since I believe Riley's story and mostly believe that my trust in her isn't just my dick talking—but I'm still pretty curious to see if I'm right.

So I head down to the basement to find out.

Madd has enough weapons stored down here to outfit half the gang, but more importantly at the moment, it's where we store other tools of our trade. I head straight to a workbench in the back and spread Riley's clothes out on it. I felt up the

seams while I was upstairs and didn't notice anything suspicious, but my attention wasn't fully on it.

This time, I do a more thorough job. Slicing through every seam, removing the lining from the jacket, turning out the pockets and then running some electronic sensors over the resulting scraps. It's all clean.

I carry what's left of her clothes to the small, unfinished room in the back of the garage. We use it as a wet room when needed, with a drain built into the floor, and the concrete walls make it a discreet place to burn things that we don't need tied back to us later.

I toss Riley's clothes on the ground and reach for an accelerant, then hesitate for a second.

"Fuck it," I mutter, grabbing the silky blue panties back out. They're intact. So fucking small that I didn't bother cutting them up.

I run them through my fingers, then bring them up to my nose. They're not the ones she wore last night—those are upstairs in my room—but the sweet musk takes me right back there.

Me *and* my dick.

It hardens, and I shove the little scrap of silk into my pocket.

Fuck, at this rate, I'm basically starting a collection. But nothing good is gonna come from overthinking that fact, so I don't. I flick my lighter to light the pile of shredded clothes on fire, clean up the mess once they've been reduced to ash, then head back upstairs, passing by the spot where Maddoc had Riley strip.

It was sexy as hell, despite the shit Logan gave her about the way she did it. She's so fucking strong, although there's a vulnerability to her that sits right below the surface despite her best efforts to hide it. I'm not gonna go against Maddoc's no-sex rule, but I'd be lying if I said Riley isn't everything I crave.

I finger the silk in my pocket, taking the stairs two at a time. I head straight to my room and grab a couple of things, then make my way down the hall to the bedroom I figure Logan put Riley in.

I'm right.

She's standing by the window when I open the door, still so fuckably naked, and she jumps when I walk in, whirling around to face me. *Fucking gorgeous.*

She doesn't bother covering up, and she looks pissed. The combination is hot as hell.

"Dante." Her breath hitches, her nipples hardening, and my name comes out of her mouth like it's another word for *asshole*.

I grin. I like how she always wants to fight.

I like how her body responds to me even more.

"You enjoying the accommodations, princess?" I ask, just to see if I can get more of a rise out of her.

She narrows her eyes. "No."

I chuckle, not really having expected anything different. "Brought you something."

As I speak, I toss the clothes I grabbed from my room on the bed for her. Her eyes flick in that direction for a split second before they lock back on to me.

"Are those yours?" she asks.

It's what she's getting, so does it really matter? "If you want to put something on, they'll have to do until we have someone pick up your stuff," I tell her.

Her eyes rake my body like claws, and I tuck my hand back in my pocket to caress that little scrap of silk, my cock starting to fill again.

"They won't fit," she bites out.

I shrug. She's right. She's gonna swim in the t-shirt and workout pants I brought her, but since the pants have a

drawstring, I figure she can make them work. Not her usual look, but... yeah.

The clothes *are* mine, and my cock likes something about the image.

Riley looks torn, and I grin, shrugging. "You wanna stay naked, that's fine too."

I don't even realize I'm moving toward her until she starts backing up. I keep coming until her back hits the wall behind her, then lean down to whisper in her ear, "I've got no complaints with this look, princess."

Her body goes tense, her breath coming in short, ragged gasps, and although she glares up at me when I lift my head, she doesn't try to push me away.

"Maddoc and Logan think I'm working for West Point," she says, which is half right.

Maddoc is reserving judgment, but Logan definitely doesn't trust her. "Well?" she demands when I don't respond.

"Well, what?" I ask, planting my hands on the wall on either side of her head and dropping my eyes to that lush mouth of hers.

"Do *you* think I'm working for them too?" she presses.

I lift one shoulder. "Not sure, princess. Are you? Kinda curious, you showing up like this."

She huffs out an angry breath. "I didn't know who you were last night. This wasn't about that. It was just..."

I raise an eyebrow when she doesn't finish.

Pretty sure it was one of the hottest fucks of my life, is what it was. I'm still curious what *she* was gonna say, though.

"I wasn't trying to use you," she says a little stiffly, a hint of pink coloring her cheeks. "This isn't a setup or anything."

"Okay." I nod. My cock is throbbing and, if I'm being honest, my attention is only half on what she's saying.

She goes still, blinking up at me. “Okay... you believe me?”

“Okay, I *hear* you,” I shoot back, smirking. “But it’s the same thing you’d say if West Point really had sent you here, so...” I shrug again.

“You’re a fucking asshole.” Riley smacks my chest again, just as uselessly as the first time. Not that she doesn’t have some power in her, but she’s got no room to swing here.

I lift her hands to the wall above her head and crowd in even closer, crushing her breasts against my chest as I stare down at her. “Either way, we’ll figure it out.”

She doesn’t fight me at all this time. She just stares back at me.

Then her breath hitches, her eyes turning glassy.

She blinks fast, looking away. “Why the hell would I work with them when they stole my sister?” she asks, her voice breaking. “Why... why would I do anything for that fucking animal? He took Chloe.”

“That’s why. You’re the one who said it. If he took her, you’d do anything to get her back.”

“Not for *him*,” she spits out, cold fury on her face.

Fuck. I believe her.

I’m damn good at reading people, and Riley seems genuinely broken up over this shit with her sister. And that hatred she’s got for Austin McKenna? It may come from a different place, but it looks a hell of a lot like the same hatred Maddoc carries around. The kind of hate that will stop at nothing to bring West Point down.

I appreciate that she didn’t let her tears fall, though. That shit serves no purpose. The world is a fucked up place, there’s just no getting around that fact. I’ve got no idea why McKenna took Riley’s sister, and I’ve got no doubt that when we do get her back, whatever he’s used her for will have left its scars. But it is what it is. I stopped feeling pity for the cruel turns of fate a long-ass time ago, and no amount of tears—genuine or

not—are gonna revive a useless emotion like that. It would only get in the way.

But Riley is a tantalizing mix of soft, hard, and hot as fucking hell.

Even if I don't pity her, I'm definitely... curious.

"Why the hell would you do something as reckless as asking *us* for help?" I ask, lacing our fingers together where I've still got her hands pressed against the wall over her head. "Since you tracked us down, you've gotta know what it means to be a Reaper."

"I know the Reapers' reputation," she whispers, fear flickering through her dark brown eyes. She tilts her chin up, a hint of something vicious underlying her tone as she adds, "And I hope it's true."

That startles a laugh out of me. "Do you now? Why is that? You get off on danger?"

"No," she straight-up lies. I can feel the way her body is responding to me, proving how false her words are. "But the enemy of my enemy is my friend."

"Is that what you wanna be?" I ask, releasing one of her hands and running my fingers over her jaw. "Friends?"

"No," she repeats, her chest heaving against mine as I press in even closer. I shouldn't, not with Maddoc's law laid down. But I can't seem to stop myself.

"Good. Because my brothers and I aren't your friends," I murmur, my blood on fire with the same unquenchable desire she sparked in me last night. I grip her jaw and tilt her head up, dropping mine down until our lips are so close I can taste her on the air I'm breathing. "Don't ever forget it, princess."

Her exhales come in short, quick puffs, and I suck each one in like a drug.

The scent is better than the panties in my pocket. She smells like fear and lilies and lust, and I'm so fucking hard for her that my cock aches.

"Dante," she whispers. "I can't—"

Whatever she was going to say gets cut off by the sudden sound of my phone buzzing in my pocket. The sound isn't even that loud, but it might as well be a fucking sonic boom, the way it cuts through the haze of chemical attraction that surrounds us. The room around me seems to snap back into focus as I come to my senses.

Goddamn. She really is like a drug.

Clearing my throat, I let go of her and take a step back.

“Get dressed,” I tell her with a jerk of my chin as I fish my phone out of my pocket. “Or... not.”

Before she can respond to that, I turn away and answer the call, glancing at the caller ID as I swipe across the screen.

It's fucking Mario Ricci.

“What's up, Mario?” I ask, vaguely registering that Riley hasn't made any move toward the clothes I brought her. She's leaning against the wall I had her pinned against as if she's not quite ready to trust her legs yet, and it makes me want to see what else I could do to make her weak in the knees. But Mario is already groveling on the other end of the line, and my mind reluctantly shifts back to business.

Mario runs a casino and occasionally cleans money for us... and it takes about two seconds of listening to his sorry list of excuses for me to figure out that he's trying to back out of a deal we recently made.

His casino isn't the only money laundering setup we've got in place for the Reapers. Not even the biggest. But even without the way his excuses reek of West Point interference, there's no fucking way we'd survive if we let him set a precedent of screwing us over.

I set the fucker straight about that as I take the call out of Riley's room and head down the stairs.

Maddoc's gonna need an update on this.

LOGAN

THE DULL BURN in my lats is becoming hard to ignore, even for me. I do it anyway, blocking out the weak part of my awareness that notices it as I continue the steady rhythm I've set at the pull-up bar in the gym that takes up part of the first floor of our home.

I work out every morning from 4:10 a.m until 5:59 a.m., and the fact that I'm in here for a second time today would make me furious if I let it.

I don't like breaks in my routine. But I *detest* the fact that Maddoc brought that girl into our home.

I appreciate that he heard me out, and drawing blood on Dante helped too. But I still needed this. Something more to calm my rage at the idea of the girl waltzing in and becoming a distraction. A weakness. A chink in the armor that holds me and my brothers—and the entire Reapers organization—together.

I hit two hundred and keep going, but the steady count that I tick off in my brain isn't working the way it usually does to crowd out other thoughts.

Not thoughts. *Feelings*.

"Fuck," I grunt when I should have said "two hundred and one."

I get back on count. *Two hundred and two. Two hundred and three. Two hundred and f—*

"*Fuck.*"

My back seizes up, my muscles locking as I hiss through the sudden spike of pain and then forcefully push it into the background again. I'm in control. Not my body. Not the chaos the world always wants to throw in front of me. *Me*.

Always.

"Two oh four." I make it happen. "Two oh five." I do another. "Two oh six." And another.

And then my grip spasms, and my left hand slips off the bar.

I drop to the floor with a curse. I've been down here for close to half an hour, pushing myself to the limit, but it hasn't worked. I still feel too wound up to center myself. Too filled with the cold fire that's been my lifelong companion: rage. And there will be nowhere for it to go if my body is going to fail me like this.

I don't like that there's a stranger in our home. Our sanctuary. Our fortress.

I don't like that there's a *woman* here.

Other gangs do that. Fuck around with women in a variety of sadistic ways. Take the ones that matter to their enemies as prisoners. Punish betrayal by using their bodies. Enact retribution by defiling them, destroying them, degrading them.

But we don't. Maddoc has never sanctioned that sort of thing for the Reapers, and I like it that way.

I have no qualms about hurting others for our own gain. I don't crave it either. I simply do what's most expedient. But I can also admire that there's a certain beauty to the infliction of pain when it's done well.

But regardless, the less association we have with women, the better. The past proves that.

Mine, certainly.

Maddoc's, most definitely.

Although I suppose I can see how Dante has yet to learn that lesson.

I roll my shoulders, then my neck, trying to loosen the muscles. I'm tempted to jump back up to the bar and force my body to obey me. There was a time I would have, even if it incapacitated me afterward.

Instead, I close my eyes and take control of my breath. My heart rate. Force relaxation into each muscle group in my body, one by one. I retreat into stillness as I remind myself that there's a time to demand compliance, but there's also a time to forge an alternate path.

Watching Maddoc build the Reapers up from nothing taught me that.

Being trusted as his second—moving in here with him and Dante five years ago, just after Maddoc began formalizing the loose association of criminals whose loyalty he'd earned into our current organization—is the single stable touchstone in my life. The only one I need.

I open my eyes, finally under control again, and start methodically tidying up the equipment I've been using. Realigning the floor mats. Adjusting the weight plates in their rack until each is turned to face the proper direction. Blocking out the fact that there's still something out of place.

Intrusive.

Riley.

I press my lips together tightly, then force them to relax again. Maddoc's made a decision, and if I didn't trust his decisions, I wouldn't be here.

In the beginning, he poured everything he had into keeping control of the Reapers. Dante and I helped him maintain the power he'd built up through any means necessary, and it forged the three of us into an unbreakable unit.

The three of us.

Only us.

No one else has ever been brought to the house on an open-ended basis like this. Maddoc and Dante have both had

women over for their own pleasure, of course, and we have a space here in the basement for those times it's been necessary to bring people in for interrogations or beatings.

Occasionally, Maddoc will even allow someone to visit this house for a business deal.

But no one else has ever lived with us. He's never moved anyone else in.

Why now?

Why her?

He should know better. Women can't be trusted. Of course, *no one* should be trusted until they've proven themselves, and in twenty-six years, the only two people I've ever come across who are worthy of trust are the two I call my brothers. But Maddoc should've learned his lesson about falling for a woman's lies the last time he got entangled with one.

Sienna Morgan.

She's the only bad decision I've ever seen him make, and when she broke his trust, it ended badly for all of us.

I don't want to see that happen again... but the cracks are already there.

Dante didn't just fuck this girl. He was affected by her. I can tell.

And Maddoc?

The calm, calculated demeanor he radiates is one of the reasons I trust him. He knows how to keep his cool in a way that most people don't, to use his head rather than his emotions.

But this time, there was something brewing under the surface when he looked at her, and I don't like it.

I force a slow, cleansing breath out through my nose. Then another.

Methodically, I package up the unwanted thoughts and emotions cluttering up my mind and seal them away. Then I turn the lights off in the gym, close the door with a quiet snick,

and head up to the ensuite bathroom attached to my bedroom to shower, carefully keeping my mind blank.

Once I'm clean and dressed, I go back down to the main floor. Dante is in the living room, typing out a text on his phone.

"Got a problem," he says when he sees me, finishing up the text and tucking his phone into his pocket. "I just finished giving Maddoc an update."

I lean in the doorway, crossing my arms. "The girl?"

"Nah. Mario Ricci."

A curling heat unfurls in my stomach. Here's something I can do, a problem I can take care of.

"How can I help?" I say immediately.

Dante snorts, chuckling. "You wanna hear how he's trying to screw us over before you start planning how to dismember him?"

The question is rhetorical, of course. For one thing, I won't know if dismemberment is necessary until I understand the scope of the problem Mario has caused us. And even if it turns out that it is, Dante knows me well enough to understand that the *pleasure* I get out of doling out appropriate consequences to our enemies isn't based on which tool I use to do it.

It's about returning things to their proper order.

And all of that is beside the point, because I don't need him to explain how Mario has attempted to screw us over. I can already slot the puzzle pieces together into a logical conclusion.

"He's trying to fuck with our money."

Dante nods. "Yup. He's fucking stupid, is what he is. He wants to back out of our deal."

The deal being the fifty thousand dollars that we've arranged to funnel through his casino by the end of the month in order to legitimize it enough to put it back into circulation.

"Backing out of the deal isn't an option."

Dante grins. “Yeah, that’s what I told him when he said he couldn’t do it. He didn’t seem to believe me, though, so I’m gonna go pay him a visit.”

“*We* are,” I correct him.

This is what I needed. Whether we leave Mario breathing after the visit or not, the opportunity to right this wrong should be the outlet I need. The one that pushing myself in the gym didn’t prove sufficient for.

We enter the garage, and Dante grabs a set of keys from the lockbox by the door, tossing them in his hand. The Escalade.

I clear my throat.

“Oh, come on,” he says, throwing me the charming smile he usually employs to get into women’s pants. “It’ll be fun.”

I don’t bother answering. I’m not getting into a vehicle with him in the driver’s seat, and he knows it.

I did. Once. And hated it.

Dante drives like he has a blindfold on: wild, reckless, and with a sloppy disregard for anything resembling economy of motion or the strategic use of the roadway.

“Fine.” He groans with a put-upon sigh, replacing the keys to the Escalade. “Worth a shot, though, right?”

“Never,” I deadpan, plucking the keys to the Audi RS7 from the lockbox. It’s the car I prefer when I’m behind the wheel. The one Dante laughingly called “the pinnacle of understated rage” when we bought it and that neither of my brothers ever disrespect me by driving themselves—even though, like all of our vehicles, it’s the property of the organization.

I slip behind the wheel and run my hands over the smooth leather covering the steering wheel, my body humming with the power I’m holding even before I turn the key.

“You know you’re just as bad as I am,” Dante comments as I back out of the garage. “Hell, the speeds you like to push it to? Maybe worse.”

It's true. I do drive fast. Fast and aggressively.

"It's not about speed," I tell him. "It's about precision."

"I'll give you that," he says with a laugh as I thread through traffic, analyzing the driving patterns around us and overlaying my knowledge of the city's grid to get us to the casino by the most efficient possible route.

Our destination is on the outskirts of Halston, and by the look of the parking lot, it's not crowded. Not surprising, since the night is still pretty young and the place is a bit of a shit hole even at the best of times. Its current patrons are mostly the sad, compulsive gambler crowd who've probably been here since the sun was high and look pathetic at any time of day... but in my opinion, even more so under the cheap patina of glitz and mystique that the casino tries to put on at night.

It disgusts me. The stains on the carpet. The smell of cheap booze, stale sweat, and empty desperation that permeate the air.

They disgust me. They've got no control over themselves, and unlike me, they don't even try to master their basest impulses.

We head to the back, striding side by side. Mario's security makes a half-assed attempt to slow us down when we pass through the discreet doors marked as employee only, but they back off quickly when we deploy some of the tools at our disposal to convince them it's not in their best interests.

Dante gives me a look when we reach the closed door to Mario's office, reminding me with a single glance why he's one of the two people on this earth that I trust enough to kill for on his word alone.

I should hate everything about him. He's the polar opposite of me... on the outside.

But inside?

Dante truly is my brother. We share certain traits that make words completely unnecessary for the two of us to understand each other.

We burst in, and Mario lets out a frightened shout. He scrambles up from his desk, tipping over the chair he was sitting in as he backs away, his face going pale with fear.

Fear is a valid response. Maybe the man isn't quite as stupid as I'd assumed.

Dante and I slide around the desk with smooth coordination, boxing him in. I slide a small, lethal blade out of the wrist sheath I always wear and hold it to his throat as Dante frisks him, removing a weapon from a side holster.

Just one.

The man is a joke.

A joke whose mouth won't stop moving.

He's dripping with whiny excuses and the rancid stench of panic. He fits right in with the disgusting patrons of his establishment... and I'm going to need a second shower once we're through here.

"If you piss yourself, I'll gut you," I inform him courteously, flicking a second blade free from its sheath at my lower back and using the tip to trace the pattern of his intestines through the strained fabric of his dress shirt.

Not to scare him, but simply to map out his vital organs.

The fear is a useful side effect, though.

"N-n-no," Mario stutters, shaking so hard he almost disembowels himself without my intervention needed at all. "Please. I'm... I'm sure we can work something out."

I'm sure we can too, but I'll leave that part to Dante.

And it doesn't change the fact that if the man defiles me with his urine, I'll make him bleed.

I always keep my word.

"You're sure, are you?" Dante asks, cocking his head to the side as he smiles at the man. "'Cause that's not the impression you gave me over the phone."

It's a beautiful smile. So... disarming. How no one ever seems to see the sinister promise of violence-when-necessary underneath Dante's personable exterior never ceases to amaze me.

Then again, people as a rule are stupid.

And Mario Ricci clearly isn't the one who's going to break that rule.

"No, no, you misunderstood," he babbles, beads of sweat dripping down his face.

One lands on the blade I've got at his throat, sullyng its shine.

I don't like that.

"Explain it to me," Dante says patiently as I slice open the buttons holding Mario's shirt closed over his bulging stomach, preparing to do what may be necessary given how truly unintelligent the man is proving to be.

I know human anatomy well, but there's an excessive amount of visceral fat wrapped around Mario's organs, pushing them out of place. I'm confident I can find the important ones anyway.

"Uh, it's... it's almost summer. We're a... a seasonal business."

Dante snorts, a signal that Mario needs motivation.

I carve a little divot into his flesh. A placeholder for where I estimate his engorged liver to be. It distracts Dante for a moment, as I expected it to. His eyes track the vibrant line of blood that snakes its way down the man's stomach.

He smiles.

He does like bright things, and he's always been partial to red.

Mario whimpers, and Dante's eyes snap back up.

"What was that?" he asks, cocking his head again. "Pretty sure you'll need to repeat it for me, Mario."

Mario swallows, an audible sound that I don't care for at all. "It's just that... that we're not busy enough to launder the full fifty you want right now," he gasps out when I prod him again. "But, uh, but we can... we can do something for you, for sure. Less, maybe? Don't worry, Mr. Channing. We'll still help you out."

"Help *us* out?" Dante repeats in a warm voice, that deceptive little smile hovering around his mouth again.

Dante's got an entirely different set of tools in his arsenal.

Well, maybe not *entirely* different.

"Yeah, yeah, you know I want to help," the idiot babbles eagerly, starting to nod vigorously but then stopping as his jowls connect with my blade.

He swallows again, his Adam's apple catching my eye as it bobs. It's a tender spot, right in the throat like that, and I mentally register it as another option if I need to carve into him more than I've already done.

"It's just too risky to run fifty-k through right now," he goes on in a strained voice. "Maybe, uh..." He gulps, then proves that yes, he really is that stupid. "Maybe I can do ten for you?"

Dante hums quietly to himself, probably giving Mario the false impression that he's actually considering it.

He's not.

I smile... on the inside. Then I remove another small divot of flesh, marking an entry point for Mario's spleen. I would have stuck with the liver, but this way adds another entrancing line of blood to the pattern already decorating his stomach.

It's a little gift for Dante's enjoyment.

Mario makes a satisfyingly frantic sound of distress, which probably means this will be enough.

Then again, sometimes people can surprise you in the most unpleasant ways.

“Ten isn’t what you promised us,” Dante reminds him. “And when you agreed to do fifty, you knew full well how busy your casino usually is this time of year.” He gives the trembling man a pleasant smile. “So tell me, Mario, are you going to keep that promise? Are you going to clean fifty-k for us and make it work like you said... or should we plan on getting the money out of you some other way?”

On the one hand, the smooth tumble of intestines slipping out of a well-placed abdominal cut has a way of enlightening even the dimmest of bulbs. But on the other hand, evisceration is so often fatal that it’s a bit of a calculated risk.

And we do need the money laundered.

Of course, more than that, we need to enforce respect for the Reapers, so it’s a risk I’m willing to take if Mario doesn’t realize the error of his ways from Dante’s gentle nudging. Fifty thousand dollars is a significant amount for our organization, but respect is priceless.

And enforcing it is something that needs to be done at any cost.

For a moment, an unwanted and unwelcome picture of the girl flashes through my mind.

Riley.

Naked.

Holding her chin up and her spine straight as I left her in the guest room Maddoc assigned her.

She needs to learn respect. There was fear in her eyes, as there should be, but not enough. Not when there were other things there too. Things that threaten everything Maddoc’s built. Everything Dante and I have dedicated our lives to keeping in order.

I grit my teeth, then force my jaw to relax as I push the girl’s image out of my mind. She’s a threat, and I won’t rest until I find a way to help my brothers see that.

But ultimately, as I’ve already stated to them, she doesn’t matter.

Right now, dealing with Mario and his transgressions is what matters.

I lock the door on any further mental distractions and focus on carving him up a little more while Dante finishes explaining the error of his ways to him. Luckily, the man keeps from pissing himself. Another shower is already a given, but I'd be annoyed if I also had to burn these clothes due to that sort of contamination.

“We'll see you at the end of the month,” Dante tells Mario with a warm smile as we finish.

I don't bother with that sort of pleasantries. I do slice off the silk tie Mario's wearing and use it to clean off my blades, however. The waste of space owes me for getting his bodily fluids all over my tools.

The blades will need better care once we're home of course, but I'm certainly not returning them to their sheaths covered in... him. That's disgusting.

And then, once Mario confirms our next appointment with a nervous jerk of his head, we leave.

Dante frowns as we exit the casino. “He's the second one to try to fuck us over on a pre-existing agreement like this.”

The second one?

I mentally flip through our recent business transactions as we both slide into the Audi.

Dante's right. Branson, a piece of garbage who owns some local used car dealerships, was the first. Mario the second. And two is two too many.

I press my lips together tightly, the smooth rumble of the Audi's engine as it fires up not enough to soothe the cold fury building inside me all over again. Any peace that setting things right with Mario afforded me is gone now that Dante's reminded me that he wasn't the first.

True loyalty may be rare, but betrayal is always inexcusable.

Always.

Dante drums his fingers on his knee, looking thoughtful. “We need to look into both incidents a little deeper. And if we throw in that shooting bullshit the other day, that’s... what, three times the Reapers have been blatantly disrespected since April? Because that sounds like a fucking pattern to me.”

“Fuck,” I bite out, pulling out of the casino’s lot and heading toward the freeway.

I need speed.

I need *something*.

I need the kind of release I have no idea how to find, not when there’s a disruption like this.

One I should have noticed earlier. One that sounds like a pattern to me too. A pattern that needs to be dealt with.

“Three times can’t be coincidence,” Dante murmurs, echoing my thoughts as he looks out the window.

His fingers keep tapping out a rapid beat, telling me without words that he’s just as disturbed as I am. Because he’s right. There are no coincidences. It’s what they fail to see when it comes to Riley, and it always means something’s up.

Something that’s not good for the Reapers.

Something, in this case, that stinks of West Point’s influence... just like the girl does.

RILEY

I'M NOT sure how long it's been since Dante left me alone. It took me way too fucking long to stop the shakes that hit me the minute he walked out, and as soon as I managed it, the first thing I did was cross over to the door and turn the handle. Pointless, obviously, since Maddoc made it perfectly clear that I'm not going anywhere.

But to my shock, it turned.

I twisted it all the way and gave it a tug, opening it just a hair to confirm it.

They really hadn't locked me in.

For some reason, the shock of that fucked with my head even more than everything that came before. Not that I want to be locked in... but I'm not sure I want it to be that easy for any more Reapers to walk in on me either.

I think I heard Dante leave the house earlier, but the window in my bedroom faces the back of the property, so I can't be sure. I haven't heard anything since, but the house is big enough that its silence doesn't really reassure me. Besides, even if I'm right about Dante, Logan and Maddoc have to be somewhere, and who knows if there are other Reapers living here too.

Or other "involuntary guests," like me.

Fuck.

I'm so fucked.

I need a plan, but it's hard to make one when those three words keep playing over and over in my head, so I retreat to the bed, curl up in a ball, and go numb for a while. The numbness helps to dull the sharp edge of panic, and when I feel a little more steady, I haul my ass back up and grab the clothes Dante left me.

They smell like him. They're clean, but with an underlying musk of man that sends heat twisting through my belly. Dante's scent is a particular blend of spice and smoke that burrowed into my brain while he fucked me last night, and it subtly surrounds me now, wafting into my nostrils.

I almost snap the drawstring on the sweatpants as I pull it tight enough to actually make them stay on my hips, then I slip the t-shirt over my head. I have to knot the damn thing at my waist to keep it from looking like a dress, and it still slips off one shoulder like I'm in an 80s tribute band.

Once I'm dressed, I go back to the window and look out at the well-tended lawn and high fence that surrounds it. I'm sure the fence has some kind of security system installed, just like the window must. That's not really what keeps me here, though. If Maddoc and his men want me to stay, they'll enforce it. If I left and they wanted me back—or wanted me dead—they'd make it happen. They've cut me off from the world, taken my clothes and my phone, and have me at their mercy. And it terrifies me.

But even if I was offered the chance to walk out the front door right now, I wouldn't take it.

Because I still need them.

I turn away from the window and start pacing. It doesn't matter if Dante makes me feel all kinds of confusing things, if Logan looks at me like he's imagining ten different ways to kill me, or if Maddoc gets off on controlling me.

The only thing that matters is getting Chloe back, and they're my only hope of doing that.

If, like Maddoc said, they even decided to help me.

But since I'm here, since they brought me into their inner sanctuary, I can at least use the opportunity to find out whatever I can about this world Chloe and I are now a part of.

I need to understand the strengths and weaknesses of West Point and the sadistic fucker who leads it, and what I know for sure is that West Point and the Reapers are rivals. It's why I'm fucking here. So it also stands to reason that the Reapers have information about West Point. Information I might be able to use against the gang myself if they decide not to help me.

The question is, where do I find that information?

"Not in here," I whisper to myself, my heart going triple time as I force my feet to move toward the door despite the sense of dread that grips me at the idea of leaving the gilded cage they stuck me in.

Was leaving the door unlocked a trap? A test? I've got no clue, and that's the whole problem. But the house seems quiet, and I'm not going to find any answers if I huddle in here like a frightened rabbit.

So I don't.

I crack the door open and listen.

Silence.

I pull it open just enough to slip out, then step hesitantly into the hall, looking both ways. No Reapers. Just plush carpeting that makes it easy to move quietly, and a few closed doors in both directions.

Choosing the opposite direction from the one Logan led me down when he brought me up here, I head away from the stairs. My lungs burn as I force my breath to stay slow and even despite the way my heart races every time I imagine I hear a sound.

The first door is a bedroom, and I slip in and look around. It's... nice. Masculine and on the lived-in side of tidy, with surprising splashes of color in the décor that make it seem almost welcoming. I can pick up the distinctive scent of Dante's cologne or aftershave, which makes me even more certain that this is his room. I quickly riffle through his things,

finding nothing of interest before returning it all to the state I found it in.

The next door is another bedroom, and it's quite definitely *not* welcoming. So, Logan's.

I skim my fingers over the top of the crisply made bed, the cool colors aesthetically pleasing but somehow slightly intimidating in a way that no bed should ever be. The corners of the duvet are so sharp I can't believe it's really made of cloth until I actually touch it. The personal items are minimal and laid out with a disturbing precision that makes me wonder if the fucker ever gets laid.

If he does, he doesn't keep a drawerful of condoms next to his bed the way Dante does.

I snort back a slightly hysterical laugh for no other reason than because I'm scaring myself and getting nowhere. It's not like the guys are going to keep West Point's secrets in their underwear drawers.

I pull open a couple more of Logan's drawers anyway, but don't touch anything. Every one of them is impossibly organized and more than one—including that condom-free nightstand—contain weapons I'd rather not have known about.

Dammit. This isn't where I need to be looking. I need to find where they keep shit related to their business.

I glance around the creepily perfect room to make sure I haven't disturbed anything, then leave, heading back in the direction of the stairs since there are no more doors this way. The fear of getting caught makes it harder than it should be to pass by the door to "my" room, but I do.

The next door is a bathroom, but there's nothing of interest in it. But the door after that opens into what looks like an office or a library.

That's more like it.

My heart lurches with excitement. A room full of books, files, and ledgers—a room that honestly looks more lived in than the bedrooms do—might actually yield something I can use.

I pause in the doorway, listening hard. It's not easy over the insistent pounding of my heart, but I close my eyes and focus on my other senses. The only way I'm going to make it through this is to stay vigilant, and the stakes are too high to make a stupid mistake.

I ignore the sound of my own breath and focus instead on all the small sounds houses make. Occasional faint creaks. A distant ticking. The quiet shushing of the ventilation system.

But no footsteps.

No sounds of life or scent of cooking.

No sudden caress of moving air to tell me doors are opening or closing in other parts of the house.

As far as I can tell, I'm alone. Definitely on this floor, and possibly in the whole house.

I'd hear it if someone came up the stairs, wouldn't I?

I tell myself I would, then curl my toes into the soft carpet, take a slow, deep breath for courage, and open my eyes. Still alone.

Thank fuck.

My pulse finally starts to slow down, and I step into the room and start looking around.

There's a painting on the far wall that tries to suck me in. Bright, vibrant colors explode out from a dark center. It's a painting of nothing and everything, and I shake my head when I catch myself wasting time trying to make sense of it, then tear my gaze away.

It's not information on West Point, and that's all that matters.

I go to a crowded bookshelf, running my fingers over the titles. Weapon manuals. Warfare tactics. Business strategy. A few biographies, but nothing that seems like it would hold information about West Point.

There's an empty beer bottle tucked behind the leg of the plush chair in the corner, like someone reading set it down and

forgot about it. A Zippo tossed down next to a lamp. A handheld gaming system next to a stack of engine schematics. A jagged brick with a worn inscription on one of the shelves, acting as a book end. A carved wooden box.

Small signs that the fortress I'm trapped in really is a home, and that the men who live in it have lives.

Lives I'm curious about despite my best efforts not to be.

I'm starting to doubt I'll find anything about gang activity in here—about the Reapers or West Point—but the room still gives me a small glimpse of who these men are behind the calculating, cold, ruthless demeanor they present to the world, and figuring out what makes each of them tick could still be valuable.

At least, that's what I tell myself as I pick up the Zippo, running my fingers over the smooth metal sides as I make a slow circuit of the room to take it all in. I trail the fingertips of my other hand over the bookshelves and the small personal touches in between the books, wondering about each of them. Guessing at which of the three men chose each piece. Trying to suss out why and what I can do with the information.

I'm in front of the painting, facing away from the door, when the skin at the back of my neck prickles.

I whirl around, adrenaline surging through me even though I know I'm alone. I'm just fucking paranoid, but I haven't heard a thing since I entered the room other than the sound of my own breath, so it's—

Not fine.

I'm not just paranoid.

“Logan,” I blurt, dropping the Zippo as I instinctively scramble backward to get away from the cold fury on his face as he barrels down on me like an oncoming freight train.

I can't. There's nowhere for me to go. He comes at me with a single-minded intensity that's far more terrifying than Austin McKenna and his gun-toting minions and threats. Logan's icy rage isn't a threat. It's not even a promise. It's like staring down death.

“Logan,” I repeat, holding up my hands to ward him off. “I —”

I don't know what I'm planning to say, but he doesn't give me the chance. He knocks my hands aside before I can react and locks one of his larger hands around my throat without a word, pinning me to the wall behind me. His grip isn't tight enough to cut off my air supply, but his hand is so big that it feels like my throat is trapped in a vise. Adrenaline surges through me, and I'm sure he can feel the way my pulse beats frantically against his palm.

I yank on his arm, my fingers digging into the corded muscles of his forearm, but the man is made of fucking steel. His grip doesn't loosen even a little bit as he steps even closer, looming over me like a dark shadow.

He holds me in place without flinching and leans in, his gaze locked on mine as he murmurs softly, “You shouldn't have done that.”

He's close enough for me to make out the eerie beauty of his pale blue eyes and feel the heat of his rage on my skin, and for a second, even through the panic, it shocks me. As if Logan shouldn't have body heat, since everything else about him is ice.

Then he makes a noise in his throat, tightening his grip just enough to remind me that he's the one in control of whether or not I get to breathe.

“Do you hear me, wildcat?” he demands. “You made a mistake. You touched my bed. You opened my drawers.” His eyes narrow, dark lashes partially obscuring the bright blue of his eyes. “You defiled my space.”

Through the rush of fight-or-flight instincts raging through my head, it hits me. The bedrooms. He's not talking about *this* room, he's talking about the bedrooms I snooped in earlier. One was his.

How the fuck did he figure out I was in there?

I was careful.

I put everything I touched back exactly as it was.

And yet... he knows.

Logan leans in even closer. So close that those pale, unblinking eyes of his are the only things I can see. So close that when he shifts his grip on my throat, his cool, clean scent floods my nostrils.

“Why are you here?” he demands in a low voice. “What... the fuck... do you really... *want?*”

He drags out every word, his gaze never wavering from mine. He looks more like a monster than a man in this moment, and my stomach dips as I'm hit by a terrifying thought.

If I answer his question the wrong way, there's a good chance that Logan is going to kill me.

RILEY

HE'S GOING to kill me.

That thought spurs something inside me, and I renew my struggle against his hold. But he's like a robot, a machine made for one purpose, unbreakable and unstoppable. Keeping his hand firmly wrapped around my throat, he pries my other hand away from his forearm and presses it to the wall above my head, his nostrils flaring as he keeps me pinned with the weight of his body.

I wriggle against him, helpless against the force of his rage. He still hasn't cut off my air completely, but the pressure around my throat is a constant reminder of the power he has over me.

Every breath I take, it's because he allows it.

My gaze locks with his as I have that thought, and for some reason I can't even fathom, a burst of heat rushes through my veins. My chest heaves as I suck in a breath past the constriction that tightens my throat, and my skin prickles with a strange sensation that's almost like... arousal.

No. That doesn't make any fucking sense, Riley. This man could kill you. He's unhinged.

My mind snaps back into focus, and I shove at Logan's chest with my free hand, the feelings swirling around inside me only heightening my panic—because I don't understand them. I don't know why my nipples are hard, or why my clit is throbbing. All I know is that I need to get away from this man.

He doesn't budge at all when I try to push him away, but I manage to get a leg up and drive my heel into his knee. I'm not wearing my shoes, so it doesn't do much damage, but Logan flinches slightly.

He blinks, his pupils dilating and contracting as his gaze bores into me. His grip tightens again, just a little, something wild and furious burning in his eyes.

"Logan! Fuck, brother. Stop!"

The loud voice from the doorway jerks my attention away from Logan. Dante bursts into the room, rushing toward us. His large hands wrap around Logan's, prying them from my neck.

"Breathe," Dante demands, and it takes me a second to realize that he's not talking to me. "Just take a breath and think about this," he says to Logan, his jaw clenched tight but his voice calm and smooth. "Back off for a minute and... and seriously, what the hell? Just... just let her go, okay?"

Logan's eyes flash, and it's like he doesn't see Dante. Can't feel Dante's hands on him. Refuses to hear.

But then, slowly, his fingers loosen a bit around my throat.

He releases the wrist he's got pinned to the wall, letting my arm fall, then finally lets go of his hold on my neck and takes a step back.

I drag in a shuddering lungful of air, slumping against the wall as all the bones in my body seem to melt.

"Yeah, that's it," Dante says quietly, subtly putting his body between me and Logan as the blond man backs away. "I've got this, okay? I'll handle it. You just take it easy and get your head on straight, all right?"

I slide down the wall, landing hard on my butt with my knees bent. The remnants of that strange and unsettling arousal are still buzzing through my body, but now that Logan has let me go, the fear of everything he could've done to me rushes up to eclipse everything else. My hands are shaking from the amount of adrenaline in my veins, and I can still feel the phantom pressure of his palm on my throat.

My lungs expand so widely that my ribs hurt, as if my body is trying to stockpile oxygen as I slowly raise my gaze to Logan. He's staring down at me without any expression on his face.

"You're not welcome here," he finally says. "Not in my room. Ever. Not even in this house, as far as I'm concerned."

If I felt like risking my life again, I'd tell him that's pretty fucking obvious. But I don't, so I keep my mouth shut, refusing to say anything.

Hatred burns so brightly in Logan's eyes that I swear they almost glow, but just when I think he's going to do something about it—either pin me to the wall again or tell me where else I'm not wanted—he presses his lips together into a thin, tight line and storms out of the room without another word.

The minute I'm alone with Dante, I blow out the breath I've been holding, raising my hands to shove my blue and purple hair out of my face.

"Jesus," I gasp, my voice rough. "Fuck. Why did he... why...?"

Dante looks down at me, his expression hard to read. I'm not sure what it is I see on his face, but it better not be pity. I don't think I could handle pity from him.

"You okay?" he asks.

A huff of breath that's almost a laugh bursts out of me before I can stop it, and he sighs, scrubbing a hand over his face.

"Yeah. I guess that was a stupid question." He hums under his breath, his eyes turning to the door Logan left through. "Logan's... dealing with a few things. We've all got our shit, you know?"

"Please tell me you're not making excuses for him."

I raise my hand to my throat unconsciously as I speak, running my fingertips over the place where Logan's fingers were a minute ago. There was so much control in his grip that I don't think he even left bruises, but to be honest, that control

is the thing that scares me the most about him. It's just a reminder of how efficiently and precisely he could take me apart if he wanted to.

Dante shakes his head, one shoulder lifting. "Nah. He shouldn't have gone after you like that. It's just... violence is in our blood, mine just as much as his. No excuses, but I get it."

I swallow hard and look away. I want to hate Dante a little for not immediately disavowing Logan, but why would he? What the fuck does this man owe me? Nothing, that's what.

I may still be breathing because of him, but it's not like he's on my side.

But...

Well, I won't say 'I get it too,' because I don't. Logan's eyes were filled with a quiet sort of rage before I ever opened my mouth to ask for the Reapers' help, so his anger clearly isn't about me. Or not *just* me, at least. So no, I don't get it, but I do understand what Dante is saying. We all have our things. The shit that's shaped us. The fucked up backstory that digs its claws into us and drags us down certain paths in life whether we want to go there or not.

I'm still freaked out as hell by what he did, but some part of me is morbidly curious about why he is the way he is. I've been with them for less than a day, and I've already caught glimpses of what each one hides behind the masks that they show the outside world—and every little glimpse I get just makes me want to learn more.

"Logan's got some anger issues," Dante says, reaching down and offering me a hand to help me up.

I give him a pointed look as I rise to my feet, keeping my back to the wall and letting it help support me since my legs are still shaking a bit. "So you're telling me water is wet?"

His full lips quirk up. "I guess you could put it that way, yeah. But the thing about you going into his room..."

He gives me a pointed look, but I refuse to take the bait and confess. And I'm damn sure not confessing that I went

into what I'm pretty sure is Dante's room too.

Dante grins in a way that makes it clear he sees right through me even if I don't admit it, but he doesn't press me. "I'm just saying, Logan has his reasons for being the way he is, and he has his methods of dealing with his demons. And one of those methods is to be very controlling of his environment."

"Must be nice," I mutter, which just makes Dante smile wider.

"It's necessary," he says. "Or else..."

"Or else what?"

"Logan just needs things to be a certain way, and it's important to him that they stay that way. Just something to remember while you're staying with us."

As if it's my choice.

"So you're basically saying don't ever touch his shit or he'll rage out?"

"Yup," Dante says, brushing some of my hair off my cheek and tucking it behind my ear.

I roll my eyes, wishing I had it in me to pull away from him.

But I don't. Not right now.

"So this was all because he's pissed that I moved a few things in his room?"

"I don't know, did you?" Dante asks, that teasing glint back in his eyes.

"No," I insist stubbornly. He raises an eyebrow, and I finally break. "Fine. Yes. But I mean, barely. Jesus. I was *careful*. I put everything back exactly where it was. How did he know?"

"Because he's Logan." Dante chuckles. "And yeah, that's why. Sounds just like him. It doesn't take much to set him off."

He takes a step closer to me and rubs that hair he tucked behind my ear between his fingers, then runs those fingers down my throat, so lightly that I can barely feel his touch.

“This hurt?”

I shrug, swallowing hard. The truth is, my neck feels okay, but the almost tender way Dante is touching me is fucking with my emotions. It doesn't mean anything, I know it doesn't, but I can't stop myself from leaning into him a little. I feel a strange pull toward this man, and I have since our eyes first locked back at Club M.

It's probably just because he's the least terrifying of the Reapers, and I need to remember not to fall for it. It would be foolish to believe that Dante is actually a good person just because he's less overtly frightening than the other two men.

Like he said, they've all got violence in their blood.

“You're strong as hell, I'll give you that, princess,” Dante murmurs, his fingers still moving lightly over my throat. He tilts my chin up, dragging his thumb over my bottom lip. “I've seen grown men just about piss themselves when Logan comes after them in one of his moods, but you aren't one to let your fear get the best of you, are you? You don't just accept defeat, ever. You fight back, no matter what. I've gotta tell you, that's hot as hell.”

There's a quiet awe in his tone, and even though he's not gripping my neck in an unbreakable hold the same way Logan did, my pulse quickens again, my breath catching in my throat. His thumb tugs at my lip slightly, his gaze dropping down to watch the way my jaw falls open a little. One corner of his mouth curves upward in a small, crooked smile, his head dropping toward mine.

“You want to explain what the fuck is going on here?”

The deep voice from behind Dante makes me jump, and Dante drops his hand, his head snapping back up.

Both of us turn toward the door as Maddoc strides into the room.

RILEY

MY SHOULDERS immediately tense up at the sight of Maddoc, but even though Dante steps away from me, his posture is still relaxed and confident.

“Logan had her by the throat,” he tells his leader with a nonchalant shrug. “I had to do something.”

“You had to do what, exactly?” Maddoc asks, his eyes gaze flicking between the two of us.

“I had to step in.”

Dante’s voice remains casual, but when I glance over at him again, I realize I was wrong about him being unaffected. Although he’s doing a good job of hiding it, there’s an expression on his face almost like he just got busted and knows it.

Busted for what?

For protecting me?

Or for touching me the way he was?

But that doesn’t make sense. Even though he and I were standing intimately close when Maddoc walked in, Dante already told his two friends that we fucked. Between that confession and the way Maddoc made me strip for all of them earlier, I can’t imagine the leader of the Reapers would give a shit about walking in on whatever may or may not have just been going on between the two of us.

But that’s not the vibe I’m getting from Maddoc at all right now. He definitely looks pissed as he stalks into the room,

bearing down on us until he's almost toe to toe with Dante.

"Logan had her by the throat," Maddoc says, repeating Dante's words. "And do you know the reason Logan was angry enough to go after her like that? It's because Riley was snooping around where she doesn't belong. Did you miss that little detail when you 'stepped in'?"

Dante grimaces, and I wince.

Yeah, he's definitely busted for letting that slide.

The two men have a silent face-off, and although I'm sure they're communicating something in the silence, I have no idea what it is. Then Dante dips his head in a nod. He shoots a quick look in my direction, giving me a one-shouldered shrug as if to say there's nothing he can do. Before I can respond to that, he turns and strides from the room.

"What exactly were you looking for when you decided to go snooping around our house?" Maddoc demands, stepping closer to me the second we're alone.

I lift my chin, glaring back at him. "I was just—"

"*Don't* try to lie about what you were doing," he barks before I can finish. "I've already talked to Logan."

I swallow, fear shooting through me at the mention of Logan's name. But I forge ahead anyway. If I was going to let fear stop me, I would have given up long before I ever met the Reapers. Dante was right about me in that regard.

"What do you think I could possibly do?" I ask. "I'm your prisoner here, remember?"

Maddoc still looks pissed, but he huffs a breath that's almost a laugh. "I think you're the one who needs the reminder, butterfly. You came to us. You're not a prisoner. You're our guest."

"And let me guess, Logan is your hospitality director?" I mutter bitterly.

I don't realize I'm touching my throat, instinctively trying to banish the lingering heat from Logan's hold, until I notice Maddoc's gaze following my hand. I drop it immediately.

Nothing good can possibly come of showing weakness in front of him.

“Actions have consequences,” he says flatly, staring hard at my throat for another beat before he lifts his gray eyes to mine again. “You’d be smart to remember that.”

“All I was doing was looking for the bathroom,” I say, shifting tactics as I try to put an innocent expression on my face.

Maddoc smirks. “There’s one right down the hall. You passed by it on your way to this room.”

I know.

“Oh.” I nod as if that’s new information. “Okay, then I’ll just go use that one. I didn’t realize it was—”

I step toward the door as I speak, trying to use this opportunity to slip away, but I don’t make it. Before I’ve even taken two steps, Maddoc grabs my wrist and yanks me backward. Slamming into his body feels like hitting a brick wall, and I gasp as he wraps his arms around me, clutching at one of his thick forearms.

“Don’t ever run from me, butterfly,” he murmurs, dipping his head to speak low in my ear. “Nod if you understand, because I don’t want to hear another lie come from that pretty mouth of yours.”

His breath gusts over my skin with each word, his hands splayed wide on my body to hold me in place, and I’m sure he can feel the way my ribcage vibrates with every thudding beat of my heart.

I open my mouth to answer and then remember he told me not to, so I nod instead.

“Good.” The scent of cedarwood drifts into my nostrils as his voice rumbles against my back. “Now let’s try this one more time. What were you looking for?”

He won’t accept anything but the truth, and somehow I’m positive he’ll know if I lie again. So I slump a little against his chest, letting out a defeated breath.

“I was looking for information I could use against West Point,” I admit. “In case you decided not to help me.”

The room goes quiet for a moment, and my eyes dart sideways, trying to get a glimpse of Maddoc even though he’s behind me. After another short beat, he makes a noise in his throat, sounding almost surprised.

“You really do hate them, don’t you?”

“Yes,” I whisper, my voice harsh with vehemence.

He chuckles, and I can feel his body relaxing slightly. “Good. They’re worthy of your hate, butterfly. I promise you that. And just so we can put this subject to rest, I *will* help you get your sister back. Understood?”

I drag in a breath as a rush of emotions makes my eyes water. “Thank you.”

He nods. I can feel the movement of his head, although he doesn’t respond with words. He also doesn’t loosen his hold on me, and now that I’m no longer quite as afraid, I become hyper aware of how close we are. Of his masculine cedarwood and leather scent. His hard body. Of the possessive way his hand is splayed open just under my breasts, his thumb and fingers barely brushing against the bottoms of them.

His other hand is pressed flat against my lower belly, and for some reason, it makes heat stir deep inside me. He’s already had his fingers inside me once tonight, something my body reacted to in a way I didn’t expect, and if he moved his hand just a little lower, he’d be right there again.

My clit throbs, and I can feel my pulse in my neck, every thrum of my veins amplified by the slight ache left by Logan’s grip. My body feels like it’s been hit by a truck, having gone through so much in the past twenty-four hours that it can’t properly process sensations anymore.

Maybe that’s why I feel so hot, why it feels like there’s fire in my blood. Maybe that’s why I lean into Maddoc’s unyielding body instead of pulling away like I should.

“Please,” I whisper, not even sure what it is I’m asking for.

For him to let go of me? For him to *not* let me go?

The silence is deafening, and that one quiet word hangs in the air between us for a long moment. Then Maddoc's chest expands, pushing against my back as he sucks in a deep breath. His arms cinch around me even tighter, and something brushes the side of my neck.

It's his nose, dragging across the sensitive skin there.

Oh god. He's breathing me in.

He's scenting me like some kind of primitive animal.

The heat in my lower belly expands, making my clit throb harder. The room around us seems to swim in my vision as my gaze drops out of focus, and my fingernails dig into his forearm as my body struggles to comprehend what the hell it wants.

"*Fuck,*" Maddoc grunts. Jerking his face away from my neck, he shoves me roughly away from him.

I stumble, my legs almost giving out before I catch myself on the back of the chair. Holding on to it like a lifeline, I turn to face him, my eyes wide and my mouth dry.

What the fuck was that? What just happened?

For a moment, he looks as confused and off balance as I feel. His brows draw together, and he looks like he's about to take a step toward me. But then he straightens his shoulders, clearing his throat and running a hand over his dark hair.

The hard expression I'm used to seeing him wear falls over his features again as he says, "We'll help you, but there are rules you have to abide by while living in this house. As long as you're here, you'll either stay in your room or stick to common areas. The kitchen, the living room, and the main bathrooms. I don't want to see you anywhere else."

"Okay." I nod, suddenly desperate to leave this room and the loaded atmosphere that still sits heavily in it. "Is that all?"

Maddoc hesitates for a half second, and I hold my breath. Then he nods toward the door with a sharp jerk of his chin.

“That’s all. Now get the fuck out.”

RILEY

THE MINUTE I escape Maddoc's penetrating gaze, I make a beeline for the room they gave me, doing my best to keep my mind blank.

I don't want to think about how it felt to nearly die by Logan's hand. I don't want to think about why I almost felt safe for a moment when Dante stepped in and protected me. And I sure as hell don't want to think about the confusing muddle of fear and attraction that *Maddoc* just stirred up.

As soon as I'm inside my bedroom, I shut the door and lean back against it, closing my eyes and letting my pulse return to a normal rhythm. As it does, my brain finally manages to fully process the most important thing that happened in the library—and it isn't the fact that I almost died.

It's the fact that Maddoc finally gave me his word.

The Reapers are going to help me get Chloe back.

The West Point leader may be a sadistic bastard, but Maddoc, Logan, and Dante are all ruthless motherfuckers on a whole different level.

And for now, at least, they're on my side.

I blow out a slow breath, then push away from the door. It's close to midnight, and I haven't eaten in a long time. Maddoc *did* say I could go to the kitchen, so I pretend my heart isn't trying to beat its way out of my chest as I leave my room again and head downstairs.

Thankfully, I don't run into anyone on my way to the kitchen. I grab a few easy items—a box of crackers and a jar of pickles from the pantry, and some sliced cheese and meat from the fridge—then dart back up to my room and close the door.

I ignore the idea of eating at the little desk in the corner and take my stash to the bed, chewing and swallowing without really tasting any of it. Then I crawl beneath the covers and fall into an exhausted but restless sleep.

I DIDN'T THINK to close the curtains before I passed out, and when I blink my eyes open late the next morning, feeling groggy and a bit disoriented, the room is full of bright sunlight. I squint and yawn, sitting up in bed as I tug at the oversized shirt Dante gave me.

To my surprise, there are a couple of familiar bags on the floor by the door.

Someone brought them in while I was sleeping.

My stomach flips over at that thought. At least one of the three men in this house seems to actively want to kill me, and the idea that someone came in here while I was asleep and vulnerable makes goosebumps break out over my skin.

Suppressing a shiver, I get up and go check the bags. They're the two worn out totes that I keep in the back of my closet at our apartment, and sure enough, they're full of my clothes and personal items.

I hate that some stranger was poking around in my personal space, touching my shit and going through my private things, but it does make me feel marginally better to have some of my own things here. I quickly tug off the clothes Dante left me and throw on the first things I grab from one of the bags. Some underwear, thank fuck. A tight pair of ripped jeans. A loose top in the same shade of blue as my hair.

I consider unpacking the bags and putting my clothes in the small closet opposite the desk, but I decide against it. I don't plan on being here long anyway, and somehow, the idea of my bags being packed and ready to make a hasty escape when the time comes makes me feel better.

I drag the bags over to sit in front of the closet, though, just to get them out of the way, and as I do, my stomach growls. I slept longer than I meant to, and it's past eleven already.

My eyes stray to the half-full box of crackers from last night. That and some pickles are all that's left of my midnight snack. It's tempting to just make do with that and call it good, but starving myself won't do me any damn good, so I shove my still-packed bags against the closet door, then leave my room.

My footsteps pause for a second on the stairs when I hear voices, but I remind myself that I shouldn't need to tiptoe around. I'm sticking to the areas Maddoc said I could be in, and maybe it will be a good thing if I run into one of the men. I want to get an update on their plans for retrieving Chloe, and the only way I'm going to find out what's going on is to find someone who knows.

So I take a deep breath and square my shoulders, then keep moving.

The voices are low and indistinct, and they're coming from the living room, which I'll have to pass by on my way to the kitchen. I try to identify the voices as I near the door to the living room, but I can't—and when I peer tentatively through the door frame, I realize why.

A man and a woman are standing in the middle of the living room, their heads bent together as they speak. I don't recognize either of them, but the woman has long red hair that reaches almost to her ass and a figure that would make her a shitload of tips if she danced at the club. That's about all I can tell about her, since her back is to me.

The man stops talking when he notices me staring at them, his eyebrows twitching upward in a look of surprise, and when

the woman loses his attention, she whirls around to find out why.

“Who the fuck are you?” She frowns, her eye flicking up and down my body in a quick appraisal.

I return the favor, taking her in now that I can see her more fully. She’s pretty, but hard looking. I’ve got no doubt she’s a Reaper just like the man is, both of them probably lower level members of Maddoc’s gang.

“Hey.” She stalks toward me when I don’t answer. “I asked you a question.”

I hesitate for a second, not sure what to say. Maddoc never mentioned whether our deal should be a secret or not, and I don’t want to misstep and piss him off again.

So I just go with, “I’m a guest.”

Technically, it’s true. The invitation may have been one I didn’t have the option to turn down, and my stay here will most definitely be enforced, but like Maddoc reminded me last night, I’m the one who came to them asking for help.

The redhead obviously thinks I mean a different type of guest, though. Her gaze lingers on my clothes and my sleep-mussed hair, then she glances behind me like she’s piecing together the fact that I came from upstairs. She smirks, but it doesn’t reach her eyes.

“Fun night?” she asks coolly.

I almost laugh. That’s not quite how I’d describe it, and if she’s feeling jealous of me, I’d *gladly* trade places with her.

“It was a *long* night,” I answer, opting for a vague but honest answer.

She blinks, like she’s trying to figure out what I mean by that, but before she can say anything else, the sound of heavy footsteps coming toward the living room from the other side draws her attention.

Maddoc stalks into the room from the entrance opposite where I’m standing.

“Isaac. Payton,” he greets the two gang members, ignoring me completely. “Thanks for getting here so quickly.”

The redhead—who I’m guessing is Payton—gives me one last narrow-eyed glare and then turns her attention to Maddoc. There’s an instant shift in her demeanor as soon as he looks at her, her shoulders straightening and the frown lines around her mouth smoothing out as she smiles at him.

“Of course,” she tells him. “We brought you—”

“Wait.” He cuts her off with a raised hand as his gaze flicks to me.

Our gazes meet, and his eyes flare with something that makes my pulse quicken, there and gone so fast I can almost convince myself I imagined it. Then he jerks his head toward the door.

He’s clearly dismissing me so they can talk about whatever it is that these two brought him without me listening in, and after our... conversation in the library last night, I feel like it’s a good idea not to push his buttons this morning.

Without a word, I duck out of the living room doorway and pad toward the kitchen, aware of both Payton and Maddoc watching me as I go.

The low hum of voices picks up again as Maddoc resumes his conversation with the two gang members, and I take my time poking around the kitchen looking for something to eat as I unrepentantly try to eavesdrop.

I know I promised Maddoc I wouldn’t go poking around in “unapproved” parts of the house, but I’m not technically breaking that rule right now. And even though I have no interest in the inner workings of his gang, I can’t help the curiosity that tugs at me. The more I can learn about this world as a whole, the better off I’ll be when it comes to facing off with West Point.

But unfortunately, his voice is just a low, steady rumble in the other room, and I can barely make out any words.

I take an apple from a bowl of fruit on the counter and idly polish its bright red skin as I wander closer to the kitchen

doorway, where I might be able to hear a little better.

There's something about a casino.

Names of people I've never heard of.

Payton says something I can't pick up, and I lean a little closer, turning my head to try to get a better angle... when a heavy hand suddenly lands on my shoulder.

My heart jolts up to a mile a minute, and I whirl around, instinctively lashing out. Dante chuckles, grabbing my wrist before I can land a punch.

"You've got a fighter's instincts," he comments, an appreciative glint in his green eyes.

I let out a shaky breath, yanking my wrist out of his hand. "Jesus. I didn't even hear you."

His grin gets wider. "Yeah, your attention was elsewhere."

He gives a pointed look toward the conversation happening in the living room, but then his smile drops, and he glances down at my neck. There's a tiny bruise on one side of my throat from where Logan wrapped his hand around it, and I can practically feel Dante's gaze moving over that small mark.

"Those instincts of yours aren't a bad thing, princess. You were putting up a good goddamn fight against that fuckwad the night we met, but you might want to rein them in a little before they get you in trouble," he murmurs, the softness in his eyes almost enough to fool me into thinking he cares.

I huff out a breath. "If I wasn't constantly surrounded by people who'd be happy to kill me, maybe I wouldn't have to be so jumpy."

"Just offering some words of advice." He shrugs, running his hand over the light shadow of stubble on his broad jaw.

"Did I ask for it?"

"You don't have to. I'm generous like that."

The voices in the other room get a little louder, a little more strident, drawing my attention that way again. I start to

turn my head, but Dante grabs my chin and tilts my face back toward him, a smile tugging at his lips. “More free advice?”

“No, thank you.”

“You might want to rein in the eavesdropping around here too,” he continues anyway. “Didn’t Maddoc talk to you about snooping last night?”

“I’m not. I wasn’t. I... I’m just trying to get some breakfast,” I mutter, but his warning has the desired effect as the reality of the risks I’m taking by going against Maddoc’s rules crashes over me like a wave.

Luckily, Dante doesn’t push the eavesdropping issue, even though I can tell he doesn’t believe I’m only here for breakfast.

Of course he doesn’t believe it. He didn’t believe my lie last night either.

It’s easy to see why the Reapers are such a dominant gang now that I’ve met their leadership. Maddoc, Dante, and Logan are all so different from each other, but one thing they’ve clearly got in common—besides their ruthlessness and obvious loyalty to each other—is how sharp they each are.

“Come on.” Dante plucks the apple out of my hand and tosses it back into the fruit bowl, breaking into my thoughts.

“What are you doing?” I ask, moving to pick it up again. “I’m hungry.”

“Good. Because I’m gonna take you out.”

My heart trips in my chest, my hand freezing in mid-air as I blink at him. “You are?”

“Yup.”

“Where are you going to take me?” I ask, arching a brow suspiciously.

“Wherever I want, princess.” His lips slide into an easy grin. “Wherever I want.”

DANTE

RILEY NARROWS her eyes at me, wariness written across every line of her face. “Sorry, I’m gonna need more information than that.”

I chuckle, amused by her refusal to be led around like a little lamb. “Don’t worry. It’s nothing you won’t like.”

“Yeah, well, I’m not so sure I trust you to guess what I will and won’t like,” she mutters.

Good point.

I doubt Riley trusts anyone, least of all me and my brothers, and I can respect that. It’s those kinds of street smarts that keep people alive, in my experience. And even more than her smoking-hot body, her single-minded focus on survival is what really draws me to her. She always seems to be looking for a way to navigate every situation so that she comes out on top.

Even last night, with Logan’s hand wrapped around her throat, she didn’t give up. She didn’t stop fighting. She didn’t wilt in the face of his anger, and not a lot of people can make that claim.

“I’m just trying to make sure you’re taken care of, princess,” I tell her. “Gotta be a good host and all, right? I see you found your clothes,” I add, letting my gaze drift down to the shirt she’s wearing. Her own, unfortunately. “They look good on you. Although, to be honest, I liked you better in mine.”

“Well, *I* didn’t,” she insists, a flush creeping up her cheeks even as she glares at me. “Yours didn’t fit.”

Shit, that candy pink color infusing her soft skin reminds me just how responsive she is. I like it more than I should. It makes me want to do dirty, dirty things to her. Maddoc’s laid down the law there, though, so I satisfy myself by making a mental note of the exact shade her cheeks are right now so I can capture it later on canvas.

Fucking beautiful.

Shaking off that thought, I wrap my fingers around her upper arm. “Come on. Let’s get out of here.”

As I guide her toward the garage, we pass through the living room. Maddoc is going over some evidence that Payton and Isaac brought by that points to more West Point fuckery, and I’m not surprised at all when the three of them clam up as we walk by. Reaper business is never something we’re gonna share with outsiders, but the slightly jealous look on Payton’s face doesn’t seem like it’s got fuck-all to do with business.

Nope, that’s something else entirely.

Payton has had a crush on Maddoc ever since she joined the Reapers. It’s never going to happen, and one of these days she’s going to figure that shit out—although the way her hand is resting on his arm tells me that today is not that day.

Maddoc’s expression has a hard edge to it that looks a bit like jealousy too, but it’s not directed toward Riley. It’s directed at me.

“Going somewhere?” he asks, giving away his interest since he normally wouldn’t bother interrupting a meeting with two of our crew just to poke at me about my plans.

“Yup,” I tell him, draping an arm around Riley’s shoulders as we continue on our way through the living room. “Catch you guys later.”

I can feel Payton’s and Maddoc’s gazes burning holes into our backs, and I bite back a smirk as they finally resume speaking again in low voices.

I'm pretty well convinced that Riley isn't a West Point spy or a honey pot sent to infiltrate us, but Maddoc isn't quite there yet. And given Payton's clear dislike of our new houseguest, I wouldn't be surprised if she tries to convince Madd to kick Riley out.

I trust my brother not to be swayed by whatever shit Payton might say, though. He's perfectly aware of how much Payton would like to take the place vacated by his ex, Sienna. We all are. Just like we all—at least, everyone but Payton—also know that Maddoc will never make that kind of mistake again.

Payton, though? She's her own special issue. Valuable because she's skilled at what she does and a hundred percent dedicated to the gang, but her obsession with Maddoc is gonna be a problem one of these days.

But not *my* problem.

Not today.

Riley doesn't say a word as I usher her into one of the vehicles in the garage—the Lincoln, since that's the first set of keys I grabbed—and head toward downtown. She watches the route closely as I drive, probably trying to figure out where we're going and how to brace herself for whatever she'll find there.

Watching her brain work overtime on the issue is entertaining as fuck, but her stress is rising under her poised exterior and that's not really my style, so I finally decide enough already with the whole silent-and-watchful routine.

“Relax,” I tell her, reaching over to squeeze her thigh and letting my hand stay there after she glances over at me. “This isn't a test. I'm just taking you to breakfast.”

She looks surprised, then narrows her eyes like she doesn't believe me. “Breakfast?” She crosses her arms over her chest. “It's almost noon.”

I grin and pull into the parking lot of my favorite diner, a little hole in the wall that has food to fucking die for. “Yeah,

well, first meal of the day is always breakfast. Doesn't matter what time it hits."

"You haven't eaten yet?" she asks, her skeptical expression making me laugh. Always wary. Always looking for the catch.

Sometimes—not often, but sometimes—there just isn't one.

"Yeah, I have. But *you* haven't," I remind her, hopping out of the car and resting a hand at the small of her back as we head inside.

She looks around at the cracked red leather seats in the booths and the linoleum floors so scuffed you can barely tell what color the checkered squares started out as, a skeptical expression crossing her face.

"Trust me," I say, leading her back to my favorite booth. The one with a view of all the exits. "I'll order you something good."

"You don't know what I like," she points out, arching an eyebrow as a bit of a spark comes back to her eyes.

It's a good look on her.

"Don't I?" I ask with a wink, then rattle off half a dozen items when the waitress comes up before she can hand us our menus. No way is Riley the type of girl who's going to settle for half a grapefruit or some bullshit like that.

"Coffee with all of that, doll?" the waitress asks in a bored pack-a-day voice as she scribbles the order down on her pad.

"Yeah. Two, please. And some cream for one of them."

"You got it." The waitress nods, tucks her pen behind her ear, and heads back behind the counter.

Riley watches her go, then huffs out a breath. "That's a fuck-ton of food."

I grin. "You're welcome."

"Okay, but what are we really doing here, Dante?"

"You're hungry, aren't you?"

She eyes me warily. Good girl. She'd be a fucking fool to put too much trust in me, but it's still nice to see the way she can't quite keep herself from smiling a little as we banter back and forth about how I just ordered half the menu without bothering to consult her.

It doesn't take long before the waitress is back, covering the table between us with all my favorites. I thank her and reach for the plate of French toast, and Riley's stomach growls.

"Go on now, go to town," I tell her, moving one of the pieces onto a separate plate for her and pushing it her way.

She holds back for a second longer than I could have, not with how fucking good it all smells, then gives in and takes it from me, adding some eggs and a few pieces of bacon, along with some fruit. Still watching me cautiously, she finally starts eating.

I chuckle. "Relax already," I tell her again. "Enjoy it. You need to fuel up."

"Why do you care?" she asks as she adds a little cream to her coffee.

I snort. I don't *care*. That's overstating the case. But I also feel a stupid amount of satisfaction when she moans around a bite of eggs.

"Well?" she pushes me.

"You need to eat. It's not rocket science," I tell her, tucking into my food because I'm hungry too. And because I need to stop staring at her. "You belong to us now, and Reapers take care of what's ours."

"Really?" she scoffs, touching her neck. I'm sure she's thinking of what went down last night.

"Yeah, really." Although I don't say it out loud, the fact that Logan didn't hurt her, that he barely even left a mark on her, means he *was* taking care of her. I've seen him choke a man to death with his bare hands, so I know he wasn't trying to kill Riley. "Anyway, we haven't had a houseguest in a long time. We're all still getting to know each other."

“Is that what we’re doing here?” she asks, her lips twitching a little. “Getting to know each other?”

“Sure.” I grin again.

“Okay,” she says, lifting her chin and shooting me a challenging look. “So tell me about you. Why are you a Reaper?”

I laugh. She’s fucking ballsy, I’ll give her that. There’s no way in hell I’m gonna tell her the story she just asked for, though, so I flip the tables.

“Tell me why you’re *with* us Reapers,” I say.

Her eyes narrow. “You know why.”

“Yeah, but how’d it get to this point, princess? McKenna didn’t snatch your sister for no reason.”

She stiffens, and I almost regret asking. We need some context, though, and... fuck. Sue me, but I’m curious. I guess I do want to get to know her.

“It was our father,” she finally says reluctantly, rage flashing across her face before she ducks her head and takes another bite. “He sold her out to them to cover some debts.”

“Fucking prick,” I mutter. He’s not the first shithead to do something like that and not the last either, but it still sucks for her. And for the sister, no doubt.

The tension in Riley’s shoulders relaxes a little at my words.

“Yeah,” she agrees, going back to her breakfast. After a minute, she goes on. “Frank has always been a sorry excuse for a parent. Shitty, neglectful, sees us as a meal ticket and not much else. I’ve spent my whole life protecting her from his bullshit, and—”

Her voice chokes off, and she snaps her mouth closed, fury clear on her face. Her father sounds like a real piece of shit, so I’m not surprised at all that she hates him.

“And your mom?” I prompt her after another long beat of silence.

Riley glances at me, then looks away. “Mom’s been gone for a while now. Died when I was young. I think it’s part of the reason Chloe and I are so close.”

“You raised her,” I guess, adding up the pieces.

She puts down her fork. “Yeah. I did. She needed me, so I grew up fast so I could take care of her. She needed someone to be at least somewhat of a parent to her, even if I could never really fill that role completely.”

It’s not anger in her voice now, but sadness. She sounds almost guilty, like even after all the shit she’s done for her little sister, she still doesn’t feel like it’s enough.

“How about you?” she asks suddenly, blinking a few times and getting back to her eggs as she tries to deflect shit back to me. “You have parents?”

I shrug. “Nope.”

She laughs, and some of the pain in her eyes bleeds away a little. “Oh, so you were immaculately conceived? Come on, Dante. Fair’s fair. Give me more than that.”

I grin. “Mom was never in the picture, but guess I turned out okay anyway, just like you. Except in my case, my dad gets the credit. He’s the one who raised me.”

Raised me and trained me up well before he died, but she doesn’t need to know about that. My father’s death wasn’t pretty, and when I avenged it, I made sure the man who took him out paid for that—but guess going out the way Dad did wasn’t exactly surprising for a trained assassin who had as many enemies as he did kills by the end.

Riley cocks her head to the side, studying me. “You love him.”

Loved. Past tense. Kind of rattles me that she sees through me so clearly, though.

“Blue and purple, huh?” I say, changing the subject as I gesture to her hair with my fork. “I like it.”

She touches the messy locks, tangling the strands around her fingers in a way that’s sexy as fuck without meaning to.

“Thanks. I dyed it for better tips.”

I smirk. “Bet it worked.”

“Fuck yeah, it did. It makes me look more mysterious and glamorous or something.” She chuckles, then glances away, still playing with a lock of her hair. “It makes it easier,” she adds quietly.

My brows furrow. “Makes what easier? Stripping?”

She nods, then shrugs. “It gives me sort of a ‘character’ to slip into when I’m on stage, so I can keep a little distance between the real me and all those shitbags who come to watch.”

I think of how she looked on stage that night, and how she looks to me now. There’s no denying she was sexy as fuck, drawing the attention of every red-blooded man in the shitty strip joint... but it’s nothing compared to how gorgeous she is in her jeans and loose-fitting, casual top, sitting across from me in this diner.

I’m glad I get to see this side of her, instead of just the character she puts on when she’s stripping, and I get a sudden urge to tell her something real about myself. Something beyond just the charmingly dangerous persona I show to the world.

“You know, I was actually with another gang before I joined the Reapers,” I say, and Riley’s brows shoot up in surprise.

“And?” she prompts after a minute.

Even if I don’t think West Point planted her, there’s no way in hell it would be smart to give her too much detail about my history. I grin, leaning back and casually draping my arm over the back of the booth as I shrug and deflect her question.

“And the Reapers won me over,” I tell her. “Loyalty is...”

I trail off, not quite sure how to finish that sentence. There’s no description that quite does justice to that word.

Loyalty, or the lack of it, is what got my dad killed. It’s a concept I thought I understood when I was younger, but didn’t.

Not until Maddoc showed me what true loyalty was meant to look like.

“It’s everything,” Riley says, finishing the sentence I left hanging and jolting me out of the unwelcome trip down memory lane.

My eyes snap up to meet hers. They’re fucking gorgeous. A deep brown that’s warm and mesmerizing, like melted chocolate.

“Yeah, it is,” I agree, because even though that still doesn’t quite sum up the word, it’s as close as either of us will get.

There’s a long moment where she holds my gaze, then she shakes her head and stabs at a piece of sausage with her fork. “So you’ve been involved in... this life for a long time, then?”

“Yeah.” I click my tongue against my teeth. “For most of my life, really, in one way or another. Even before I was officially a member of any gang, I crossed paths with them a lot. I’ve never had a nine to five, let’s just put it that way.”

“Right.” She snorts, digging into the food again with gusto.

She really was hungry, and I like the way it feels to fix that. I also like how hard she tries to keep her walls up as we talk, as if our conversation is a game of chess, although I like the moments when those walls come down even better.

We keep chatting as we eat, talking about mostly random bullshit, and then Riley pauses and bites her lip, putting her fork down. “I, um...”

“What?”

Her cheeks go pink, a lighter shade than back at the house, and I commit that color to memory too. “I need to use the bathroom,” she says, looking simultaneously annoyed and flustered that she needs to spell it out. “I’m not asking for permission or anything,” she clarifies quickly, defiance flashing across her face. “I just want you to know I’m not going to try to run.”

“Good.” I hold back my smile as I jerk my chin toward the hall to our left. “It’s down there.”

I’m impressed with how quickly she’s adapting to her circumstances. Learning the ropes of this situation she’s put herself in and accepting the parts she’s got no hope of changing. She’s scrappy as hell, I can tell that much, and now that I know a little more about her backstory, I’m starting to get an idea of just how resilient she really is.

She gives me a questioning look before she gets out of the booth, as if she’s waiting to see if I really trust her out of my sight.

I do. I also enjoy watching her ass as she walks away.

This bullshit with West Point becoming more aggressive lately is starting to get to all of us, but even if Maddoc and Logan can’t see it yet, one way or another I’m convinced that having Riley in the mix is gonna be a win for us.

Hell, it already is, since I’m enjoying the fuck out of having her around.

Not just breakfast or even the sex the other night. Just her.

She really is the perfect distraction.

RILEY

“GET IT FUCKING TOGETHER, RILEY,” I murmur under my breath, staring into my own eyes in the diner’s chipped bathroom mirror. I’m taking too long in here, and I know it, but I need to get my head on straight before I go back out to Dante.

The light catches my nose ring, making the black faux-diamonds that make up the tiny skull glitter for a second. My gaze drops to the tiny piece of jewelry, a reminder of my sister, and I square my shoulders.

I was getting way too comfortable out there, talking to Dante easily as I went to town on the spread of food he ordered as if eating was going out of style. I actually started to let my guard down, telling him shit that probably would’ve been smarter to keep to myself, so I had to fake a pee emergency just to give myself a moment alone to focus the hell up.

I run my hands under the tap and then dry them off, shooting myself one more narrow-eyed look in the mirror before I leave the bathroom.

Be smart, I remind myself. This whole thing is a dangerous fucking game, and if you don’t keep your head on straight and your guard up, you’ll lose the game before you even learn all the rules.

I’m so busy giving myself a mental pep talk that I don’t watch where I’m going, and as I start to make my way back

down the hall toward the main part of the diner, I slam into a large male body.

The man I ran into grunts, catching me by the arms as we're both knocked off balance.

"Sorry, I—" My words break off as I look up and realize who it is.

Rob.

My ex leers down at me, surprise and amusement flashing across his features as he gives me a full once over.

"Hey, Riley. I haven't seen you around the club lately. Where've you been?" He makes a face almost like a pout. "I hope you haven't been avoiding me."

"Fuck off," I mutter. I haven't been in the mood for his bullshit ever since we broke up, but that's especially true today. I move to walk around him as I speak, but he steps to the side, blocking my way again.

"Don't be that way, baby," he drawls. "It's good to see you."

"It's really not."

He laughs like I'm joking, then reaches for me again. "I went to Club M last night, but you weren't on stage. I really wanted to see you. I've been missing you."

I bat his hand away, my temper flaring. "Move, Rob. You're in my way."

He holds his hands up apologetically but makes no move to step aside. "Sorry, sorry. But I'm glad I ran into you," he says, then gives a smarmy grin. "Even if *you're* the one who actually ran into *me*."

He chuckles like he thinks we're both in on a joke, and I glower at him. Maybe he can see how completely unamused I am, because he goes on quickly. "Okay, okay, but look. I just wanted to apologize for the other night."

I give him a blank stare, my mind already moving past this conversation. "What are you talking about?"

“Don’t be pissy, Riley.” Rob shakes his head, looking remorseful. “I know I fucked up. I hurt you. I never meant for you to see me and Kiki like that.”

I still don’t know what he’s talking about or why the hell he thinks I care, but then it suddenly hits me, and I can’t help but laugh.

That’s right. Kiki’s stage name is Sugar, and Rob was fucking her in the alley behind Club M the other night when I left. Jesus, it feels like a lifetime ago. Before Chloe was taken. So much shit has happened since then, so many things that matter more to me than he ever did, that it might as well have happened to someone else.

If he actually believes I wasted a second of thought on who he was sticking his dick into, he really is delusional. I’ve already forgotten about it and never cared in the first place.

I huff a breath, not even acknowledging his words. “Get out of my way.”

“Hear me out first, baby,” he says cajolingly. He moves toward me as he speaks, angling his body a little to try to back me up against the wall. “I’ve been wanting to get back together ever since I made the mistake of breaking up with you.” Heat flashes in his eyes, and he gives me a look that I’m pretty sure is supposed to be seductive. “You’re a much better fuck than Kiki is. You’re better than all the girls there. I wasn’t kidding when I said I’ve missed you. I missed your sweet pussy...”

He reaches for me as he speaks, his fingers brushing my collarbone just below the spot where Logan gripped my throat yesterday, and something inside me snaps.

I slap his hand to the side, pushing away from the wall and shoving hard at his chest. I may have to put up with the Reapers manhandling me, and I’ve already resigned myself to the three of them doing whatever they want, but it will be a cold day in hell before I put up with any more of *Rob’s* shit.

“Get. The fuck. Away from me,” I snap as he stumbles backward, helping him along with another hard shove that has

his back hitting the wall on the opposite side of the hallway.

He rubs his chest, looking affronted. “What the hell, Riley? I’m just trying to make things right with you,” he whines.

“Yeah? Well, you failed at that the minute you treated me like your personal whore,” I shoot back, my voice cold. “We’re *over*. We will always be over. It’s a permanent condition. I’m the one who broke up with you, remember? And I haven’t regretted it for a fucking second.”

He shakes his head. “No, that’s not how it—”

“And do you know why I broke up with you?” I go on, talking right over him as my anger builds. “Because you have a pencil dick, Rob. It’s small. It’s limp. And you don’t know how to use it. I broke up with you because I wasn’t satisfied, and I doubt anyone else you’ve stuck it in has been either. And mostly, I broke up with you because I don’t have time for someone who wastes his time hanging around a strip club pretending to be a big shot, which means I don’t have time for *you*.”

His face has been getting progressively redder, and now he scowls. “Jesus. You don’t have to be such a—”

My hand curls into a fist, and he snaps his mouth closed before he makes the mistake of finishing that sentence. I don’t know what it is he saw on my face, but I’m genuinely surprised that he’s smart enough not to piss me off even more by saying what I think he was about to.

But he’s not *that* smart, so I make sure to spell it out for him.

“Fuck off and don’t ever talk to me again,” I say, stepping back as he stares at me with a look of wounded shock on his face. “Not if you want to keep that tiny dick attached to your body.”

With that, I turn on my heel to head back to my table—but my footsteps stutter as my eyes lock with Dante’s. He must have gotten tired of waiting on me, because he’s standing at the end of the hallway, leaning casually against the wall with

his arms crossed over his chest and something glinting in his green eyes as he watches me.

I can't quite read his expression... but there's a tiny upturn at the corners of his mouth, as if he can't help but be amused by what he just saw. And as I make my way toward him, I could swear I even see something like *pride* in his face.

"Ready, princess?" he asks once I reach him, without commenting on what just went down with Rob.

"Sure," I say, reminding myself that it's stupid to read anything into the way he was looking at me. Just as stupid as it is to feel settled, almost secure and safe, when he rests his large hand against my back as he guides me out of the diner.

There's nothing safe about Dante. About any of the Reapers.

And I don't know why a part of me likes that.

RILEY

LOW VOICES ARE COMING from the living room when we get back to the house, but this time, instead of steering me away so I don't listen in, Dante leads me right toward them.

"Come on," he says. "Madd should be done with his meeting with Payton and Isaac by now."

He's right. The girl who seemed to hate me so much and the other Reaper who came to report to Maddoc are both gone, and the only people in the living room now are Logan and Maddoc. Logan looks up as we enter, his eyes as flat and cold as always. Our gazes lock, and for just a second, something shifts in his expression—a barely-there tightening of his jaw that's impossible to read.

My footsteps slow, and I'm sure my face is a lot more expressive than his is, despite the fact that I'm trying to maintain my best poker face. This is the first time I've seen him since last night, and my pulse skyrockets at the memory of his large, strong hand wrapped around my throat.

Then Logan looks away from me, breaking the loaded eye-contact between us as he shifts his attention back to Maddoc.

"McKenna would be a fool to risk it," he says in that chilling, passionless way he has.

Are they talking about the West Point leader?

"Austin McKenna?" I blurt without thinking, desperate to find out anything that might help Chloe.

Logan's eyes go even colder, and Maddoc's lips press together, as if hearing Austin McKenna's name leaves a bad taste in his mouth. But he sticks with his habit of being an asshole and answers Logan instead of bothering to acknowledge that I've spoken. "He's not going to see it as a risk. He's already got the girl, and he's got no reason to think he needs to be cautious about flaunting it."

My heart jumps in my chest, adrenaline surging through me. He has to be talking about Chloe, which means they're really going to do it. They're talking about how to help me get her back.

"McKenna *is* a fool," Dante chimes in, sprawling out on the comfortable-looking leather couch and patting the spot next to him as he grins up at me. "Sit," he says before turning back to Maddoc and Logan. "Did Isaac and Payton have anything we can use to fuck West Point with?"

"Dante," Maddoc says in warning, shooting a hard look in my direction that I have no trouble at all interpreting.

He doesn't want to talk about gang business in front of me.

"Yeah, I know." The big tattooed man runs a hand through his hair, shoving the dark strands back from his face. "She's not one of us. But she could be helpful if we loop her in. She's earned this, Madd."

He grabs my wrist and pulls me down next to him on the couch as if to punctuate those last words, then drapes his arm across the back of it, resting it behind me. He looks back and forth between Maddoc and Logan.

"So? Gonna fill us in?"

Maddoc's eyes narrow, and Logan looks like he might crack a tooth if he clenches his jaw any harder. I don't think either of them like the "us" part of that, and I have no idea why Dante is pushing for them to include me in this conversation, but I'll take it.

"You'd already know what Isaac and Payton had to say if you'd stuck around," Logan snaps at Dante. He jerks his chin

in my direction without actually looking at me. “Where did you take her?”

Dante grins. “To lunch.”

“Breakfast,” I correct him under my breath, nudging him with my shoulder. “First meal of the day.”

He chuckles, flashing me his sexy as fuck grin. “Right. Breakfast.”

Logan definitely isn’t amused by our little inside joke. If anything, he somehow stiffens even more, cool annoyance radiating from him.

“So much for your loyalty to your sister,” he says bitingly, finally shifting his gaze to me. “You obviously don’t care about her as much as you’d like us to believe if you think fucking off to have ‘breakfast’ in the middle of the day is more important than planning how to get her away from West Point.”

His blunt words hit me like a punch to the chest, and I’m on my feet before I know it, anger lancing through me hard and fast. I curl my hands into fists, my voice raspy as I force words out past the sudden painful lump in my throat.

“That’s not fucking fair. You have no idea how much I love Chloe, you ice-cold psycho. If you’d ever loved anyone, maybe you’d have a clue what it means to lose your sister. But of course you don’t know. You’d have to have a fucking heart for that!”

I don’t know what I’m expecting from my little outburst. Maybe part of me hopes that Logan will show an ounce of empathy for once. I’d even be satisfied if he just looked a little bit guilty for blaming me for having lunch, when Maddoc already made it clear that the Reapers are going to take point on getting Chloe back, and that there’s nothing I can do to help.

But instead of softening, Logan’s face goes so still that he actually looks like he’s carved from stone. When he speaks, his voice is different than I’ve ever heard it, soft and dangerous in the manner of a predator that’s about to strike.

“You have no idea what you’re talking about,” he says, enunciating every word. “Don’t ever tell me who I’ve loved. You don’t know *anything*.”

The atmosphere of the entire room changes as silence fills the space, and my stomach twists itself into a knot. I want to glance at Maddoc or Dante to see how they’ve reacted to the sudden change, to read their expressions and try to get a handle on what just happened... but I’m afraid to drag my gaze away from Logan. There’s so much leashed emotion in him that part of me is certain that if I turn away from him, he’ll lunge like the predator he is.

The room stays quiet for a long, heavy beat, and then Maddoc clears his throat.

“Riley, why don’t you go to your room,” he says, phrasing it like a question but making it crystal clear that it’s not.

Shit. I don’t know quite why my words pissed Logan off so much, but I can’t let the fact that I lashed out get me kicked out of the room. I don’t know how much help I can be in whatever plan they put together to get Chloe back, but I’ll feel a hell of a lot better if I at least know what it is. If I know what they know and how they’re considering going up against West Point.

“No.” I shake my head, finally ripping my gaze away from Logan, although I can still see his face in my peripheral vision. “If the three of you are going to talk about rescuing Chloe, I want to stay... please.”

Maddoc’s lips press into a line, and I’m certain he’s about to say no. He already didn’t want me here, and after things got awkward with Logan, I’m sure he’s even less enthusiastic about having me around for their meeting.

“Please,” I whisper again, an ache of guilt building in my chest as I remember Logan’s words. They pissed me off, and it hurt so much because on some level, I feel like he’s right. I haven’t done enough. “I need to, Maddoc,” I plead. “I need to help. I need to get my sister back. I need to be a part of this.”

I'm not fighting with him this time. I'm not even asking. I'm begging.

His gray eyes glitter, his jaw working as he considers his answer for a long moment. Then he nods.

"Thank you." I breathe, relief hitting me so hard that my legs wobble.

He just grunts, then goes back to all but ignoring me. But at least I'm here.

I settle back onto the couch, keeping my lips glued together and mostly just listening, trying to get caught up on where things stand with West Point. The three men bounce ideas off each other like a well-oiled machine as they discard and refine different options about how to find Chloe, and I listen intently to all of it, throwing in small bits of information where I can.

I can't tell if Maddoc allowing me to stay is a sign that he's starting to trust me or if it means the opposite, more along the lines of "keep your friends close and your enemies closer," but either way, I'm grateful.

Better than that, I'm *hopeful*.

Because if the Reapers are truly planning on making a move soon, that means I'm finally one step closer to getting Chloe back from the monsters who took her.

RILEY

A FEW DAYS LATER, I'm still grateful... but I'm also frustrated as all hell that we still don't have a solid plan about how to get Chloe away from West Point yet.

True to his word, Maddoc has included me whenever they discuss it, but they're still not sharing everything with me. I even understand why, but that doesn't make it any less maddening to hear the three of them bat around ideas only to have the planning stall out due to details I don't understand because it's gang business.

Reaper business.

Not, as it's been made crystal clear, any of *my* business.

It's midmorning, and I'm going stir crazy with nothing to do besides pace around my room, so I finally slip out into the hall and head downstairs. I'm not really hungry, since I ate breakfast just a couple hours ago, so instead of turning toward the kitchen when I reach the first floor, I glance toward the back of the house.

I've never been back that way, so I don't technically know if it's considered a "common area" or not, but I decide that it probably is... or at least, I could easily argue that I thought it was if Maddoc finds me and gets pissed again.

A hallway leads toward what looks like the door to the back yard, and there are a few other doors off the corridor. One of those doors has been left open, and I peer inside as I pass. It looks like an office, which piques my interest immediately—but it's not empty.

Maddoc is sitting behind the large desk that dominates the room, and he looks up at the sound of my quiet footsteps.

My heart lurches, and I clear my throat. “Is... um, there a bathroom down this way?”

To my total shock, Maddoc doesn't turn cold and deadly or whip out the gun he's always got tucked into his waistband and just shoot me in the head. Instead, he almost looks... amused.

“No,” he says, setting down the tablet he's holding. After a beat, he adds, “Any other questions?”

Oh, I've got a million questions. I just have no idea which ones will get me killed.

I shake my head. “No. I'll just leave you to do... whatever it is you're doing.”

“Riley,” he says sharply when I start to back away. “Come over here.”

I hesitate, but he gestures me closer, and since I've clearly already broken the no-stupidity rule I gave myself once, the last thing I need to do is break it again by defying him.

Besides, if I'm being honest, I don't want to. Maddoc may be intimidating as hell. I may hate him—I *do* hate him, even though I'm grateful for his help. But there's also something about him that's pulled me toward him from the start, like a moth to a flame.

“West Point,” he says once I reach his desk, tapping the tablet he set down, “is shooting itself in the foot.”

“What do you mean?” I ask, instantly on high alert now that I know he was working on something that has to do with Chloe's captors.

He sighs, scrubbing a hand over his face, then seems to catch himself, dropping his hand and hardening his gaze, as if he didn't mean to let me see him in anything less than total control.

“I mean they're fucking stupid,” he growls. “Too willing to sacrifice their own people for short-term gains. No idea what it

actually means to build an organization of strength. No concept of true loyalty.”

He spits out the last sentence like he’s disgusted. It’s the exact feeling I have anytime I let myself think too hard about Frank selling my sister, so I can completely relate to his anger for once.

I do wonder what exactly he was working on that got under his skin like this, though.

I glance down at the tablet since he invited me over in the first place, but the screen has timed out and gone dark, so it tells me nothing.

Maybe Maddoc will, though.

“I thought gangs looked out for their own?” I ask.

“Only the ones who want to survive,” he says, his eyes going hard. He swivels partway around to glance at a map of the city on the wall behind him, a hard smile spreading across his face that reminds me just how ruthless this man has to be to lead the Reapers. “And without understanding loyalty, they won’t.”

“Is that how your gang has made it so long?” I ask when Maddoc stands up and goes to the map.

“Yes,” he answers shortly, running his hands over it. His touch is possessive, proprietary, *intense*, and for some reason, even though it’s the map that he’s touching and not me, my skin breaks out in goosebumps.

“I’ve seen maps of Halston before,” I murmur, daring to move closer, “but never quite like this. What does it all mean?”

My shoulder brushes against his bicep, but Maddoc doesn’t react. For a second, I think he won’t answer, or worse, that I’ve overstepped. Pissed him off by pushing for information when he’s made it clear he doesn’t want me poking into the Reapers’ business.

But after a moment, he taps the map over the area that we’re in right now. The whole thing is covered in hand-drawn

lines and multi-colored shading that splits Halston up in ways I don't understand despite having lived here all my life, and the Reaper house I've been staying in with them is right in the center of an irregular section of shading in the same pale gray as the lightest part of Maddoc's eyes.

"This is Reaper territory," he says, caressing it almost lovingly. Then he presses his lips together. "And these," he grunts, stabbing his finger on a red X, then on several more X's, "are places West Point has breached it. Tried to encroach on our turf. Hurt my people."

"What's this part?" I ask, touching a smaller chunk of two-toned shading that includes Club M.

"Those are allies," he tells me, still staring at the map as he touches the shaded section, then trails his fingers over several others. "And enemies."

I look up at him, my brows furrowing. "You make it sound like a war."

His eyes turn flinty. "It is. It's a war for every street. Every block. It's how we survive. How we'll dominate. It's always been a fight and it always will be, Riley. If you don't understand that, you'll never make it in this world."

I swallow, my eyes tracing all the familiar parts of this corner of our city but seeing them in a new light. It's hard to comprehend how difficult it must be for the gangs to gain territory in a city so crowded with criminal activity and how ferociously they have to fight to hang onto it once they've claimed it.

"Don't you ever want to do something else? Stop fighting a never ending battle just for more territory?" I ask, thinking of the expression on his face when he scrubbed his hand over it.

Exhausted. Burdened. Determined.

Maddoc huffs out a laugh, breaking the tension even though I'm sure he doesn't think it's funny. He takes my arm and steers me back to his desk. "It's not always that simple.

This is the life I was born into, but the battle isn't just for territory."

"Then what is it for?"

I want to bite my tongue as soon as the words are out. The last thing I want is for Maddoc to think I'm fishing, not after how suspicious he still is about why I'm here. But he surprises me again, answering instead of jumping down my throat in anger.

"I was born into this life, and it's not something you can just walk away from. My father taught me everything he knew. I'm still here because I learned from his mistakes as well as his successes. And one of those lessons was that territory matters, but it's not enough on its own."

He's talking about loyalty again. About people. About belonging to something and not being alone.

"Is your father a Reaper too?" I can't help asking, despite the feeling that I'm walking on egg shells with this odd mood Maddoc seems to be in. I want to know more, though.

He shakes his head. "The Reapers didn't exist back then. My father did a lot of illegal dealings, but he was disorganized about it. Sloppy and short-sighted. Eventually, he did form the beginnings of this gang, but he's six feet under now because he couldn't see the bigger picture."

I study his face as he stares at the map. "And you can?"

"Yeah. I can." Maddoc touches it again, tracing Reaper territory. "I'm the one who formed his loose connections into a true organization. I made us into a real and cohesive crew, with stability and vision and fucking *ambition*."

He says it fiercely, although I can still see that same exhaustion in his face that he tried to scrub away when I walked in. It's clear to see that the mantle of being the leader weighs on him even though he wears it proudly.

"You'll do what you have to, because they're your family," I whisper, the words slipping out before I can stop them.

It's not like stripping was what I always wanted to do with my life. I had other aspirations once. I've long since accepted that they'll never come to pass, and I'm okay with that. I do what I have to do too, and stripping is the best way for me to make the most money for *my* family. For Chloe.

I'm not sure if I'm entirely happy to be finding common ground with Maddoc, but I can't deny that I relate to his drive and dedication.

"I understand fighting for that," I add when he turns his gaze sharply in my direction. "It doesn't matter what we want when we have people to take care of. It doesn't matter what we have to do or how fucking hard it is, as long as it means things can be better for the people we care about."

Something passes over Maddoc's face, as if he's surprised by my words. The corded muscles of his neck move as he swallows, and then he nods. "Exactly."

I can hear the sincerity in his voice, and it strikes me that I don't even know how many sacrifices he's made for the people he leads. How many nights he's gone without sleep, how many tough calls he's made. How many times he's put their survival over his own.

Fuck, I hate this feeling of connection.

I don't want it, not with him, so I look away, blinking quickly. My emotions feel constantly raw and exposed these days, and talking about Chloe has only reminded me of all the ways I failed to protect her enough.

I swipe at my cheeks, trying to banish the tears before Maddoc notices them. "I should go."

"Not yet," he says, taking my chin and turning me back to face him, not letting me hide.

I know he sees that my cheeks are wet, but he doesn't offer me any false comfort, thank fuck. I may understand him, but we're not friends, and we're sure as hell not anything else. "I'd like to see a picture of your sister first. Do you have any? We've got our people watching the West Point gang."

"To try to find Chloe?" I ask, hope surging in my chest.

“No.” His eyes go hard again. “For... other reasons.” He gives me a tight smile. “But if they know what she looks like, they can keep an eye out for her too. Maybe even get an idea of what McKenna is doing with her, and if—”

“If she’s okay?” I interrupt before he can say something worse. I don’t give him a chance to answer because I don’t want to hear it. She *is* okay. She has to be. “I have a ton of pictures... on my phone.”

I arch an eyebrow, reminding him that he’s the one who has that particular device, and he laughs—a dark, gravelly sound that seems to resonate through my entire body.

“Right,” he murmurs, then pulls it out of one of the desk drawers.

He tosses it over to me, but not before I notice a familiar envelope at the bottom of the drawer. It’s the one containing the money I offered him the night I showed up at that bar.

I’m a little surprised it’s just sitting there, unused and seemingly forgotten, although I guess I shouldn’t be shocked. Having seen how large their territory is and the lifestyle they lead—not crazy extravagant, but definitely in a different stratosphere than Chloe and I have always lived—it’s hard to imagine that the few grand I offered for the Reapers’ help means much to them.

It doesn’t really matter that they haven’t spent it yet, though, so I pull my eyes away and don’t comment on it as Maddoc slams the drawer closed again.

I unlock my phone, pulling up my photo gallery and then having to fight off the hot prickle of tears all over again as I start scrolling through pictures of me and Chloe. They’re mostly stupid pics we took while we were just goofing off and having fun, but before I can find something more posed that will give him a good image to share, Maddoc crowds in next to me and takes the phone out of my hand.

He swipes back to a picture I just passed. Me and Chloe in the middle of dying our hair last summer.

She put hot pink streaks in hers and I went candy-apple red for a month. You can't see that yet in the picture, though. It's a selfie she snapped while we both had our heads wrapped in Saran wrap and our tongues out for the camera.

My breath hitches, pain lancing through me. She looks so fucking happy.

Maddoc swipes again, to a picture of Chloe laughing, her head tipped back. He scrolls through a dozen more pictures, and I have to curl my hands into fists to suppress the urge to snatch the phone back.

This man has seen me terrified and angry. He's seen me raw and helpless. He's seen me naked. Hell, he's had his fingers inside my body, and still, none of that makes me feel as vulnerable as letting him see these candid glimpses of what I lost when Austin McKenna took my sister.

But if it will help him help me get her back, it'll be worth it—even if I feel bared in front of him and oddly embarrassed by the smile that tugs at his lips as he flips through these little snapshots of my life.

“Will any of those help?” I finally ask, chewing on my lower lip.

Maddoc looks up, an unexpected softness on his face that throws me off kilter.

“Yeah. They'll help.” His eyes rove over my face like he's seeing it for the first time, and he reaches up to brush my cheek with his fingertips, holding my gaze. “You know, not everyone would do what you're doing.”

I shake my head. “Anyone would, for the person they love. Isn't that what loyalty is?”

“It is,” he says, something flaring in his eyes that's completely at odds with the gentleness of his touch.

The confusing combination pins me in place as he trails his fingers lightly over my skin, leaving a cascade of soft tingles in their wake and making the air surrounding us feel electric.

I can't look away.

I don't want to.

I have no idea what it is that's building between us, but it's potent and inescapable and intoxicating. It makes me take a step toward him before I can think better of it, before I even realize what I'm doing.

Maddoc's tattooed fingers trail down to my jaw, and he cups it in his large hand, tilting my face up a little.

"You're not what I expected," he murmurs. "When you walked into Clancy's that night, your hair shining like a butterfly's wings, I had no fucking idea what was under the surface. You're..."

He trails off, like he's not quite sure how to end that sentence. Then he suddenly blinks, stiffening and pulling away. He drops his hand and pockets my phone, his movements abrupt and jerky.

"Thank you for the pictures," he says, his voice turning cool and impassive as he turns away from me. "We're done here."

Whatever bubble was surrounding us for a moment pops, and I don't even bother to answer him, spinning on my heel and making a beeline for the door. I want to be pissed off at his cool dismissal, but I'm too unnerved by whatever it was that just happened between us.

Because *something* sure as fuck did.

And no matter how unaffected Maddoc tries to act, he felt it too.

RILEY

AFTER HOLING up in my room for the rest of the day trying to avoid thinking about that moment in Maddoc's office, hunger finally draws me out of hiding.

Steeling myself for the possibility of running into one of the Reaper men, I make my way down the stairs again. I haven't seen anyone but Maddoc today, but as soon as I reach the bottom of the steps, I know I'm not alone in the house.

A noise filters down the hall, and my stomach clenches.

This time, the sound coming from Maddoc's office isn't the rustling of papers. I know exactly what it is. The low grunts and breathy moans would be impossible to mistake for anything else.

My eyes widen, and my feet carry me toward the noise before I can tell myself to walk the other direction.

The door is open, and I suck in a sharp breath as I peer around the door frame.

Maddoc has a girl bent over the desk, the same one he keeps my phone in, and he's fucking her hard.

It's not Payton. It's no one I recognize at all. Just some random girl, about my age, probably. Her face is pressed sideways into the desk, hands clutching the edge of it as she cries out with every hard thrust.

Jesus. Why the fuck didn't he bring her up to his room? Why did he leave the door open?

I'm about to back away, but then a deep grunt draws my attention, and I yank my focus away from the girl to find Maddoc's eyes boring into me. Time stops, my skin flushing hot as all the breath is punched out of my lungs.

I'm caught. Trapped in place and pinned by his gaze.

He doesn't look away from me, and instead of telling me to get the hell out, he starts fucking her even harder.

"Yes! Oh god, yes!" she cries out, her face contorting with a fierce pleasure. The wrecked, ragged sound of her voice hits something inside me, making heat pool low in my belly, and when she whimpers again, grinding back against his thrusts, I realize he's just started fingering her ass. Fucking it with two fingers while his other hand holds her down by the back of her neck and his thick cock fills her pussy over and over.

"You like that?" Maddoc growls, and my stomach clenches at the way the question seems meant for me.

"Yes. Fuck, yes! Harder! Oh *fuck*..."

The girl is the one who answers him, but Maddoc is hardly paying any attention to her anymore. A sheen of sweat covers his skin, his breath growing ragged and harsh and his muscles bunching and flexing as he pounds into her while still staring at me.

"Take it," he grunts. "Fucking take all of it."

God, I still don't know if he's talking to her or me. There's something commanding in his voice, like he's telling me not to look away. Demanding that I watch every thrust, every slap of skin, every movement of his hand as he works her body over like he owns it.

I don't *want* to watch. Seeing him fuck her stirs up a mess of emotions inside me, a confusing mixture of arousal, anger, and jealousy that makes my limbs feel hot and too heavy.

But I can't look away, and it's not just because of the command in Maddoc's tone. I couldn't drag my gaze away if my life depended on it.

“That’s right.” He drives into her so hard that the desk squeaks against the floor as it shifts beneath them. “Now come for me.”

His lips pull back from his teeth in something almost like a snarl, and he twists his fingers in her ass, finally pushing her over the edge into an orgasm that has her writhing beneath him. He groans, his face contorting and his hips stuttering as he lets loose with a string of low, vicious curses.

Oh god. He’s coming inside her.

He grinds roughly against her ass, releasing his hold on her neck and digging his fingers into her hips as he keeps her where he wants her, his nostrils flaring, his chest heaving... and his eyes never leaving mine.

My clit throbs, pulsing so heavily that it’s like my body is trying to obey Maddoc’s order to come, even though I’m not the one he’s fucking.

I wrench my gaze away, my heart pounding so hard that it nearly deafens me. I can still hear the sounds of him fucking her through his own release, but now that I’m not staring at him, it breaks the fucked-up connection that felt like it was holding me locked in place.

Finally able to move again, I pivot on the balls of my feet and run.

My heart is beating way too fast, my stomach clenching into a tight knot, and what I want to do is run all the way out of this fucking house, right out of the Reapers’ world. But I can’t.

“Goddammit,” I hiss as I turn toward the stairs instead, taking them two at a time.

I slam the door to my room as soon as I make it inside, then lean against it and try to push what I just saw out of my head.

But it’s impossible. The way Maddoc looked...

Fuck.

Why the hell would he do that? He's got a perfectly good bedroom with a door that closes and probably locks too. Hell, even the office door could've been closed. So why was he fucking some girl in plain view of anyone who happened to walk by? Does he do that sort of thing all the time? Was he trying to prove that he can do whatever the hell he wants to in this house, and I'll just have to deal with it?

Or was he trying to fuck with me?

Why didn't he tell me to leave? He didn't just let me watch, it was almost like he wanted me to watch. Once he realized I was standing in the doorway, he didn't look away from me once, not even when he came. He had to have seen what it was doing to me, how the sight of him fucking her affected me.

He must've known I was turned on.

And it's like he wanted that.

I'm still so keyed up, my lower body throbbing and my pussy clenching as images I can't shove away filter on repeat through my mind. I bite my lip so hard it hurts, trying to push down the waves of arousal that are cascading through my body in an out of control torrent.

Come for me, he said.

And even though I have no idea if he was talking to me at all, even though he can't see me and will *never* fucking know, I can't help my hand from sliding downward and slipping beneath the fabric of my shorts.

I have to.

I need this.

And fuck Maddoc for making me need it. I hate him for that most of all.

LOGAN

DANTE IS OUT, and Maddoc is busy down in the office, so when I hear footsteps pounding up the stairs, I know it can only be the girl.

Riley.

Her door slams down the hall from mine, and I go still, carefully containing the disquiet that having her in our house, distracting us and weakening us, always awakens inside me. Her presence has a way of cracking open the parts of me I usually keep locked up and forcing things to spill out in dangerous ways, which just goes to prove that *she's* a danger.

I've been warning my brothers about that from the beginning, but they don't see it.

No. Worse. They're each compromised by her. Not that either of them has said as much, but I see it. They're drawn to her.

Which means it's up to me to be vigilant. To balance my loyalty to the two of them with my need to protect them and safeguard what we've built here. She can't be allowed to threaten that.

So I pull up the home security feed on my computer and patch in to the cameras hidden in Riley's room.

It only takes a moment to flip through them and find her, and when I do, my brows furrow. She's not huddled on her bed or sitting at the desk or staring out the window the way I've seen her do before. Not eating a snack like she was last time I checked on her.

Instead, she's leaning against the door with her eyes closed and her head thrown back, the soft waves of her purple and blue hair tumbling down around her shoulders. She's got one hand pressed white-knuckled against the door and the other between her legs, her face screwed up in a look that might be mistaken for pain.

It's not pain, though. I'm familiar enough with that emotion to recognize it in the faces of others, and this is definitely... something else.

What the *fuck* is she doing?

Air escapes between my teeth in a hiss, all my nerve endings flaring to life without my permission as I watch Riley roll her hips against her hand. The desperate rhythm builds in intensity, and as my gaze moves downward, I can track the frantic motion of her hand beneath the fabric of her pants. I flip the control to turn the sound on before I'm even conscious of moving.

Low, breathy moans flood out from my speakers.

My nostrils flare, and I lean closer to the screen.

The sound of ragged breathing fills my ears, sending an unwelcome heat racing up my spine. Riley is panting hard now, her hand moving faster and faster as she bites down on her bottom lip.

Her skin looks flushed. Warm. Salty.

I lick my lips. I hate the sight, yet I can't look away. I hate the disorder she's brought into the sanctuary of our home. I hate the splintering of my own control every time I give in and pull up the feeds, searching for her.

Stalking her.

Watching her.

Telling myself it's for our protection and refusing to listen to the voice in my head that calls me a liar.

My brothers know about the cameras I've got set up around the house, including the ones in her room. But they don't know how often I check the feeds, or how thoughts of

her invade my mind even when I'm not checking the security footage. They don't know about my obsession.

I've learned her patterns, her habits, searching out all the secrets that people reveal when they don't realize they're being observed.

But I've never seen this.

Up until now, when I've watched her through the feeds, there's always been a barrier between us. A distance that mutes all the unwanted, unruly feelings she drags out from those dark, hidden places inside me that are better off locked away. She's safely hidden behind the screen, real but not real.

Until now.

Until *this*.

Now it feels like I'm in the same room with her, no distance between us at all. I grit my teeth, the pixels on my screen expanding until they're all I can see, her image heating my blood and sending it throbbing into places it doesn't belong.

My dick is hard. The muffled sounds of Riley's rising pleasure surrounds me, and the sight of her touching herself this way strips the safe barrier of the camera away until the insulating distance between us is gone. Until she invades my mind, my space, my control, in ways that are totally unacceptable.

I rub my cock through my jeans, willing my erection to go away. I've never wasted my time with sex. I've rarely been attracted to anyone, no matter their physical attributes, and I've always been able to control and dismiss the distraction when it's come up.

But Riley is different.

It's one more reason I know she's a danger.

When the pressure of my palm doesn't help—the opposite, as my cock grows painfully hard and throbs urgently behind the confines of my pants—I force myself to stop. Pulling my

hand away, I fist it at my side and hold myself still as I narrow my eyes and watch her rush toward her climax.

It won't affect me.

She won't affect me.

I won't allow it.

For a moment, I want to curse Maddoc. Riley is fully clothed, but thanks to his strip search of her when she first arrived, my mind has no trouble at all conjuring exactly what her lithe body looks like naked.

“Shit,” she murmurs, her voice low and muffled. “Oh, *shit.*”

Her fingers move faster and faster, soft, urgent noises spilling from her lips. She's about to come, and my own lips pull back in a furious snarl as I rip my zipper down and drag my cock out, the tip already slick and the shaft hard and swollen.

The touch of my own hand is electrifying, and I lurch forward, leaning one hand on the desk my computer sits on while I grip my cock with the other, dragging my palm up the throbbing shaft as stars explode behind my eyes.

This isn't right. I don't fucking do things like this. I barely jerk off at all, and never with the kind of burning, primitive drive that rages through me as I watch Riley gasp and arch her back, her body moving with an unconscious sensuality that pushes me past the breaking point.

I grit my teeth and fuck into my fist hard and fast, my eyes locked onto the screen. She's close. Cresting. Teetering on the edge of climax and then biting her lip to muffle her soft cry as she comes.

“Fuck, fuck, fuck, *fuck.*” The word rips out of my throat in a continuous stream as white-hot bliss spills down my spine and gathers behind my balls, then, with one last stroke, erupts from my cock.

I drive through my fist again and again, milking every drop as my entire body shudders.

All the tension drains from Riley's body as she sags against the door, dark lashes resting on her cheeks and her lithe body looking just as boneless as mine feels. For a single, endless moment, there really is no distance between the two of us, and everything else fades into meaninglessness as I watch her through the screen.

Then she sighs and pushes away from the door, her shoulders tightening up again and a frown settling back over her face, and reality comes rushing back at me like a brutal explosion of shrapnel.

My hand is sticky, my pants and desk both spattered with my cum.

What the fuck did I just do?

RILEY

THE MINUTE I come down from the high of the orgasm, my head feels a little more clear. I've never come that hard from just my own hand—it usually takes a tongue or a vibrator to get me off like that—and I hate that it's because I was so turned on from watching Maddoc.

It's a little early for bed, but since there's no way in hell I'm going back downstairs in search of a late dinner, I push away from the door and dig through the bag of clothes to find something to sleep in. Trying to ignore the riot of thoughts and emotions churning through my head, I strip off my clothes and throw on a cami and a pair of soft cotton shorts.

I dart down the hall to brush my teeth and splash some cold water on my face, then slip back into my room. I'm a little hungry, but I'll just have to eat in the morning.

And if that girl is still here in the morning, maybe I'll make Dante take me out for breakfast again. I don't know if I could handle looking her in the eye.

Grimacing at that thought, I turn off the light, then pull the covers back and crawl beneath the sheets, letting the cool linen soothe my flushed skin.

The spike of adrenaline when I walked in on Maddoc and that girl, followed by the intensity of the climax I just gave myself, has left me feeling boneless and exhausted as it all starts to ebb away. Despite the jumble of contradictory thoughts racing through my mind, sleep pulls me under surprisingly fast.

MY EYES POP open in the darkness, consciousness rushing back in quickly.

For a moment, I'm disoriented, unsure what it was that woke me. But then I hear the quiet, controlled sound of breathing—someone *else's* breathing—and my heart lurches in my chest.

The mattress dips as someone climbs onto the bed with me, a shadow moving in the darkness.

My first instinct is to lash out, but before I can, something cold touches my skin, pressing against my throat.

A knife.

The dark shape of a man hovers above me, and as my eyes adjust to the low light, I realize I can make out enough of the features of the sculpted, angular face.

It's Logan.

He hasn't said a word, and there's no expression on his face at all. Unlike in the daylight, when his eyes appear pale and icy, under cover of darkness they've become twin black holes, darker than the night that surrounds us, but they stare down at me with an intensity that makes my breath hitch.

Then the knife moves, and I stop breathing completely.

He drags it over my skin, lightly enough that in other circumstances it might almost be erotic.

Fear rises up inside me as the cool metal knife tip moves downward from my throat and over my upper chest, but even as my pulse flutters and my breath catches, something hot spreads through me—something that feels far too much like arousal.

Logan moves the blade to one side, running the knife over my chest in deliberate movements, and I gasp as cool air suddenly rushes across my breasts.

Holy shit. He's slicing my cami open. Shredding it.

As the delicate fabric falls away, he slides the blade lower, over my stomach and hips.

My muscles quiver, my instincts going haywire. My skin tingles, and all my senses suddenly become razor sharp, centered on the deadly metal as my entire world narrows to the smooth, precise, controlled movements Logan makes with it.

The long slices.

The swift strokes.

The pressure that drags across my skin and splits the thin cotton of my shorts over and over. He cuts through both my shorts and panties with the precision of a surgeon, methodical and controlled, slicing the garments off my body without ever breaking my skin.

Finally, I'm naked, bare before him in the moonlight and lying in a puddle of my shredded clothing. My nipples have tightened into stiff points, and I swallow hard as his gaze finds mine again in the darkness.

"What are you doing to me?" I breathe.

He stiffens slightly, as if I had shouted the words instead of whispered them. Then he shakes his head, a tortured expression passing over his shadowy features. "What are *you* doing to *me*?"

He brings the knife back up to my chest, right between my breasts, those dark eyes of his boring into me. My breath catches, the entire world seeming to stand still.

"Tell me to stop, wildcat."

Logan's voice is rough. Strained. It sounds like he's wrestling with something inside himself, almost like he *wants* me to tell him to stop. Like he wants Dante to rush in and pull him away from me like the big, tattooed man did last time we had an encounter.

But Dante doesn't come.

And for some reason that I can't quite understand, I don't say anything.

I feel like I'm standing on the edge of a cliff, looking down at the expanse below. I know I should back away from the ledge, return to solid ground where it's safe... but I can't. Some part of me needs to know what Logan is going to do. Some part of me *likes* the mingled fear and arousal that floods my veins every time he's close to me.

And as insane as it is, I can't fight it.

Logan stays perfectly still, his gaze locked on me, waiting to see if I'll respond. I don't, and the silence stretches between us, loaded and heavy.

Then he cuts. Just once.

Logan draws a careful line between my breasts, the blade so sharp that it breaks my skin before the sensation sets in. When my nerve endings finally register the bite of pain, it draws a hiss from my lips, and Logan freezes. Then, like a rubber band pulled too taut until it finally snaps, he pulls his hand back abruptly, bursting to his feet and backing away from the bed, staring at me the whole time.

His eyes dip just once, burning with cold fire as they take in the mark he made, and then he's gone.

I stare after him, shock still keeping me frozen in place.

He didn't even close the door. He just... left.

"What the fuck?"

The words come out on a shaky breath, and I reach up to touch the space between my breasts. The cut is delicate and shallow, but it's oozing blood, and even in the darkness, I can see the dark stain on my fingertips when I pull them away.

Goosebumps scatter over my skin, and I feel almost like I'm coming out of a dream, as if that entire interaction with Logan never really happened. Shaking my head, I sit up on the mattress, scooting back to lean against the headboard amidst the pieces of my destroyed sleep outfit. I reach over quickly

and turn on the small lamp by the side of the bed, and as light floods the room, I suck in a breath.

It wasn't just the cami and sleep pants that Logan destroyed.

All my clothes are shredded.

The bags Dante dropped off for me are opened, the clothes strewn over the floor. Logan must've done it before he ended up on the bed with me and I woke up, methodically pulling out each and every thing I own and slicing it into ribbons.

I stare at the carnage of shredded fabric around me, trying to piece together what I'm seeing. Something clearly set Logan off, but I have no idea what it was. I definitely haven't gone into his room since he told me not to, so it couldn't have been that. But what else could it be?

And if he truly hates me so much, why did he decimate my clothes... but barely touch me?

DANTE

“WHAT DID YOU FIND OUT?” Maddoc asks, leaning back against the kitchen counter and crossing his arms over his chest.

The man looks fucking grim, and Logan is no better. It just makes me all the more determined to take what we’ve learned and bring West Point down. The shit they’ve been pulling hasn’t just been harming the organization, it’s also wearing on my brothers.

“They admitted that those fucking weasels have been giving them a hard time,” I say, grabbing an apple out of the bowl we keep on the counter and tossing it back and forth between my hands. “Threatening repercussions if they keep doing business with us.”

Maddoc scowls, even though there’s no way he’s surprised. The whole reason he sent me and Logan to lean on this particular supplier was because we suspected that their recent change of heart had something to do with West Point.

Turns out we were right.

“How much of our business is West Point actively interfering with?” Maddoc asks, his expression hard.

“Too much,” I say before Logan can jump in with the facts and figures he’s no doubt got burned into his brain. Important info, for sure, but my answer is correct too. “We need to deal with this shit already, Madd.”

He nods, his jaw clenched tight. “We will.”

“Good,” I say, a grin spreading across my face as my blood heats up. I bite into the apple, letting its sweetness burst over my tongue. “So when do we move?”

“Not yet,” Maddoc tells me, his tone measured. “We need to have a talk with McKenna first.”

I scoff. “Talk?”

We all know West Point is fucking with us. Lately, every pile of shit we turn over stinks of them. McKenna is clearly trying to escalate things, but even though we’ve addressed some of the direct interference, Madd’s been smart and cautious about responding. He’s had us gathering information and getting our ducks in a row, thinking things through strategically and planning how to use what we know.

It’s what makes him a great fucking leader, but sometimes you just need to smash a few skulls in to make a point, and as far as I’m concerned, that time is now.

“Talk,” Maddoc repeats grimly, crossing his arms over his chest.

I know he wants to play this the right way, but long term vision or not, he must be just as ready as I am for a fight.

It’s time to step things up.

I glance over at Logan for some support, because if there’s anyone I can count on to go fucking medieval when our brotherhood is threatened, it’s him. But he doesn’t jump into the conversation the way I’m hoping for. His face is set like stone, eyes fixed on the wall behind me like he’s lost in his thoughts.

“Logan?” I bump his shoulder with mine. “Don’t you think it’s time to cause West Point some pain?”

He blinks, refocusing on my face as soon as I speak. Then he gives me a quick, sharp nod. “Yes. Their increased interference warrants a decisive response.”

O...kay. Not that I’m surprised he agrees with me, even though of course we’re both gonna go with Madd’s call on the timing, but something is definitely up with him. While

Logan's scary-sharp brain has obviously been following the conversation, he hasn't contributed much. In fact, he hasn't really said much of anything all morning, leaving it mostly to me and Madd to bounce information back and forth.

Silence isn't exactly out of character, since Logan tends to bottle shit up, but it kinda has a different flavor to it than usual right now. A sour one that has worry flickering in my chest.

I glance at Maddoc, wondering if he's noticed the same thing or if he's too focused on the logistics of this bullshit with West Point to have caught on to Logan's mood. But Madd's looking down at his phone, scowling as he taps out a quick response to something one of our lower-level members must've sent him.

Maddoc has known Logan longer than I have and knows more of his history, since they've been tight since they were kids. There was some heavy shit that went down for Logan back during his childhood that still haunts him. Shit that shaped him, and that I'm pretty sure is the fuel for the cold fury he unleashes on the world sometimes.

An image of my father's murdered corpse flits through my mind, reminding me that we all have our fucking demons, but I shove it down.

We've all been through our shit, and part of the reason the three of us work so well together as the Reapers' inner circle is that we give each other space to work that out in our own ways and time.

There was a period a little over a year ago when shit went seriously south with Logan. Not sure what the catalyst was, but for a while there, it seemed like he might lose the battle against his particular demons.

I was here, but he shut me out, and I'm pretty sure only Maddoc saved him from going somewhere so dark we wouldn't have been able to get him back.

Those two have a connection that goes way back to when Logan was living on the streets, doing some small-time jobs

for Maddoc's dad, hustling just to put food in his mouth because there wasn't anyone else looking out for him.

They were just kids, but Madd was still Madd, so of course he decided he wasn't gonna let Logan become disposable. They've been tight ever since. But even though Logan and I may not have the same history, he's just as much my brother now as he is Maddoc's. So if Madd is distracted at the moment, it's up to me to pull Logan out of the dark pit I see brewing behind his blank-eyed stare.

"Hey. You eaten yet?" I ask, grabbing another apple out of the bowl and tossing it to Logan before crunching into mine again.

He still looks like he's not all the way here with us, but I feel a little better when he snatches it out of the air with the kind of insane automatic reflexes that make him so fucking deadly to our enemies.

"Yes," he says curtly, carefully placing the apple down on the counter and then ignoring it like I knew he would.

Fair enough. Logan isn't just a creature of habit, he's got an almost manic dedication to certain orderly routines, and one of those is the boring-ass egg white and spinach omelet he eats every morning with whole grain toast. That's *all* he'll eat for breakfast, but that's fine. The apple isn't the fucking point. Logan just needs some human contact sometimes. Some "increased interference" of the brotherly variety when he starts spiraling too deep into that complex headspace of his.

Maddoc is still frowning down at his phone, no doubt getting an update from Isaac or one of our other runners about the West Point activities we've been keeping an eye on.

So I pluck out another apple from the bowl and throw it at Logan's head.

He stops it right in front of his face in a CGI-worthy superhero move that has me grinning, and a glimmer of life finally appears in his eyes as he glares at me.

"I'm not hungry."

I take another bite of my apple. “You sure about that? They’re good. And you might need the energy to help us figure out our next moves against West Point.”

“I won’t.”

“What, you won’t help?” I goad him. “Damn. I thought you had our backs, brother.”

Logan doesn’t laugh because he’s Logan, but I definitely consider the way his lips tighten into a thin white line of irritation a total win.

“I won’t need additional energy from complex carbohydrates,” he enunciates carefully, proving beyond a doubt that I’m annoying him... which means he’s not stuck quite so deep in his head anymore.

Mission accomplished.

“Your loss.” I shrug, finishing the last bite of my apple and throwing the core into the garbage disposal. Then I pivot, giving him a break and getting back to business now that he’s back with us a little. “So how are we gonna handle West Point tonight?”

Logan parses out a few cryptic logistical details and Maddoc finally ends the text exchange with Isaac and updates us with some new intel.

The three of us get so caught up hashing out plans that I don’t notice Riley come into the kitchen until Maddoc stops mid-sentence, a flash of heat passing through his eyes as his eyebrows shoot up in surprise.

“Fuck, princess,” I say with an appreciative smile when I turn and find her in his line of sight. “That’s a good look on you.”

In other words, naked... other than the towel she’s got wrapped around herself.

She glares at me, then lifts her chin and looks at Maddoc. “I need clothes.”

Not as far as I’m concerned, but guess I don’t get a vote.

I grin and lean back, shoving my hands into my pockets and preparing to enjoy the show. She's fucking ballsy as all hell, and it's the best entertainment we've had around here in a while... but I'm pretty sure I'm the *only* one who's enjoying it based on the way Logan has gone stone-faced again and Maddoc has carefully wiped away the lust I saw in his expression when she walked in so that his features now look just as blank as Logan's.

Not that I'm not surprised. Both of my brothers have their reasons for distrusting women, and I'm not gonna say they're wrong, even though my own instincts tell me Riley's not a danger to us.

"What the hell are you talking about?" Maddoc asks her in a clipped voice meant to intimidate.

"I just told you," she shoots back, pulling the towel tighter around herself. "I need some new clothes."

"What's wrong with the ones we had picked up from your apartment?" Maddoc snaps.

She presses her lips together, her eyes flicking over to Logan for a half second before she answers him in a tight voice. "I can't wear them. They're... wrecked."

I frown, then catch Maddoc's eye. I'm not the only one who caught that tell-tale look she sent Logan's way. He's back to impersonating a fucking statue, face completely blank and eyes so closed-off they look like iced-over metal.

Maddoc nods. I doubt he has any more information here than I do, but we both know our brother and can read between the lines. Something obviously went down between the two of them, and that something involved Logan causing this, uh, clothing malfunction of Riley's.

"Dante, take care of this," Maddoc says, giving me a look that assures me he's finally clued in that our brother is a bit off today. More so than usual, I mean. "Get some new things delivered here for her, and make sure she's got a dress or something for tonight."

I nod as I pull out my phone to handle it.

“You can go,” Maddoc tells Riley as I leave the room to make some calls to arrange for what she needs.

I look back at her, half expecting her to give Madd some shit for being so bossy, but she’s busy glancing at Logan again.

There’s an expression on her face I can’t quite get a handle on, and it makes me wonder what the hell happened last night. She’s giving off an energy like she’s freaked out, but there’s also something that almost feels like sexual tension filling the air between them, which isn’t something I ever thought I’d say about Logan and... well, anyone.

I make the arrangements I need to for her new clothes with one of our lower-level members, which takes a bit of time to sort out, since if she came downstairs in just a towel, she probably needs everything. And Jesus fucking Christ, explaining the color palette I want for her to the kid who’s going to pick it all up and bring it here strains my patience almost to the point of snapping. But finally, it’s done.

There are other logistics I need to handle before tonight, and when I pass by the kitchen a while later, I hear the low murmur of Maddoc’s voice.

When I poke my head in, I see that he’s still in there with Logan.

“I just need to know it’s not going to be a problem,” he’s saying, leaning in, right up in Logan’s face.

His posture isn’t aggressive, and I can tell at a glance that this isn’t Maddoc our leader. This is our brother, forcing Logan to actually make eye contact because Madd’s just as concerned about him as I am.

Logan gives him a single, jerky nod.

“Logan,” Maddoc says, frowning. “If you need—”

“I’m fine,” Logan cuts in, his voice stiff.

I’m not sure I buy it, and I can tell Maddoc is just as conflicted. But finally, he nods. “Okay. Good. Because this isn’t the time to do anything stupid.”

He squeezes Logan's shoulder, something Logan would eviscerate anyone else for. Our brother does *not* like to be touched... and the fact that he lets Maddoc get away with something that fucking sentimental sends another flicker of worry through me.

Neither Madd nor Logan have noticed me in the doorway, and I step away and leave them to it. If there's any hope of Logan opening up even the slightest, it'll be to Maddoc, and I really do have some shit I need to handle for the gang before we head out tonight.

But even as I get back to work, I can't stop my thoughts from turning.

Riley has given us an opportunity to fuck with West Point, and I appreciate that fact. Hell, pretty sure I'm gonna enjoy it. But she's also thrown our lives into chaos, each of us in different ways, and even though I'm generally a fan of a little chaos, I'm starting to realize that having her live with us is dangerous in a way I never expected.

DANTE

THAT EVENING, when someone drops off the clothes I arranged to get for Riley, I head up to her room with the bags in hand. I knock at the same time I turn the knob and open the door, and Riley startles a little as she turns to face me.

I hold up the bags. "It's just me. I come bearing gifts."

She's still wearing just the towel, and she looks relieved as her gaze scans over all the shit I'm holding. "New clothes?"

"Yup." I glance around, a frown tugging at my lips as I take note of the rest of her stuff. Her *former* stuff. I see why she needed new shit to wear. The room looks like a hurricane ripped through it. Everything we brought over from her apartment has been shredded to ribbons.

So *that's* what happened between her and Logan last night. Damn.

"Here you go. Look through it all and make sure you've got what you need," I say, handing over the new clothes and then leaving her for a second to go grab a trash bag.

Riley's set all the shopping bags on the bed when I get back, but it looks like she hasn't opened them yet. She's got her back to me, standing at the window looking out at fuck knows what. She doesn't turn around when I come into the room this time, and I leave her be for a second while I start picking up pieces of tattered material off the floor and shoving them into the bag.

Logan really did a number on them. The colors are gorgeous, the fabric feels nice, but I can't even tell which

scraps were part of what from the way he sliced them up so fine. This level of carnage must've taken him a while. I have no fucking clue what set him off, but that sense of concern I felt when he was so withdrawn this morning comes back tenfold.

Except this time, it's weirdly mixed up with some feelings for Riley too.

She's still got her back to me, and I frown as I grab another handful of her former clothing and shove it into the bag.

"Do you want to tell me what happened?" I ask as I methodically clear it away.

"No," she says, still staring out the window.

I nod even though she can't see me, accepting her answer.

No, *respecting* it.

Everything about this girl pulls me in a little more. Sure, part of me is curious about what went down between her and Logan. It was obviously intense. But a bigger part of me is impressed that she's not letting it break her. She hasn't begged us to let her go or tried to flee in the night. She's seen the darkness in all of us by now, and she hasn't run from it.

"What do you think West Point is doing to Chloe?" she asks out of the blue.

I pause, hand outstretched toward a shiny piece of black fabric. I've got no fucking clue why those weasels snatched her sister in the first place, much less what they've been up to in the time that they've had her, but I can think of dozens of possible answers that might be true.

None would be kind, though. True or not, thinking too hard about that shit when Riley can't do anything about it—not at the moment, at least—isn't something I have any interest in putting her through.

"You can ask her when we get her back," I say, then bite my tongue before I say the second part out loud. *Or avenge her if we don't.*

That's another thought Riley doesn't need on her mind right now... especially because I know damn well how unsatisfying revenge really is in the end. Necessary, of course, and I'll make sure she gets vengeance for her sister if it comes down to it. But even though I made my dad's killer pay dearly for what he took from me, the memory of the man's screams over the long days it took to end him is never gonna be enough to make up for the way it gutted me not to have been able to save my dad in the first place.

I shove that memory aside, focusing on Riley again. She's still looking out the window, and I have a feeling she's still thinking about her sister. Worrying about her.

I should probably just leave it alone and let silence fall between us, but I don't. Instead, I say, "Tell me about Chloe. What's she like?"

"Did Maddoc show you her picture?" she asks, finally turning around to face me.

"Nope." I grab another handful of scraps. "She look like you?"

"More like our father," she says, grimacing. But she does what I asked, telling me a few stories about her sister as I finish cleaning up the shredded clothes. She sits on the bed after a while, the towel still wrapped around her, and by the time I'm done, she looks a little more relaxed.

"She sounds like a good kid," I say. "And smart too. You did a good job raising her, and that'll serve her well."

"Thanks, Dante," Riley says with a tentative smile as I bag the last of the shredded clothes. "You really are the nicest of them, aren't you?"

I chuckle, shaking my head, and toss the bag out into the hall. "Best not to judge a book by its cover, princess. None of us are the nice one."

"How long have you known Maddoc and Logan?" she asks, fiddling with the edge of the towel. It barely covers her ass the way she's sitting on the bed, and she looks sexy as fuck

with nothing but that fluffy piece of fabric hiding her athletic curves.

“It’s been a few years,” I say.

Riley smirks. “That’s really all you’re going to give me?”

I chuckle at the way she called me out, clearly noticing that I glossed over the details on purpose. The less anyone knows about you, the less ammunition they have to use against you, so it’s just old habit at this point—which is why it makes no fucking sense at all that a part of me wants to tell her the whole story of how I came into Maddoc’s orbit.

I don’t, of course. That would be fucking stupid. But I decide to give her something else that I know will be of interest to her.

“You catch that conversation we were having in the kitchen this morning?” I ask.

She instantly leans forward, looking alert. “I heard something about West Point when I walked in. Was it about Chloe?”

“We were going over some new information,” I tell her. “Seems that those fucking weasels have been putting pressure on some of our contractors to stop doing business with us.”

“Contractors?”

“Businesses and individuals who aren’t in the organization, but who we do business with.”

She nods. “So they’re trying to weaken you. It really is a war, isn’t it?”

“It is,” I say grimly. Then I grin. “But hey, having something concrete like this to move on gives us a real beef with West Point, and that’s only gonna mean good things when it comes to helping you.”

“It is? How?”

Shit, the hope that lights up her face is... well, it’s fucking beautiful is what it is.

“It’ll light a fire under Maddoc’s ass,” I say. “He’s already got a score to settle with McKenna, and getting your sister out can be a part of that.” I grin, gesturing to the bags of new clothes. “Now come on. Let’s get you dressed.”

She bites her lip, then nods. I smile as she clambers off the bed and starts pulling clothes out. I was pretty fucking specific with my instructions on what to grab for her, and the kid I tapped to pick it all up did good. Every piece is gonna suit her, I can already tell.

Although, like I told her this morning, the towel she’s in isn’t a bad look either.

I reach down to subtly adjust my cock as she picks up a soft-looking sweater. She touches it gently, smiling. “Chloe gave me a mood ring this color.”

“Mood ring?”

She touches the glittering black skull in the side of her nose. “That’s what Chloe calls my nose rings.”

“Huh.” I nudge her aside and rustle around through the bags, then pull out the dress I had Dylan pick up for the club tonight, along with the new nose ring he found.

The skull she’s got in is hot, but this one is bold and blood red. My favorite color and fucking perfect for the way Riley takes on every challenge.

“Here.” I hand both to her. “You’ll want to wear these tonight, not that sweater.”

She looks at them in confusion. “Tonight? Why? What’s happening tonight?”

Before I can answer, Madd steps into the room. His eyes narrow as he catches sight of us standing so close together. I know he doesn’t like the fact that I’ve taken an interest in her, but I’m pretty sure it’s not because he’s jealous. It’s because she’s gotten under his skin too, and he has no fucking idea what to do about it.

“Everything good here?” he asks me, giving me a piercing look.

“Yup, all good.” I drop my hands, letting Riley have the dress and the ring. “Riley was about to get dressed.”

“Hurry up,” he says, his voice clipped and his temper obviously short. “We leave in twenty.”

“Leave?” Riley looks between the two of us. “Where are we going? Is *someone* going to tell me what the fuck is going on, or are you both just gonna act like I’m not even here? You’re pretty good at that, aren’t you, Maddoc?”

Madd’s jaw clenches. Riley is still wrapped in the towel, and when he flicks his gaze toward her, something loaded passes between them.

Damn. What the fuck have I been missing out on?

First Logan this morning, and now Maddoc. I don’t know what the cause of the tension between them is, but I can feel it in the air like a fucking haze. Or maybe I’m wrong. Maybe he’s just wound up about confronting McKenna tonight, and he’s taking it out on Riley.

But somehow, I think there’s more to it than that.

“Club Prestige,” he tells Riley after a long moment. “Don’t make us late.”

Then he strides out without another word.

“We’re going clubbing?” Riley scrunches up her nose as she stares after him. “How is that supposed to help me get Chloe back?”

“Because West Point owns the club,” I say, arching a brow at her. “So get that dress on and meet us downstairs so we can go, yeah?”

Her jaw drops at that revelation, and she nods once, her demeanor changing instantly now that she knows this has something to do with West Point and Austin McKenna. She slips out of the room and heads to the bathroom, and I gather up the bag of discarded clothes I put in the hall earlier, doing a final sweep of her room before closing the door. I start to head toward the stairs, but before I get more than a few steps, Riley’s voice calls out from the bathroom.

“Hey, Dante. Can you help me for a second?”

“Sure, princess. What’s up?”

I drop the bag of fabric and push the bathroom door open, my eyes meeting hers in the mirror. She’s got the ring I picked out for her in her nose and the dress I chose on her body, and something hot and possessive rears up inside me at the sight. I wasn’t lying when I told her I liked seeing her in my clothes, and this feels sort of like the same thing.

She looks gorgeous.

“What do you need?” I ask, dragging my gaze back up to meet her eyes.

“I can’t reach the zipper. Can you...?”

She trails off, turning around to show me the back of the dress.

“Yeah, I’ve got you.” I step inside, pushing the thick waves of her hair aside and running a finger down the curve of her spine.

She shivers, and my cock thickens.

The tight little dress hangs open in the back, exposing all that creamy skin with nothing to block my view. No bra strap. She doesn’t need one, not with the way the dress is cut.

The zipper pull is stuck at the bottom, just over the swell of her ass.

“This what you need help with, princess?” I ask, my voice coming out husky.

She nods. “It’s stuck.”

Her skin feels smooth and satiny, and arousal burns through me when goosebumps dot her flesh as I trace the top of her thong. “It’s caught in the lace here.”

“Can you...?”

“Yeah.” I step closer, wrapping one hand around her hip as I free the zipper and start to slide it up her back. “This looks

good on you,” I murmur as the two halves slowly come together, encasing her in blood-red silk.

“It... feels good,” she whispers, her body shivering slightly under my hands.

Fuck yeah, it does. My fingers brush against her skin, and I slow the pace to a crawl, dragging it out.

It feels more than good. It feels strangely intimate, even more so than sex, in a way.

Riley’s breath hitches. “Dante?”

“Yeah,” I repeat thickly, not even sure what her question was.

Hell, I’m not sure about anything with this girl. She’s not like anyone I’ve ever known, such a strange mix of strength and vulnerability. Beautiful, but with a bite to her. Irresistible.

When I’m done with the zipper, I drag my fingers higher, pushing her head to the side and baring her neck as I smooth those gorgeous waves of purple and blue hair over her shoulder. Then I drop my head and kiss the side of her neck.

Riley tenses up when my lips touch her skin, but then she makes the most delicious little sound and sways back, leaning into me. I wrap my arms around her, tugging her tighter against my body.

“You drive me fucking crazy,” I murmur, nuzzling behind her ear and drawing in a deep breath. She smells as good as she looks.

“I’m pretty sure *I’m* the one going crazy,” she whispers back with a disbelieving laugh, like she can’t figure out what’s going on.

That makes two of us.

Her body may be relaxed and pliant in my arms, but her voice is strained, and I can’t blame her. She’s in a fucked-up situation that’s gotta be just as stressful as it is confusing.

This right here, though? This is simple.

This is just... good.

I drag my nose along her neck, humming with pleasure as desire heats my veins and my cock strains the denim of my jeans, pushing against her ass.

“Crazy,” she repeats softly, tipping her head to give me better access as her eyes flutter closed.

My lips brush against her skin again, and I bite back a groan. I’m not the one to tell her she’s *not* going crazy—living in this house with us is probably proof that she’s right about that—but at least she’s in good company.

We’re all a little mad here.

RILEY

BEFORE I CAN DO something really stupid, like turn around and wrap my arms around Dante's shoulders so he can kiss me properly, he releases his hold on me and steps away.

"I'll see you downstairs, princess," he says, giving me one more lingering look before he strides out of the bathroom.

I really must be crazy to keep feeling like there's something between us. There can't be. Not anything real. But the phantom touch of his lips on my skin lingers as I take care of my hair and makeup, and when I finally head downstairs, my stomach is still fluttering.

"Stupid," I mutter under my breath, shaking my head as I leave the bathroom and head down the stairs. Even if there *could* be the spark of something real between us, my focus needs to be on the true reason I'm here.

I've started to feel almost sympathetic toward the Reapers in this "war" they're having, rooting for them where just a few weeks ago, I would have lumped all gangs into the same stay-the-fuck-away category. But like Dante implied, maybe this escalating feud they have with West Point really will work out in my favor if it gets them to move faster when it comes to getting Chloe back.

I'm not entirely sure what role I'll play in that mission tonight, or even how going to this West Point owned club is supposed to help, but that's where my focus needs to be. Not on anything else.

Whatever they want from me tonight, whatever they tell me to do at the club, I'll do it. The Reapers may not be my friends, but for now, at least, we have a common goal.

I hear the three men talking quietly in the front entryway once I reach the bottom of the stairs, and they look up as I approach.

"There she is." Dante gives me a broad smile, his eyes moving over me appreciatively even though he just saw me upstairs.

My steps slow, my heart thudding heavily as heat sweeps through my body like wildfire.

Because he's not the only one who's staring at me.

All three pairs of eyes—vivid green, piercing gray, and pale ice blue—lock on to me like lasers. The men are dressed in suits, and even though their clothes hide the tattoos beneath for the most part, they all still have a dangerous edge to their appearances.

Maddoc's eyes burn with something that reminds me of the way he looked at me last night, and even Logan... fuck. I shiver. Even he looks at me with raw heat in his eyes before his usual mask of cold indifference descends, snuffing it out.

I swallow, not sure what to do with that, or with the way my body reacts to it.

But before I have time to figure it out, Maddoc ruins it like he always does.

"You're late," he says in a clipped voice, making my hackles go up.

I'm definitely *not* late. If there's one thing working the stage at Club M has taught me, it's how to make myself look totally fuckable in record time.

"If you're in such a goddamn hurry, then why are you just standing there eye-fucking me?" I shoot back, breezing past him and toward the door.

Dante chuckles, and I bite back a smile as Maddoc's jaw clenches. I'm sure he picked up the not-so-subtle reference to

what happened last night, the way he fucked that other girl without ever taking his eyes off me, and I hope my unspoken message is loud and clear.

You fuck with me? I'll fuck with you right back.

Luckily, once we leave the house, I can focus on things other than all the shit that's gone down between me and these men. The guys spend the drive exchanging cryptic information, and I listen carefully to all of it. It really is like they're going over a battle plan, and even though Dante already told me the club we're headed to is owned by West Point, it's the wolf-like, predatory intensity they each radiate that drives that point home to me.

Logan's phone vibrates as Maddoc pulls the Escalade into a parking lot two blocks down from the club. I've never been to this place, but I'm familiar with it. A couple of the girls I used to work with mentioned it a time or two.

"Don't they have valet parking?" I ask, earning me a wink from Dante and a scowl from Maddoc.

Logan, of course, ignores me. Aside from that moment in the kitchen and the flash of heat in his eyes when I came downstairs, he's barely even acknowledged my existence today, let alone any of what happened in my bedroom last night.

The spot on my chest burns, more from the memory than from the actual cut, which has already healed over into a thin red scab that's hidden by my dress.

"No fucking way am I putting our transportation at the mercy of West Point," Maddoc growls, actually answering my question straightforwardly.

Right.

This isn't a fun night out, this is some kind of mission into enemy territory. One I still don't really understand why they've included me in, unless it's just that Maddoc doesn't trust me alone in their house.

Actually, that's probably exactly why.

“McKenna’s there,” Logan says, pocketing his phone after he taps out a quick message on it.

“Isaac has eyes on him?” Dante asks, his voice more serious than the light tone I’m used to hearing from him.

Logan nods once, then slips out of the Escalade like a silent shadow.

“Here? In the club? Are you going to *kill* him?” I blurt out, adrenaline slamming into me as I scramble out of the back.

“That would be stupid,” Logan says coldly. He considers for a second, then adds, “Tonight, anyway.”

“Logan’s right. We’re not here to kill him. This is business, and you need to stay out of it,” Maddoc says, glaring at me as if he wasn’t the one who insisted I come along in the first place.

I put my hands on my hips. “Well, what exactly *am* I supposed to do here? If this has anything to do with getting Chloe back, I want to help.”

“We just need to talk to McKenna, princess,” Dante tells me, stepping in. “We’ve got some shit to discuss with him.”

Maddoc, who seems more on edge than usual tonight, doesn’t say anything else. He just clicks the key fob to lock up the Escalade and then turns and heads toward the club. Logan follows, and Dante offers me his arm like a gentleman.

“Come on,” he says. “And keep your eyes and ears open.”

“For what?”

“Anything useful.” His playfulness vanishes for a second as he gives me a serious look. “But stay out of trouble while we’re in there, okay?”

I grimace. “Trouble has a way of finding me.”

“You got that right.” He shoots me a sinful grin, his casual charm resurfacing.

Sticking close to Maddoc and Logan, we head past the bouncer and into the club.

The music slams into me first, followed quickly by the scent of bodies, alcohol, and smoke. It's loud and crowded, filled with a seductively pulsing energy that, for a second, makes me wish Dante and I were just here to let loose and dance.

But that's a fucking pipe dream considering the turn my life has taken recently, so I shake it off and do what he asked me to, looking around as he pulls me through the press of the crowd toward the back of the club. I try to keep my eyes and ears open, even though I can't imagine what I'll notice that would be "useful."

The music is too loud to hear anything, and all I see is the expected mix of gyrating bodies, drunken hookups in dark corners, and a cross section of Halston's clubgoers trying to see and be seen. Whatever gang business goes on here isn't going to be out in the open.

Dante tugs me closer as we walk, dragging me right up against him and wrapping an arm around me as he leans down so I can hear him.

"Want a drink?"

"I thought we were here on business," I say, arching a brow and trying to ignore how good it feels to be tucked against his body like this.

"We are. But that doesn't mean we can't..."

Dante keeps talking, but whatever he says is drowned out by a sudden rushing in my ears as I glance to my left and catch sight of a girl with blonde hair dancing on a raised pedestal nearby.

No. Not just a girl.

Chloe.

RILEY

“OH FUCK,” I gasp, digging my fingers into Dante’s shoulder as my gut twists.

My sister is standing on a small round pedestal about five feet above the edge of the dance floor, wearing nothing but a g-string and a smile that looks like she’s dead inside.

I’m vaguely aware that there are other pedestals around the place with similar dancers on them, but I only have eyes for Chloe.

And as if she can feel the weight of my gaze on her, she looks over at me.

Her eyes widen, hope, fear, relief, and shock all flashing through them before her expression settles on panic. Her gaze darts around like she’s looking for her captors, and she never stops moving, as if they’ve already made sure she knows better than to try.

Shit. I have to help her. I have to get her out of here.

It’s the only thought I have as I shove away from Dante and start pushing through the crowd in Chloe’s direction.

But I don’t get more than a step or two before a strong hand closes around my arm, stopping me in my tracks.

At first, I think it’s Dante, but as he yanks me backward against his body and his scent reaches my nostrils, I realize it’s Maddoc.

“Keep your shit together,” he says coolly into my ear, his grip around my waist like iron.

“That’s my sister,” I gasp. “They can’t—Maddoc, I need to... They... She—”

I can barely string my thoughts together, much less any words. Fear and anger churn inside me, an emotional whirlpool threatening to suck me under.

“I know,” he says, his voice low. “I know you’re pissed. But what do you think you’re going to do that will help her right now?”

Do? Save her. That’s what I need to do.

I struggle against him, trying to twist free so I can get to her. “Let me go. I—”

“*Think, butterfly,*” he says sharply, spinning me around to face him. “What can you do?”

The blunt question cuts through my chaotic emotions. He’s right, and I hate him for it.

There’s nothing I can do right now. This club is owned by the men who captured her. They must have security around. It’s not like they’re going to just let me walk out with Chloe, and by the panicked look on her face, my sister knows it too.

I can’t save her like this.

A helpless rage wells up inside me, so overwhelming that it feels like it’s going to break me. Like it could shake me apart and shatter me into a million pieces. My only anchor is Maddoc’s cool gaze, locked on to mine.

“Count to ten,” he says, his voice somehow all I can hear despite the blaring music.

“I can’t—”

“Yes, you can. Come on now, just take a breath and count for me.”

A shudder rips through me, a sob clawing its way up my throat. It feels like he’s asking for the impossible, but he’s so fucking *solid*, so immovable, that it doesn’t matter.

What Maddoc wants, Maddoc gets. He’ll make it happen with his will alone.

I take a breath.

“That’s it,” he says, surprisingly gently, still staring down at me with that unblinking gaze as he creates a bubble of space for us in the midst of the crowd. “Another one.”

I do it. I take another breath, then another, until it feels like some of his calm steadiness transfers to me.

It helps.

I still feel like I’m going to break, but maybe not right this second. I already knew we weren’t here tonight for Chloe, so I just have to remember that this is a win. At least I’ve seen her. At least I know she’s... well, I can’t say she’s all right. Not after seeing the hopeless emptiness in her eyes while she danced.

But I’ll make her all right.

I’ll fix this.

I force my muscles to relax, giving Maddoc a nod so he knows I’ve got my shit together. His eyes search my face with a look that I’d almost call soft if that was a word that would ever actually apply to this man.

Once he’s satisfied with what he sees, he jerks his chin toward the back of the club. We start moving again, and Dante crowds up behind me as we make our way to the private area there that overlooks the floor.

Logan is already waiting at a roped off area when we reach the back of the club, his eyes as cool and unreadable as always as he watches us approach. He steps aside when we get there, and Maddoc tells the bouncers that they’re here to talk to Austin.

My chest starts to tighten up as they move the rope aside and let us in. Austin McKenna is lounging on a plush leather couch, his legs kicked out in front of him like he’s fucking royalty. There’s a curvy brunette tucked under one of his arms and half a dozen men positioned around him, but neither Maddoc, Logan, nor Dante look the slightest bit intimidated by his bodyguards.

“Maddoc,” Austin says, greeting us with a smirk. “Treating your seconds to a night out?”

Maddoc answers with some comment about how they’ve got better taste than to come to this club for enjoyment, but between the loud music and the way my pulse is pounding in my ears, I don’t even try to follow their posturing.

The girl sitting with Austin is watching Maddoc with a calculating gleam in her eye, while Austin himself assesses each of the three men with barely concealed hatred. His gaze flicks over me too, but he immediately dismisses me.

I grit my teeth. I can’t tell if he recognizes me or not, and even though I know I’m a thousand times safer if he doesn’t, the idea that he cares so little about what he’s taken from me that he’s already forgotten who I am infuriates me.

“So if you didn’t come to enjoy the club, then what the hell are you doing on my turf?” Austin finally asks as he casually picks up a drink and sips at it, raising his eyebrows in an invitation to the Reapers to get on with it.

I fucking hate him. Seeing him look so relaxed and casual while he’s got my sister dancing practically naked on a pedestal makes me want to rip his eyes out with my bare hands.

I curl my fingers into fists, my nails biting into my palms.

“We know what you’ve been doing, McKenna,” Logan says in a flat tone.

“Enjoying myself?” Austin says with a shark-like smile, draping his arm over the back of the couch, behind the brunette. “I am, thank you.”

“You really want things to get ugly?” Dante asks, his demeanor just as casual and charming as Austin’s, but somehow coming across as twice as deadly. Then he jerks his chin toward the girl. “Uglier than they already are, I mean.”

“Fuck you, Dante,” she spits out.

Austin pulls her back. “Don’t worry, Sienna,” he all but purrs. “I’ve got this.”

“We’re offering you one chance to back off before we escalate things,” Maddoc says, coldly ignoring the exchange between Dante and the girl.

Austin relaxes back against the couch as he banter back and forth with the Reapers, as if they’re not talking about wreaking havoc on this corner of the city. About the possibility of a bloody, violent gang war that will no doubt spill out onto the streets and leave chaos in its wake.

I don’t care. I really didn’t think I could hate Austin McKenna more than I already did, but I can’t even be curious about whatever history there obviously is between all of them. Not when my sister is less than fifty feet away, on display for the club’s patrons like she’s nothing more than a cheap accessory Austin picked up.

Worse, she saw me too.

She knows I’m just... leaving her there.

As the conversation between the men goes on, I can’t help glancing over in her direction. I can just make out the pedestal she’s on from where we’re sitting, and my gaze finds her just as one of the men in the crowd reaches up, snagging her ankle and trying to pull her closer so he can grope her.

The shithead makes her fall on her ass, and something inside me snaps at the sight.

My pulse skyrockets, hot fury blooming inside me like a bomb exploding. I’m past the bouncers and on the other side of the rope before I even realize I’ve moved.

I don’t care that the tension between the Reapers and West Point is already balancing on a razor’s edge. I don’t care how my actions could fuck up whatever Maddoc is hoping to achieve here tonight. I only care about protecting Chloe, and I charge the motherfucker who still has his hands on her—who’s *laughing* about it—and attack him like a fucking banshee.

“What the fuck?” he grunts when I barrel into him.

He’s bigger than I am by a lot, but I caught him by surprise, knocking him off balance. I keep going, lashing out with a punch that connects to his jaw. It hurts like hell, my

knuckles stinging, but I do it again, barely even registering the pain.

“Don’t you *ever touch*—”

Someone yanks me off him, and my threat ends in a grunt as I’m suddenly hauled backward and locked in a tight embrace.

“Let me go!” I demand, struggling against the muscled arms that hold me. “Let me—”

“Stop.”

Dante’s voice is low and deadly, and it breaks through the red haze in my head. I realize in a rush that Maddoc and Logan are standing on either side of us, the three Reapers facing off with what looks like at least a dozen of the West Point gang.

Somewhere in the middle of my attack on the guy groping Chloe, the music was cut. Heavy silence fills the space, club goers all turning to look at us as the two groups square off.

“What the fuck is this shit?” Austin growls, stepping forward as he all but spits the words in Maddoc’s face. “This is what you bring to my house? This is how you disrespect us after I let you in?”

Maddoc’s jaw ticks, his entire body like a coiled wire, and I swallow hard. None of them have their guns drawn yet, but I can see several of Austin’s men reaching for concealed weapons, and I know it could all explode in an instant.

Oh fuck. What have I done?

“It was a mistake,” Maddoc says, his voice low and even as he stares Austin down. “A simple misunderstanding. It was nothing, McKenna. We’re willing to let it go.”

“Starting a fight on my turf isn’t nothing. It’s a fucking insult!”

And if his men start shooting, it will be more than that. It will be blood and chaos and terror in a packed club like this.

“Like I said,” Maddoc repeats in a calm tone undercut with steel. “We’re willing to let it go and walk away as a gesture of goodwill... this time.”

Austin scoffs. “You mean you’re begging us to *let* you go. That’s not goodwill. That’s the kind of weakness that I’m going to wipe out in Halston.”

Maddoc raises an eyebrow. “Do you honestly think we’re the ones The Six will be looking at if something goes down at the club *you* run? You know they wouldn’t appreciate you drawing the attention of law enforcement.”

Austin spits on the floor. “Yeah? Well, fuck The Six.”

Maddoc smiles grimly, as if Austin has just said something epically stupid. But all he comes back with is, “We haven’t forgotten that you’re trying to fuck *us* over, but your call, McKenna. What’s it going to be? Am I going to take my people out of here without trouble, or...?”

For a second, I think the West Point leader might actually be bloodthirsty enough to risk his own people by escalating things just for the hell of it. There’s a manic gleam in his eye that makes him look seriously unhinged.

But then he huffs out a breath and shoves his gun back into the waistband of his pants, yanking the curvy brunette into his side and groping her as he gives Maddoc one of his shark-like smiles again. All teeth and pure threat.

“I’ll allow it,” he says with an arrogant smirk. “This time. Go.”

Maddoc doesn’t say a word. He just turns on his heel and grabs my arm, yanking me away from Dante and dragging me from the club as Logan and Dante bring up the rear.

The crowd closes behind us, the music starting up again before we’ve even made it to the door.

I look back as Maddoc pulls me along, desperate to see if Chloe is okay.

My throat closes up, tears pricking my eyes as I stumble along in Maddoc’s wake.

She's not okay.

She's not hurt. She's still alone and untouched up on that fucking pedestal. But her sad, scared face as she watches me go guts me to the core.

She looks just as hopeless, just as *helpless*, as I feel.

The minute we're outside, all traces of Maddoc's calm demeanor disappear, and he explodes in a string of curses that only cut off when he roughly shoves me into the back of the Escalade. That surprising gentleness he showed when he helped me calm down earlier is nothing but a distant memory now.

Not that I can blame him. I fucked up. Badly.

The drive back to the house is tense, and the closer we get to their place, the more tightly my stomach twists with nerves.

No matter what might have happened between me and any of them, the truth is that I'm just as disposable to the Reapers as Chloe is to West Point.

And I don't know what they're going to do to me now that I've made myself a liability in the middle of their war.

MADDOC

EMOTIONS DO nothing but make you stupid, and stupid gets you killed. I saw it over and over growing up, and I took those lessons to heart and made them the foundation of how I operate.

But fucking *hell*, the drive back to our place tests my control.

I turn onto our street, the inside of the Escalade as silent as a tomb other than the sound of Riley's ragged, panicked breathing. I've got no doubt that my brothers will each have something to say about the clusterfuck we just walked away from, but they're smart enough to hold it back until we're alone.

Until after we deal with... her.

My jaw starts to ache, and I force myself to unclench it before I grind my fucking molars into powder. But it's goddamn hard to relax when the sight of Riley getting into a fistfight in McKenna's club keeps playing in my head on repeat.

His men were all armed and itching for a fight. If one of them had pulled a fucking gun on her...

My knuckles turn white, making the ink on my fingers stand out even more starkly, and the steering wheel creaks in my grip. This whole damn night has turned into a complete shit show, when it should have been nothing more than a simple meeting. Not that I actually thought McKenna would heed our warning—if he was that smart, West Point wouldn't

be the cesspit he's turned it into—but as Logan pointed out earlier this week, there were strategic reasons for confronting him face to face.

Unfortunately, those reasons went to shit when it almost turned into a bloodbath, and all because this fucking girl we've brought into our home can't obey a simple directive to behave.

All she had to do was keep her shit together and stay next to us. We would have been in and out, and that would've been it.

Goddammit.

The Escalade's tires screech on the cement when I pull into the garage, and I'm out of the vehicle and have the rear door yanked open before the engine goes silent.

"Inside," I growl, dragging Riley out of the back seat and toward the house as Logan and Dante follow.

We've had eyes on the club, people watching it to scope out McKenna's business. So why the *fuck* didn't anyone spot her sister before we showed up tonight?

"Maddoc," she makes the mistake of saying once we're inside.

"Don't," I bite out, rounding on her as Dante closes the door behind us. "Do you know how much fucking damage you caused?"

Her eyes turn glassy with unshed tears, but she lifts her chin and stares me down, her chin trembling. "I'm sorry."

"Fuck sorry, you—"

"*You* saw Chloe there, and you did nothing!" she screams, her chin firming up as the spirit she's shown every time it would've been smarter for her to back down comes roaring to the surface.

She's got no fucking sense of self preservation. *None.*

Anger heats my blood to boiling, and I want to slam her back against the wall and fuck some sense into her before she

gets herself killed. I do one of those things, and a framed piece of art falls to the floor with a crash when I shove her against the wall and hold her there.

“Tonight wasn’t the right time,” I bite out.

“They’re hurting her,” she hisses, glaring up at me.

I scoff at her weak-ass excuse. “You telling me your sister is too weak to handle some drunk clubber trying to cop a feel?”

Her breath hitches. “That’s not what I mean. It’s not... I don’t know if... I think they’re making her...”

She breaks off. We don’t fucking know what they’re making the girl do, but I can imagine, and clearly, so can she. Riley pushes me away and covers her mouth, tears glistening in her gorgeous brown eyes.

“Madd,” Dante starts, taking a half step forward.

I throw him a hard look, and he takes the hint and shuts the fuck up.

I’m handling this.

He nods, spreading his feet and settling in, arms crossed in front of his chest in a silent signal that he’s got my back. I flick my gaze toward Logan. He’s watching with the kind of chilling intensity that tells me he’s ready for whatever I need from him, just like he has been ever since we became brothers.

Neither one of them pulled a weapon in the club, thank fuck. That shit would have escalated things beyond my control. But goddammit, they were at risk too. She put them *and* herself at risk because she couldn’t keep her shit together.

It’s unforgivable.

I look back at Riley, my hands clenching into fists as I try to contain the seething anger that’s starting to boil over inside me. A million fucked up scenarios of the people who matter to me most being carried out of Club Prestige in body bags run through my mind, making my stomach clench.

I get why finding her sister like that blindsided her, but it's no excuse. Excuses are just another thing that gets you dead. How can she not fucking understand that?

"You should be dead," I grit out.

Fire flashes in her eyes, replacing the agony from the run-in with her sister. "Is that a threat?"

"No, it's a fucking fact. You almost got killed. You almost got my brothers killed. You need to fucking *listen when I tell you what to do!*"

What started out as a low growl ends in a shout. I'm right up in her face, pressing her against the wall again, and it's only when I catch the subtlest of movements in my peripheral vision—Logan, shifting his weight when he's normally capable of an uncanny level of stillness—that I get it together and regain my control.

I drag in a breath and back off, reeling it in as I calm the fuck down and assess the situation.

I scrub a hand over my face, wiping away all expression. She's still an asset, but shit like this can't happen again.

I need to teach her a lesson.

"Strip," I say gruffly.

She hesitates, defying me again. Always so fucking defiant. I thought butterflies were easy to break, but this one doesn't even bend. She's part of our world now, though, too deep to easily extricate herself, and she needs to learn that sometimes bending is the only way to survive.

"I told you to fucking *strip*," I repeat.

"Fine," she says tightly, her tongue darting out to wet her lips.

My cock twitches as I track the motion in my peripheral vision, but I keep my gaze locked on hers as she reaches for the zipper of her dress.

Her soft, pale skin comes into view as the dress slithers down her body, and my gaze drops immediately to the thin red

line on her chest. It's a healing cut, shallow and perfectly straight, and an unaccountable flare of jealousy rises in me as I realize that I recognize the handiwork.

Logan.

So her clothes weren't the only thing he used his knife on last night.

I don't quite know what to do with that information. It's incredibly out of character for Logan, and it explains how fucking out of sorts he was this morning. But now isn't the time to deal with that, so I refocus on Riley as she continues to strip.

This time, she's wearing less than she was the first time I made her do this. Just the dress and her tiny thong, both off in seconds, and a pair of nude heels so tall that we're almost eye to eye. They're strappy and sexy as fuck, with little cords or some shit that wrap around her ankles, and when she bends over to undo them...

"Leave them," I growl, yanking her upright with one hand and sliding my tie off with the other. I loop it around her wrists and use it like a leash to lead her over to the stairs.

For a single moment of pure insanity, I'm tempted to keep going. To take her up to my room, throw her down on my bed, and do what I almost did in my office the other day after she showed me pictures of her life with her sister.

I wanted her in that moment, drawn to the openness and warmth in her eyes. I wanted her so fucking much that I had to shut that shit down. I had to remind us *both* that nothing exists between us, so I brought home some random woman and fucked her in the very place where I almost fucked Riley.

I was hoping to get the beautiful, frustratingly fierce butterfly out of my goddamn system. Out of my head. I left the door open knowing there was a chance she would hear us... but I didn't expect her to walk in. I didn't expect her to stay and watch, and just seeing the expression on her face, the heat in her eyes... it made me come harder than I have in a long fucking time.

That's not what this is about right now, though, and the last fucking thing I need to do is indulge in my craving for Riley any more than I already have. Seeing my ex-girlfriend hanging all over Austin fucking McKenna tonight was a stark reminder of why it would be a bad fucking idea to get involved with anyone.

I attach the other end of the tie to the banister, knotting it tight in case Riley is tempted to fight what she's got coming.

She doesn't. She hasn't said a word since she started to strip. Hasn't asked what I've got in store for her or whined to try to get out of it.

The proof of how fucking strong she is just pisses me off even more.

This didn't need to happen. She should have held it fucking together.

I slip my belt off and finally get a reaction. The smallest flinch.

"Stay still," I warn her, putting my hand between her shoulder blades when they tense up. I push her forward. "Brace yourself."

I don't give her any more warning than that, because that's how life works. A bullet doesn't come with a warning, and pain is fucking inevitable.

I can feel Dante and Logan behind me, silent sentinels bearing witness as I crack the belt against her heart-shaped ass, the sound like a gunshot.

She lurches forward, a pained cry escaping before she cuts it off with a snap.

"One," I growl, dragging in a breath.

"Two." I belt her again. "Three." *Fuck, she takes it well.* "Four... five."

The red stripes are a beautiful contrast to her pale, silky skin, but even though she pants with ragged, choppy breaths under each strike, she doesn't cry out again.

Until I get to six.

I belt her again, my blood hot from the exertion as anger and protective fear churn inside me, and I finally get another sound. She swallows it down on a gasping moan, her head dropping low as she lets her bound arms take more of her weight.

My hand freezes for a moment, shock rippling through me.

Is she...?

Yes. She is. With her legs spread and that perfect little ass thrust out for me, I can see it. Hell, I can smell it. She's wet. Her pussy is exposed and swollen, soft and inviting between her trembling thighs.

This is fucking hurting her, as it should, but it's doing a hell of a lot more than just that.

"Seven," I grit out, letting the belt crack against her again as my cock hardens, the line between doling out pleasure and pain blurring as my need to punish her merges with something else. "Eight."

This time, she groans, so quietly I can barely hear it.

Then she pushes her ass back for another.

"Nine," I grunt, giving it to her.

The atmosphere in the room becomes charged, and I'm not just hard. When I swing my arm for the last one, I almost fucking come.

"Ten."

She sags against her restraints, gasping and exhausted, and I drop the belt. It hits the floor with a clatter, but I barely hear it, my gaze still locked on the woman in front of me. It's taking all of my restraint not to gather her into my arms right now, to soothe the sting of the belt with my tongue and to give her the orgasm I know she's so fucking close to right now.

I crave her like a goddamn drug, more strongly and undeniably than ever before—not just because of how beautiful she looks right now, but because I've never met

anyone like her. Never met someone who could take everything I can dish out and still want more.

But I'm the leader of the Reapers. I put the no-fucking-her rule in place for a reason, and it applies to me as well as to my brothers. I can't give in to what I want any more tonight than I could yesterday.

So I untie her, resisting the impulse to pull her close and murmur words of praise and encouragement at how well she did. To soothe her and kiss every inch of her flushed face as I breathe her in.

"Go upstairs," I say instead, pocketing the tie I used to restrain her.

She glares at me, waves of vibrantly colored hair tumbling over her breasts and her beautiful brown eyes filled with a wild mix of emotions that rivals my own.

"Now," I bark, trying to ignore how much that look in her eyes calls to me. In truth, it's just another sign that I need to stay the fuck away. Get this shit with her sister done, move ahead with our plans against West Point, and then remove her from our fucking lives.

Riley lifts her chin, holding my gaze just long enough to give me a silent "fuck you," then turns and walks up the stairs, head held high and naked ass bearing my marks.

Something hot and possessive stirs inside me at the sight.

It's unacceptable. It's fucking *dangerous*.

I wrap the tie taut around one of my hands as Logan and Dante step forward to flank me. The three of us watch her leave in silence, and after a long moment, Dante is the one to break it.

"Madd?" he prods quietly.

"It's fine," I say, my tone short.

Logan snorts.

None of us take our eyes off her.

All of us know I'm lying.

It's not fine. The girl was supposed to be nothing to us, a means to an end, but now she's becoming something more. Affecting all of us. Bearing marks from each of us. Getting under our skin.

She's become a shared obsession.

And tonight, that almost got us all killed.

RILEY

I CAN FEEL the men watching me all the way up the stairs, so I keep my shoulders straight and my head high, despite the pain that radiates from the belt marks on my ass and the flush that seems to cover my entire body.

As soon as I make it back to my room, I kick off my heels and crawl onto the bed, pulling the blankets up over myself.

I'm pissed at Maddoc for humiliating me like that, but another part of me feels like I actually got off easy. What I did tonight was reckless and dangerous, and if I'd been thinking clearly, there's no way I would've caused a scene like that. It didn't help Chloe and might've only made things worse for her.

It definitely made things worse for us.

So compared to the things that filtered through my mind on the drive back as I considered how Maddoc might punish me, belting my ass was actually pretty tame. It could've been a lot worse... but that doesn't explain my body's reaction to it. It doesn't explain why I was leaning into the strokes of Maddoc's belt by the time he delivered the final few, or why the fierce licks of pain that burst through my body made my clit throb and my pussy grow wet.

Why did I enjoy any of that?

I roll over onto my back, hissing as the soft bedspread rubs against my raw ass. It fucking hurts, but for some reason I don't roll back, taking a perverse pleasure in the flaring pain.

“God, I’m a freak,” I whisper, clutching one of the pillows on the bed to my chest.

I don’t know why I need the pain, but it grounds me, and it eases some of the ache in my chest that’s lingered there ever since I saw Chloe at the club. It gives my mind something else to focus on besides all the ways I feel like I’ve failed her, and although I’m not sure that was Maddoc’s intent, I’m almost grateful for it.

Fuck, did he hear me moan when he belted me one of those last times?

Dante and Logan were standing there watching. Could they tell that I was turned on?

I close my eyes, still hearing the deep rumble of his voice as he counted off each stroke, still feeling the phantom pressure of the tie around my wrists. My pussy clenches, and I whimper softly. I don’t understand my reactions to these men, or the things they bring out in me. I don’t understand who I am anymore.

“Fuck,” I mutter, tossing the pillow aside and getting to my feet.

I grab a robe, a lightweight lavender one I’m almost certain Dante picked out himself, then throw it on and slip out of my room, heading to the bathroom to get ready for bed.

The vague murmur of the men’s voices filter up from downstairs, and none of them come up as I quickly take care of my business in the bathroom, including awkwardly slathering my welted ass with some lotion I find in there.

They’re still deep in discussion as I pad silently back into the bedroom and fall into a restless sleep.

I’M exhausted when my eyes finally open the next morning, even though I can tell by the light coming in through the curtains that it’s not early. My body feels drained beyond just

the poor sleep I had, so I don't bother getting out of bed for a while.

I don't have anywhere to be, and there's nothing I can do to help Chloe until the Reapers decide to make a move. I'm sure I've long since lost my job at Club M, and I have absolutely no fucks to give about that. At some point, if they keep me here, not paying my rent on the apartment will become an issue, but I'm sure they don't want me here any longer than necessary, so hopefully it won't get that far.

I grab some clothes from the new supply Dante brought up yesterday, then head to the bathroom. The hot water stings my sore ass, waking me up even faster than the coffee I'm craving will.

As I get out of the shower and wipe the steam off the mirror, I can't help but look.

"Oh my god," I whisper, twisting and turning in an effort to see all of it. The welts Maddoc left on me aren't quite as angry-looking as they were last night, but they're still raised, red, and throbbing. The marks cover my ass and upper thighs in a crisscross pattern, standing out against the pale skin around them.

For a long moment, I can't look away from the sight.

He marked me.

That thought sends a shiver down my spine. I'll probably wear these marks for a while, a constant reminder of him. Some wild, primal part of me likes that idea, the ache in my core that I wouldn't let myself take care of last night returning as my clit throbs lightly.

Stop it, Riley. Get your head on straight. No more fucking mistakes.

Still chastising myself mentally, I tug on my clothes and towel dry my hair, then leave the bathroom and head downstairs.

I assume I'll find myself alone the way I have on most other mornings, but as I make my way toward the kitchen,

something amazing hits my nose—a medley of delicious scents that smell so good I almost moan.

I'm suddenly so hungry that I can't help my steps from speeding up, but they falter when I round the corner and see that Logan is the one responsible for all those amazing smells.

His back is to me as he cooks, and as always with him, everything in the kitchen looks utterly spotless and organized despite the obvious evidence that he's been here a while. A variety of breakfast dishes are laid out with military precision on the countertop, each plated beautifully and every single one of them making my mouth water like I haven't eaten in a year.

But this is *Logan*, and I truly have no idea where I stand with the unreadable ice king, so I start to back away as quietly as I can.

“Stay,” he says without turning around.

I freeze awkwardly, mid-step. My first instinct is to run now that he's somehow noticed me, but it's already too late. He turns away from the stove to face me, sliding a steaming omelet that smells like heaven onto a plate as those ice-colored eyes flick over to me and then back to the task at hand.

“Eat something,” he says without any inflection.

I swallow. “What... um, what should I eat?”

He lifts one shoulder in a small shrug before fastidiously wiping down the stovetop and efficiently transferring the pan and spatula he just used to the sink. “Whichever one you'd like, or all of them. It's all for you.”

I blink, confused. “What?”

He frowns. “Eat,” he repeats, looking at me like I'm the crazy one. “I made you food.”

“Okay,” I say carefully, wondering what the catch is.

He just stares at me in that slightly unnerving way he has until I move, creeping slowly into the kitchen in case there's some kind of booby trap I don't see.

“Uh, thanks,” I finally remember to add.

Logan grunts softly, turning back to the sink, and I snatch the first plate I reach from the counter next to him and retreat to the end of the tall island in the middle of the kitchen that the guys often eat at.

He finishes washing the pan, dries it, returns it to the cupboard, then pours a fragrant cup of coffee and doctors it with a hefty pour of cream, just the way I like it. He brings it over to me, along with a set of silverware.

I freeze, hoping against hope that one of the other men will suddenly walk in.

No one does, and being so close to Logan, being alone with him, has my heart beating in overdrive.

“Why are you doing this?” I blurt when he silently sets the items down in front of me and then turns away to pull something out of the oven.

He looks up at me, a faint wrinkle between his eyebrows, as if the question confuses him.

I clear my throat. “I mean, why did you make me... breakfast?”

“I knew you’d be hungry. You haven’t eaten anything substantial in the past thirty-six point nine hours.”

The specificity of his answer, right down to the last time I ate a real meal, throws me for a loop, and I have no idea how to respond. It doesn’t answer the question I was really asking, and unless he’s just completely clueless when it comes to all social norms, he has to know it.

But he’s not wrong. I really am hungry.

What happened between us the night he snuck into my room had me too freaked out to come near any of them yesterday, so after coming down to ask for new clothes, all I had to eat was the last of those crackers in my room from the first night I was here.

The idea that Logan might know that even though I’ve barely seen him over the past thirty-whatever hours he just rattled off weirds me out almost as much as the fact that he

prepared my coffee exactly as I take it. And, of course, this whole Top Chef act of his.

But now he's back to ignoring me, methodically turning out perfectly rounded muffins onto a cooling rack, and hunger overcomes my fear.

The plate I grabbed has two photoshoot-worthy pieces of perfect French toast on it, complete with a sprinkling of powdered sugar and juicy, perfectly sliced strawberries fanned out on top. I load up my fork with a large bite, careful to get a little bit of everything, and moan at how fucking good it tastes.

Logan freezes at the sound, his back stiffening.

His eyes snap up to meet mine, and something flickers behind the eerie blankness—a heat that I've seen before a few times, like he's got an inferno raging inside him, hidden behind the walls of ice he wears.

“Um, it's really good,” I tell him, trying to dispel the tension in the air.

He nods as if that's a given, then jerks his chin toward one of the tall stools set around the island. “Sit,” he says. “It's better for your digestion.”

I slide my plate over a little and settle onto the stool, wincing when my welted ass makes contact with the hard wood.

Logan notices that too, and this time, the heat in his eyes lingers longer before he shuts his expression again.

He goes back to cooking, and I get down to eating it, filling my belly after the past few days of not enough food and way too many emotional ups and downs. I sample a few more of the amazing dishes he made and allow myself to enjoy the pleasant silence for a few minutes.

“Are you going to eat too?” I ask as he drizzles something sweet and creamy over mixed fruit, then swiftly and efficiently turns it into some kind of fruit salad masterpiece that he adds to the buffet.

“No. I already did,” he says, aligning the bowl and then brushing some invisible crumbs or something off the counter.

“But you’ve made so much, and it’s... it’s really good, Logan. I’m sure I won’t be able to finish all of this. Sit down with me.”

He hesitates, his face still blank but his body language clearly conflicted.

I swallow, not quite sure why I’m working so hard to convince him as I add, “Please?”

Finally, he nods, one jerky motion of his chin. He finishes cleaning a few parts of the kitchen that already look spotless to me and brings the fruit salad over to the island, placing it near my plate and then sitting stiffly on the stool across from me.

I’m getting close to being full, but everything really is delicious, so I spoon some of the fruit salad onto my plate, then nudge the bowl toward him. “Are you going to have some?”

“I told you, I already ate,” he says, his back ramrod straight.

He looks so uncomfortable just sitting here with me that it almost makes me grin. This man is either terrifying or the king of awkward, with no middle ground. But for some reason, I don’t want to hurry up and leave anymore. I’m not even hoping for Maddoc or Dante to walk in. Logan has the same mesmerizing quality that any deadly predator has, and I can feel it luring me in, tempting me to get closer. To learn more about him.

“You must cook a lot,” I say. “You’re really good at it. Are these your favorite recipes?”

That line appears between his eyebrows again as he frowns. “I don’t... this isn’t for me. I don’t need a favorite. I always start the day with a balanced meal.”

“Sounds boring,” I say with a chuckle before I remember who I’m talking about. I’m not sure Logan is the type who enjoys being teased.

But instead of looking offended, his lips twitch into something almost like a smile.

“You sound like Dante.” He shrugs. “But you’re both wrong. My breakfast isn’t boring. It’s the appropriate mix of proteins, complex carbohydrates, and healthy fats to ensure optimal energy levels throughout the day.”

I scrunch up my face. “So, what, raw egg whites and... chicken breast?”

Logan fixes me with a stern look of reproof. “Raw egg whites carry a risk of Salmonella contamination.”

“I was kidding. So what do you eat for optimal...” I circle my fork around as I search for the word, but I can’t remember whatever weird health jargon he rattled off, so I just settle on, “For optimal breakfast?”

“An egg white omelet—cooked—with four ounces of spinach and two slices of whole grain toast.”

“Yum.”

My tone is teasing, but I can’t help arching a brow in surprise. It sounded an awful lot like he just made a joke with that “cooked” thing, but probably not. If he *was* joking, his face certainly didn’t get the memo. But at least, for probably the first time since I met him, he looks almost relaxed.

I’m totally full by now, but I keep picking at the food and asking him more about his daily routine, just to hear him talk. He’s still closed off, and his face stays mostly expressionless, but I’m craving company right now, and sitting with him like this is... nice.

Peaceful.

It’s not a word that I ever would’ve imagined using for Logan, but despite the fact that he’s often terrifying and cold, there appears to be another side to him too. He seems almost boyish right now, the hard lines of his features easing a bit.

He leans closer to me as we speak, resting his hands on the island between us, and when he reaches over with one hand to scratch at a spot on his opposite wrist, the movement draws

my gaze. It's a scar that he's scratching, I realize, thick and raised. I haven't noticed it before, and I'm honestly surprised that I haven't, although he usually wears long-sleeved shirts.

"What's that from?" I ask softly, reaching out to touch it.

He goes still the minute my fingers brush his skin, and it feels like all the air has just been sucked out of the room.

I yank my hand away and jerk my eyes up to his, expecting him to look angry at the invasion of his space, like he did when I went into his room. But instead, his features twist into something panicked and pained. He shoves backward, sending the stool he was sitting on toppling to the floor, and strides out of the room.

I stare after him, my hand still hovering in the air as I blink in shock.

What the hell?

Every time I think I've found solid footing with these men, they remind me all over again how deep in over my head I am.

RILEY

THE FOOD LOGAN made for me sits like a lump of lead in my stomach, weighing me down and making it impossible to move. I have no idea how the casual, relaxed atmosphere in the kitchen changed so quickly, and I'm kicking myself for ruining what had been a nice moment... although I still have no idea what happened.

When it becomes clear that Logan isn't coming back, I make myself get up, automatically starting to tidy up the kitchen and put away the rest of the food he left out before I realize how fucking stupid that is. I don't know where anything goes, and Logan's already made it perfectly clear that he hates when people touch his shit.

So I leave everything out on the counter where he left it.

I don't run into anyone else when I leave the kitchen, but I'm not sure I'm up for the whiplash that Maddoc and Logan often give me, so I decide to hole up in my room until one of them gives me a reason to leave it.

I wish like hell that the reason would turn out to be Chloe being freed, but wishes are about as likely to work out for me as breakfast with Logan did, and it doesn't surprise me that I don't hear any big rescue plans from the men for the rest of the day, even though we now know exactly where to find my sister.

"Stay strong, little sis," I mutter quietly, resting my forehead on the cool glass of the window in my room as the

sky starts to darken later that night. “Just a little while longer. We’ll see each other again soon.”

I miss her so fucking much. I’m scared for her, of course, and it guts me that I haven’t been able to protect her well enough. But, maybe selfishly, I also *miss* her. I miss joking around and being with family and just... feeling normal.

I sigh, turning away from the window, and decide to brave the kitchen again and find something to eat. It’s been hours, all damn day, since I stuffed myself on Logan’s gourmet spread, and at least being hungry is a problem I can do something about.

I’m still feeling wary of running into any of the guys as I venture downstairs, so of course when I pass the living room one of them is there.

Dante.

He looks up, a tumbler of what looks like whiskey in his hand, and I bite my lip when I see how warm his eyes get.

I nod in greeting but keep walking toward the kitchen. I came down for food, not company, and with some papers spread out next to him, he looks like he’s working on something anyway.

“Hey, princess,” he says before I’ve taken more than a step or two. “Don’t go.”

I cross my arms over my chest, stopping where I am. “Why not?”

He cocks his head to the side like he’s thinking, then shrugs and holds up a bottle of amber liquid. “I’ve got whiskey.”

A shot of heat goes through me as I’m reminded of the first time we met, but I wave away the offer. “I haven’t eaten anything since this morning. It would probably be a bad idea to drink on an empty stomach.”

“Probably,” he agrees with a wink, beckoning me closer. “But there’s one thing you forgot.”

“What?” I ask, taking the bait and joining him in the living room.

He grins. “You’re really good at bad ideas.”

I laugh in spite of myself as I come to a stop in front of the couch. Fucking Dante. He’s bad for me in all the best ways.

He chuckles, looking a bit smug at having gotten a reaction out of me, but when he reaches for a second glass and looks up at me, his face goes serious in a way that tugs at the most vulnerable parts of me. “Rough night last night. How are you doing?”

“I’m fine,” I say quickly, both loving and hating that he asked.

He gives me a long look, then chuckles again as he pours, shaking his head. “I know you are. That’s what’s fucking us all up.”

He hands me the glass, and although I probably shouldn’t take it, the smoky, spicy scent is too good to resist. My nerves and emotions are less keyed up than they were yesterday, but I could still use a drink.

“What are you talking about?” I ask. “What’s fucking you all up?”

He shakes his head again, topping up his own glass, and I smack his shoulder when it looks like that’s the only answer he plans on giving me.

“Dante, I’m serious. What do you mean?”

“You’ve got an indomitable spirit,” he finally says, pushing aside the paperwork and tugging me down onto the couch next to him.

I hiss when the pressure on my belted ass lights it up, squirming a little at the feeling. Dante turns toward me, running a calloused finger down the curve of my cheek.

“I saw it from the first moment I met you, princess,” he murmurs. “And it’s fucking incredible. Me and my brothers, we’re used to breaking things. Hell, we kinda like it sometimes, especially Madd. But you? You just won’t break.”

My throat gets tight, and I have to look away. I don't trust this man to have my best interests at heart, but I do trust him to be honest. He's never promised more than he's delivered, and if he thinks I'm strong...

Well, I know I am. I have to be.

But sometimes, it really, really helps to hear it from someone else too.

"Drink up," he says, tapping my glass with his and then downing his whiskey in one gulp.

I follow suit, and he immediately pours us both another.

"Where is everyone?" I ask, twisting the glass in my hand. I'm not sure I should drink too much if it means losing my edge when I need to stay on guard.

"Out," Dante says, lounging back, one arm spread out along the back of the couch.

I roll my eyes. "Is that your way of telling me it's not my business?"

He chuckles. "Nah, it's just true. They're out. Taking care of shit. It's just you and me."

"So basically, you've been left behind to babysit?" I ask, raising an eyebrow.

He grins without answering, and I snort back a laugh, looking away again before the piercing green of his eyes can suck me in.

I take another drink, actually tasting it this time. It's good, much better than the bottle we shared back at Club M, and when I tell Dante so, he grins.

"I like nice things every once in a while," he says, his eyes heating up as I take another sip and savor it. He lets that vibrant green gaze of his drift lazily down to my mouth, then lower, watching my throat as I swallow.

"That shit was stupid at the club last night," he murmurs gently.

I look away. "I know."

“Coulda gone really bad.”

I glare at him, the concern in his voice threatening all that inner strength he was just praising. “I *know*. I just... I saw someone grab Chloe. What did you expect? I can’t just let that happen.”

Dante’s big hand wraps around the back of my neck, squeezing just enough to ground me against the wave of emotions rising up inside me. “Breathe, princess. I get it. But it was still stupid, and you can’t be. Not around all of this. Not if you’re gonna survive it.”

The gangs, he means. This life. This world. And he’s right, but that’s the whole problem.

I was never supposed to let Chloe near them.

I was supposed to protect her.

“I just snapped,” I admit, squeezing my eyes closed as memories slam into me. Not just of last night, but of the first time I ever saw her, looking no bigger than a pink-wrapped burrito when they brought her home from the hospital. Tiny, perfect, and as fragile-looking as the delicate set of china our mom used to have before Frank broke it.

“You love the fuck out of her,” Dante notes, giving the back of my neck one more reassuring squeeze before sitting back. “Anyone can see that.”

I sigh, opening my eyes. “She’s my best friend. She just turned eighteen. I’m seven years older than her, so maybe it sounds weird that we’re so close, but we’ve always been that way. Maybe because it’s always been just the two of us.”

“How old were you when your mom died?”

“Ten. Chloe was three. Too young to understand what any of it meant, really.” I clear my throat. “I’d always looked out for her, but from that point on, I was part mother, part sister to her. I tried to live up to what our mom would’ve done, but I don’t know if I ever succeeded in that.”

I finish off my whiskey in a single swallow before holding out my glass for more. Dante obliges, and I take another sip

before continuing.

“There was this old movie our mom was obsessed with for some reason,” I say, deciding to focus on a happier memory. “We had it on DVD when we were kids, and she’d watch it over and over and over. *Whip It*. Have you seen it? It’s about roller derby.”

“Don’t think so. Should I?”

“No, it doesn’t matter,” I say, grinning at the interest that lights in his eyes. “It’s not even that good. But still, Chloe and I must have watched it a million times when we were kids.” I flip my hair and lisp like Maggie Mayhem. “Put some skates on. Be your own hero.”

He gives me a blank look at the quote, and I roll my eyes at him.

“So after I started stripping and actually had a little money,” I go on, “I bought us each a pair of roller skates at this secondhand shop over on Miller and Tenth.”

Dante nods. “Seventeenth Street territory.”

I shrug. I’ve never heard of them, but I assume he means another gang. “Anyway, the first time we try out our new skates, Chloe goes all Babe Ruthless, bites it hard, and knocks out her front tooth.”

He winces, and I don’t blame him. There was blood. *So much blood.*

“So, that sucked,” I say, which makes him laugh, a deep, warm sound that makes my stomach flutter. “But then, when I take her in to get it fixed, they give her those drugs they use for wisdom teeth, you know?”

“I’ve seen some videos,” he says, arching a brow. “Did she think there was a zombie apocalypse? Decide she was a unicorn?”

I grin. “Nope. We were both superheroes, and she was totally paranoid that someone would find out my secret identity since I’d forgotten my mask. Every time one of the

nurses came into the room to check on her, she'd put her hand in front of my face to try to hide me.”

“What about her? Didn't she need a mask?”

I shake my head, smiling at the memory. “Nope. Her superpower was going invisible.”

His brow crinkles as he considers that. “But then wouldn't they have seen through her?”

“I know, right? That's what I kept saying!”

He's still chuckling as he takes another sip of his whiskey. “Dad used to date a girl who did roller derby.”

“Are they still together?” I ask, suddenly intensely curious to hear about his life.

“Nah.” He pauses for a moment. “They were always on again, off again. ‘Off’ when Dad got taken out. But when they were on, man...” He grins, skimming right over the part where I'm pretty sure he just told me his father was murdered. “We used to have some fun. She was a wildcat. No fear at all, and she could talk him into taking us to the craziest places.”

He goes on, relaxed and easy, sharing a few lighthearted stories that have me smiling. But when he winds down, I can't stop myself from asking the question that's been buzzing in the back of my mind ever since he mentioned his father.

“How old were you when your dad died?”

His eyes go flat, and he finishes off the last half inch of whiskey in his glass before refilling it. “Fourteen,” he says after a minute.

I guess that's all he wants to give me, so I'm not sure why I don't just leave it alone. “Was it just the two of you, then?”

He's never mentioned his mother.

Dante nods, then takes a deep swallow of whiskey.

I wonder what he did once he was on his own, if he ever saw the roller derby woman again, how he took care of himself. But what I end up asking is, “How did he die?”

He finishes off his drink again, then stares into the empty glass, a storm cloud passing over his face.

Fuck. My stomach clenches with nerves, but it's not the same as this morning, with Logan. I'm not as unnerved by Dante as I am by Logan, but I wouldn't be at all surprised if he picked up and left just like Logan did, now that I've crossed over into something that's obviously too personal.

And maybe it would be better for both of us if he did, but... I don't want that.

I chew my lip, grasping for something to say to get us back into the easy-going mood I just ruined.

Before I can come up with anything, he sighs, then looks up at me with a wry grin. "Need a refill?"

"Yup." I shoot the rest of my whiskey, almost choking on the quick burn, and hold out my glass.

He laughs, pours us each another, then leans back, kicking out his legs as the tension in his face eases and his charming smile returns. "Tell me more about your sister. She as tough as you?"

"I made sure she doesn't have to be," I say, pushing away thoughts of how that might not be true anymore.

"Yeah? And how did you go about that?" Dante asks. He leans a little closer, twisting a lock of my blue and purple hair around his finger.

"She used to get bullied a little in high school," I say, plucking a random story out of my memory. "She didn't want to tell me about it at first, but once I found out..."

"Let me guess." He smirks. "You showed up and kicked the mean girls' asses for her."

I scoff. "*Girls?* Please. It was this prick who thought he was a bigshot because he was captain of the wrestling team."

Dante laughs. "Twice as big as you and twice as mean?"

"No one's twice as mean," I say, cocking a challenging eyebrow at him.

“I dunno, princess.” His voice drops to a low burn, and he tugs gently on the strand of hair he’s still holding, “You seem pretty sweet to me.”

“Don’t fool yourself.” I lick my lips, my cheeks suddenly feeling warm as something flutters in my stomach. The way he’s looking at me reminds me too much of the first night we met, and I look away before he can read those thoughts on my face.

“I think you should cut me off,” I murmur, swirling the remaining whiskey in my glass before emptying it.

“Sure,” Dante says easily. “Whatever you say.”

He eases the glass out of my hands, brushing his thumb over my lower lip to catch the last drop. He tugs on my hair again, and I drift toward him, mesmerized by the lazy curve of his lips as he smiles at me with hooded eyes.

“I fucking love this color,” he murmurs, smoothing the long blue strand he’s been playing with down over my chest, then reaching up to brush a purple one away from my face.

He lets his hand linger on my cheek, and I lean into it without thinking.

“Me too,” I say, although I’m not talking about my hair. “I’ve always liked green.”

Those gorgeous emerald eyes crinkle at the edges as his smile grows, the vibrant color sparkling. Pulling me in even deeper.

“Yeah?” His voice turns husky as the energy between us shifts.

“Yeah,” I whisper, my heart stuttering.

I really shouldn’t have had so much whiskey. It’s broken down too many of my walls.

I’m too open.

He sees too much.

But right now, I really don’t care.

RILEY

FOR A MOMENT, it feels like time stands still, something brewing between us that feels even more intoxicating than the whiskey.

“Riley,” Dante says softly, his hand still cupping my cheek.

My pulse speeds up. I don’t hate it when he calls me “princess,” but for some reason hearing him say my name—having it sound real and raw and full of something that sounds a lot like the same craving I’m feeling—has me nodding, even though it wasn’t a question.

“Fuck,” I whisper, the feeling suddenly overwhelming me.

I squeeze my eyes closed, then pop them right back open when he runs a thumb over my lips, making them tingle.

“You okay?” he rumbles.

I nod, even though I’m not sure if it’s true. It’s risky to let myself feel anything for this man, risky to want things I shouldn’t have. But I can’t stop.

I turn my head, keeping my eyes locked on Dante’s, and kiss his palm where it still cups my cheek.

He smiles. Not the charming, sexy one that pulled me in from the first night I met him, but something more real.

My stomach swoops at the sight of it.

Is that what this is? Real? Because I’m used to being wanted by people who don’t even know me. I’m used to men

viewing me as a conquest or an object. But I'm not used to the way Dante's looking at me. Like he really sees me. Like he wants *all* of me.

And that's new for me. I'm not used to being desired as a whole person.

I lean toward him without meaning to, drawn closer like a moth to a flame.

"Kiss me," I whisper even though it would be smarter, safer, to pull away.

"Is that what you want right now?" Dante teases softly, sliding his hand down to wrap around the front of my throat.

He tips my head back, his lips hovering just over mine and those gorgeous green eyes so close they're mesmerizing.

He's giving me an opening, I realize. A last chance to get up, leave the room, and head back upstairs before my already muddled feelings get even more confused.

But I can't.

I'm too drawn to him. Too intoxicated by the way he's looking at me with something in his eyes I've never seen before, not even the night we fucked.

But he still hasn't kissed me. He's waiting for me to say yes, looking at me like *no* man ever has before, and even knowing what he really is and the kind of darkness that lives inside him, I want him anyway.

If I'm honest, I think I want him *because* of all that.

For once, it's not recklessness or the need to escape my shitty reality and find a momentary release that drives me. It's that I do know who Dante is, at least in part, and it calls to something inside me that I can barely admit exists.

So I lean forward, closing the gap he's left between us, and press our lips together.

Dante groans, low and hungry. Then he takes control and deepens the kiss, his free hand tangling in the back of my hair as he sweeps his tongue through my mouth like he means it. I

gasp as the simmering heat inside me blooms into something all-consuming and urgent.

“You’re fucking perfect,” he mutters, hauling me onto his lap.

I go eagerly, throwing my knee over his thighs when he grabs my ass and urges me to straddle him. He’s big in all the right places, and even with the heat of his hands bringing the welts on my ass back to life, there’s nowhere else I want to be.

“Kiss me,” I repeat, delving my hands into his hair and attacking his mouth again when the bossy order makes him smile.

His hands slowly run up and down the backs of my thighs, and I feel it in every nerve ending as he settles them back on my ass and pulls me against him.

“Fuck,” I gasp, ripping my mouth away from his as the heat of his clothed cock presses against me.

He groans, rocking his hips, and it’s *almost* everything I need. His shaft is thick and hard and throbbing in time with my own heartbeat, rubbing back and forth with an insistent pressure right where I need it, but with too fucking many layers of fabric in the way.

“Dante,” I start again, panting as I clutch his wide shoulders. “I need...”

“I’ve got you,” he promises, fisting my hair.

The sharp sting in my scalp is electric, and when he tilts my head to the side and drags his tongue up the side of my neck, the lethal combination sends a full-body shiver through me, pleasure tightening like a corkscrew in my core. He grabs my ass again and starts dragging me up and down his cock, and the hot pressure of his cock against my clit makes me moan.

“Fuck, princess,” he groans, pulsing against me through the barrier of our clothes. “You feel so fucking good. Like this hot little pussy was made just for me.”

“Then take it,” I pant shamelessly, rocking against him.

He chuckles, low and throaty, his fingers digging into me to control the pace. “I plan to, but damn, you’re so gorgeous like this. Look at you. Hungry for it, aren’t you, sweetheart?”

I’m fucking starving for it. Not just the sex, but all of it. The way his hands are controlling but his voice is light and easy. The laughter that mixes with the heat in his eyes. *Everything.*

“Thought so,” Dante murmurs, tilting me forward as he starts to move my body against his a little faster. A little harder. “Come apart for me now.”

I gasp, the tingling heat of an impending orgasm spreading from my pussy outward as I writhe against him, desperate for more friction. For everything he can give me.

“Fuck, that’s it,” he grunts, thrusting hard against my clit and holding me there, grinding against me as he eggs me on. “Let me see what my cock does to you. Let me hear it. I want you nice and wet so I can take you hard. Been dreaming of your sweet pussy ever since you gave me that first taste at the club. Now scream for me again, just like you did before. Come on now.”

He pumps against me once, twice, pushing his hips up in short, shallow, rapid-fire thrusts that set me on fire. The friction is almost too much with our clothes in the way, but it’s also fucking perfect.

Almost as perfect as the way he watches me as I start to come apart for him, his face flushed with arousal and eyes heavy-lidded with lust, as if he’s getting off on getting *me* off.

It’s one of the hottest things I’ve ever seen, and between one breath and the next, I shatter. I come so hard it feels like my head spins.

The room tilts around me, and it takes me a second to realize that it’s not just in my mind. Dante curses under his breath as he shoots to his feet, one hand still supporting my ass as I shudder through my climax and the other splayed across my back to hold me against him.

He turns around and tosses me back down on the couch, pushing me flat as he shoves my clothes out of the way. A low sound almost like a growl spills from his lips as he trails hot, open-mouthed kisses up my stomach, laving my breasts with his tongue before sucking a trail of possessive marks along my throat. I gasp, the heat from his mouth shooting straight down to my clit.

“So fucking sweet,” he murmurs, kissing my collarbone as he nips at my earlobe. “You taste like the kind of thing I could get addicted to, wild thing.”

He pulls my shirt over my head and tosses it aside, then he’s kissing me again. His mouth is ravenous on mine as he covers my body with his, his teeth grazing down my neck to my chest. Bracing himself with one hand on the back of the couch, he shoves the other down my pants, burying his fingers in my still-throbbing pussy.

“*Dante!*” I cry out, almost jackknifing upright at the overload of sensation.

But I can’t. His weight holds me down, and he doesn’t let up.

He feels too good. It’s too much, my clit so sensitive that it’s throbbing already. I can’t stop squirming beneath him, and he groans, backing off the minute I start to clutch at him and arch into his touch.

“Easy, princess,” he grits out, palming himself through his jeans with his other hand as he goes up onto his knees. “You don’t want this to be over too soon, do you? I’m gonna take care of you, give you every fuckin’ thing you need. But not yet.”

He’s staring down at me like I’m a meal he’s been starving for, and it looks like his cock is going to rip its way right out of his pants. I half expect him to straddle my face and shove it down my throat. Hell, I *want* him to. But when I reach for his zipper, he gives me a heated smile and pins my wrists together.

“I said not yet.”

I think about fighting him on that, but then he lowers himself over me again and takes one of my nipples in his mouth, sucking hard, and I quit thinking about anything at all. He works his way down my body, tormenting me as he goes.

“Goddamn. I need to taste you,” he mutters against my skin, his voice muffled as he keeps feasting on me as he speaks. With deft fingers, he drags my pants off, then sits back and gazes down at me, looking his fill.

My stomach flutters as I lie still under his scrutiny, which makes no damn sense. I’m a stripper. I’m used to being ogled.

But not like this.

“You’re so damn beautiful,” he murmurs, finally touching me again. He lifts one leg and kisses my ankle, nipping at the skin and making me squirm and laugh at the tickling sensation.

He smiles at me, then grips my legs tight and spreads them wide. “Be still.”

“Bossy fucker,” I say, biting my lip to hold back my smile. I squirm a little more, and he pins me down, still holding me open for him.

“You’ll know when I’m being bossy,” he shoots back. “And you’ll fucking love it.”

It’s the last thing he says before he drops his head between my legs, and the snarky comment I was about to make turns into a low moan.

His mouth is hot, hungry, and relentless. His jaw is rough with end of day stubble, and the contrast between that against my inner thighs and the smooth heat of his tongue, the powerful suction on my clit as he licks and sucks at me, has me writhing beneath him as I race hard toward another release.

“Fuck, Dante, fuck,” I gasp, and he pins me down and looks up at me with wicked fire in his gaze, switching to slow, languid licks that have me shuddering.

He smiles when he feels the tremors in my muscles. “You’re gonna come for me again.”

“Please,” I whisper, trying to lift my hips to grind against his tongue.

He holds me firmly in place, because he really is a bossy fucker. Then he dives back in like he’s trying to consume me whole.

When my second orgasm hits, it’s so much more intense than the first. He sucks hard on my clit, drawing out and heightening the sensations until it almost hurts. My hips buck up toward his face, somehow hungry for *more* even as the pleasure of it threatens to overwhelm me. His fingers dig in tighter as he holds my hips, moving with me so that the contact between us never breaks.

“That’s it, princess,” he growls, his voice pure sex. He drags his tongue back and forth over my sensitive flesh as I slowly start to come down, breathing me in with a shudder of his own. “Fuck, you really are addictive. Now give me one more.”

“More?” I repeat, still floating on the afterglow as he raises his head to look at me. My brain feels like mush, and I don’t even try to figure out what he means. I feel too good.

Then he dips down again, big hands pinning my thighs apart, and puts that skillful mouth back on my clit.

My eyes fly wide as I gasp. “Fuck!”

“You taste so incredible when you’re coming all over my face,” he murmurs, nipping at my flesh between words. “Do it again.”

“I can’t.”

“You will,” he says with a cocky grin. “For me.”

As if determined to prove that he knows my body better than I do, he feasts on me, pushing me past the point of oversensitivity, driving me higher and higher. I’m clutching at his head, practically crying from the intensity of his single-minded focus on forcing another orgasm out of me.

When it hits, it comes from somewhere so deep and powerful that for a second, I’m sure he really has wrecked me.

I'm still trembling from the force of it when he surges up and crushes his lips to mine again.

I taste myself on him, and suddenly, I'm the one who feels addicted.

"I could do that all fucking night," he murmurs against my lips. "But damn, I need to be inside you."

"God, yes," I whimper, a slow pulse of arousal moving through me as my exhausted body perks up at the thought of being filled up by him. "Fuck. Please."

Dante groans, breathing deeply, then sits back and shoves his pants down, his thick cock jutting forward the minute it's freed. He starts to stroke it, watching me intently, then digs a condom out of his wallet.

"Get me ready," he says, passing it to me as he watches me with a dominant, hungry look.

I sit up a little, ripping it open and reaching for him. Fuck, I love his cock. Even better is the way he reacts when I touch it. His breath hisses out as I wrap my hand around the shaft and the muscles in his thighs go tense, standing out in stark definition, when I swipe my thumb over the leaking slit.

"Princess," he groans, his voice strained with need. "Don't tease me right now."

I look up and meet his eyes as I roll the condom down. His eyelids droop, and he shudders under the firm slide of my hand. It's hot as hell, but I don't get the chance to disobey him by teasing him more than that, because the second I've got him sheathed, he presses me back down on the couch and drapes his body over mine.

"Need you," he mutters. "I've been dreaming about your perfect little pussy since the first time I was inside you. Did it miss me? Did it miss my cock?"

"Yes," I breathe, not even caring that it might sound a little pathetic to admit that. Because no one has ever fucked me like Dante has, and right now, I don't care if he knows it.

Satisfaction burns in his eyes, and then he's lining his cock up and shoving himself balls deep inside me. The sudden intrusion punches an obscene sound out of my lips, and Dante's grin turns positively feral.

"That's right. Let me hear you. I fucking love it when you get loud."

Even after three orgasms, his size is overwhelming, but I'm wet enough that there's no resistance. My pussy stretches around him, and Dante doesn't give me any time to adjust. He presses my knees up to my chest, holding me exactly where he wants me, and starts fucking me with hard, demanding strokes, his eyes locked onto mine in a way that's almost as overwhelming as his cock.

"Fuck, you're tight. Hugging me like a glove. Your pussy feels as good as it tastes, so soft and wet it's like heaven. I could fuck you forever."

"Dante!" I gasp, digging my nails into his shoulders as his hips collide with mine over and over. There's not a single shred of the usual laid-back charm in his expression now. Just intensity and ownership and something primal that makes every stroke feel like he's trying to claim me.

A few minutes ago, I didn't think there was any way I could come again, but the feeling of having him inside me lights up a whole different set of nerve-endings, and as I clench around him, hot pleasure starts to build low in my belly, the warning sign of an impending orgasm.

I don't fight it, letting that heat spread outward slowly, my body rocking beneath his on the couch every time he bottoms out inside me. The slapping sound of skin on skin fills the living room, punctuated by the inarticulate noises coming from each of us.

He drops his head to kiss me, his tongue plunging into my mouth in a mirror of what his cock is doing, and as I kiss him back with everything I have, the bubble of pleasure breaks.

I squeeze my eyes closed, my face contorting and my nails raking his back as I come hard.

“Fucking beautiful. That’s it. Damn, princess, you were made for this,” Dante grunts as he fucks me through it. “Now look at me.”

I drag my eyelids open, feeling well and truly wrecked, and he pulls out and slips the condom off, his eyes burning right through me.

He leans over me, bracing himself with one hand next to my head, and jerks himself off hard and fast. “Watch what you do to me. See how fucking crazy you make me. Shit, Riley. *Fuck.*”

He’s so close that I can feel the movement of his hand as he works himself, the wet tip of his cock brushing my stomach with every stroke. The feeling of it lights me on fire, and I reach up and tunnel my fingers through his hair, dragging his face down toward mine, hungry in a way I’ve never felt before.

“Fuck,” Dante grunts one more time, hot ropes splattering across my core and lower belly as his lips meet mine in a fevered kiss. His hand keeps pumping between us as he milks out the last of his cum, marking me with it.

When he finally releases his cock, he drags his fingers through the mess he made, smearing his release over my pussy like he’s trying to rub it in. Then he settles a little more of his weight on me, his cum-slicked hand gently cupping my hip and the other cradling my face as he keeps kissing me, both of us trying to catch our breath.

I don’t know how long we stay like that, but it’s long enough that our kisses start to shift from hot and intense to slow and lazy, our lips melting together as our tongues explore and taste.

Finally, Dante presses a light kiss to my nose, then groans softly and draws back from me.

“Fuck, that was good...” He trails off.

“But?” I prompt, because I definitely hear one coming.

I let him help me up, pretty sure my bones are liquefied, and he scrubs a hand over his face to reveal a rueful smile.

“But I wasn’t supposed to do that. Madd laid it out for us when we first brought you here. None of us are supposed to have sex with you.”

My mouth falls open, the hazy afterglow I was enjoying burned away by a surge of emotion. Several emotions, actually, all so jumbled together it’s hard to pick them apart.

Seeing how Chloe is being treated by West Point really drove home how heartless these gangs can be, and I can’t deny that there’s some relief buried in the mix. From the beginning, when Maddoc first made me strip in front of them, part of me assumed they’d end up using me for sex.

So I’m relieved to know that sexual favors were never part of their plan for me. But at the same time, it still pisses me off to hear that they were talking about me behind my back like that. Making a deal—or, from the sound of it, Maddoc laying down the law—as if it was a given to them that I don’t have a choice in the matter myself.

But I do.

I chose this with Dante.

This wasn’t about making the Reapers happy or bargaining for my sister’s freedom, this was about the two of us. Or, at least, it felt that way to me.

I blink, my jaw working as I stare down at the floor.

“Hey now, it’s okay, princess. Look at me,” Dante says, tipping my chin up.

I do, and whatever it is that he reads on my face, it makes his eyes turn soft and gentle as he cups my cheek again.

“Madd’s just doing his job. He figured sex would break down our guard too much. Make us sloppy and shit, and none of us can afford that.”

I want to ask him why he did it then, and if he thinks Maddoc is right. Is he worried that he’ll get sloppy in his duties as a Reaper now? Let his guard down around me?

I want to ask whether the connection I thought I felt between us—hell, that I still feel—is real or not.

But I don't.

Instead, I push down the emotions I'm not sure I should even be feeling for this man and fix a wry smile on my face. "Don't worry, I won't tell."

Dante chuckles. "I'm not worried."

A beat of silence falls between us, and it feels like it's full of all the things neither of us is willing to say right now. I drag my lip through my teeth, glancing in the direction of the garage. We'd probably hear some noises that would warn us before either Logan or Maddoc came in, but I have no idea when they're planning to be back, and it's probably not a good idea to push it.

"I should, um, get upstairs."

"Yeah, you probably should," Dante murmurs, tugging me closer. "Because if you don't, I'm gonna be tempted to throw you back down on this couch and see what your pussy tastes like when it's covered in my cum."

He grins when I shiver at his words, then nips at my lip before he releases me and stands up. He grabs my scattered clothes from the floor and hands them to me. They're all wadded and tangled up, and I'm still sticky with cum, so I decide I'll just bring them upstairs and get dressed up there.

"Thanks," I tell Dante, holding my clothes to my chest as I watch him tug his pants up. "For the whiskey. And the conversation. And... well, everything."

He winks. "I'm not lying one bit when I say it was my pleasure, princess."

I nod and turn to leave, and he slaps my ass as I go. It's not hard, but the skin is still tender and sensitive, and the sudden sting is enough to make me gasp. Arousal drips down my thigh as my cheeks burn, and I glare at Dante over my shoulder.

He just smirks, heat glinting in his eyes. "Fucking beautiful. Red is definitely your color."

My lips twitch, and I have to work to keep myself from smiling as I slip out of the room and head up the stairs.

RILEY

I SLIP into the bathroom upstairs and lock the door behind me, surprised when I notice my face in the mirror. My cheeks are still rosy and pink, both from the slap Dante gave me as a parting gift and from the sex and countless orgasms. The smile I was hiding from him breaks across my face, the red nose ring he gave me flashing in the light.

God, I really needed that. Sex has always been one of the best ways for me to destress and blow off steam, but sex with Dante is next level. Even if the shit he said afterward threw me for a loop, I can't really regret what we did.

It almost makes me want to skip the shower I came in here for, to keep the feel and smell of Dante on me a little longer as a reminder of tonight. The world's been so shitty lately, and being with him felt like the antidote to everything bad.

Trying to hold on to those feelings would be stupid, though, so I turn away from the mirror and flip the water on, adjusting the handle until it's a decent temperature.

I shower quickly, letting the water rinse off the drying cum on my stomach and between my legs, then washing my hair as steam fills the bathroom.

I hear a door slam as I'm heading back to my bedroom with a towel wrapped around me, followed by the rumble of voices downstairs.

Dante didn't tell me where Maddoc and Logan were tonight, but they're clearly home now, so I toss the towel on

the bed and quickly dress in some of the new clothes Dante picked out for me.

I'm half tempted to just call it a night. With the whiskey still lingering in my system and my muscles loose and relaxed from being fucked into a state of bliss by Dante, I could probably crawl into bed and be asleep in less than five minutes. And honestly, I'm not sure I'm ready to look Maddoc in the eye after last night, especially since I'm pretty sure he knows how his punishment affected me. And whatever fragile peace I built with Logan this morning got blown up when I asked him about his scar, so I'm not really keen on dealing with him right now either.

But then the voices downstairs become more intense and urgent.

I can't make out any actual words, but I can tell by the way the men are speaking that something is up.

That settles that.

Abandoning the idea of bed, I head out into the hall instead, curious to know what's going on.

They're all gathered in the living room when I get downstairs, and my footsteps slow as I enter. There's a tense sort of energy in the air, and it occurs to me that maybe the raised voices were because they realized that Dante just fucked me in this room.

Shit. Maybe I shouldn't have come down.

But Dante shoots me a look, giving a subtle shake of his head before shifting his focus back to Maddoc.

"So you got something from Club Prestige?" he asks, resuming the conversation they were having when I walked in.

"Yes, we did," Logan says, looking more animated than usual. He dips his chin my way and adds, "Thanks to her."

"What?" I glance between them, my heart lurching in my chest. "What are you talking about?"

Logan lifts one shoulder. "Your distraction came in handy."

“My distraction?” I blink in confusion, and then my stomach drops. “You mean me trying to help Chloe? Did you... plan that? Did you know she would be there?”

“No.” The blond man shakes his head, looking supremely irritated by that fact. Being caught unawares by something probably goes against that manic need for control he seems to have. “But the commotion you caused turned out to be useful. When everyone rushed over to you, it gave me an opening to plant a bug under the table Austin was sitting at without anyone noticing. I’ve been monitoring it ever since, and—”

“You got something?” I blurt, hope rising hard and fast. “Something about Chloe?”

Logan looks irritated by the interruption, but I’m too excited to let his demeanor scare me.

I glance at Dante again without meaning to, and he smiles at me. “You did good, princess.”

I start to smile back before something occurs to me, and I turn to Maddoc, narrowing my eyes. “Wait a minute. You knew Logan planted the bug while I was trying to help my sister?”

“Of course I knew,” he says calmly, staring me down.

My ass burns, and not metaphorically. “And what was your plan to get the bug planted if I hadn’t caused that commotion?”

He shrugs one shoulder, his gaze hooded. “We would have improvised. Logan is very good at what he does.”

“So basically, you didn’t have a plan.”

That finally gets a rise out of him. “Our *plan* was to confront McKenna, give him a chance to deescalate, assume he fucking wouldn’t, and then make sure we used the opportunity to install our surveillance device.”

I cross my arms over my chest, matching him glare for glare. “So basically, you punished me for something that turned out to be useful. How the fuck is that fair?”

“What you did was risky. It could have gotten you killed.” He shakes his head, slicing his hand through the air as he adds, “It could’ve gotten us *all* killed. You needed to learn a lesson about stepping out of line like that.”

His words catch me off guard. I knew he was pissed at me for putting his people in danger, but from what he just said, it sounds like he was worried about *me* being in danger too. Is that true? Would he really have cared if something had happened to me?

The comeback I was ready to throw in his face dies on my lips, and instead, I just end up staring at him in silence.

“It’s all right, princess,” Dante says, breaking the moment between us. “Logan got something good.”

With effort, I drag my gaze away from Maddoc’s harshly beautiful features. “What is it?” I ask. “What did Logan get?”

“Tell her, brother,” Dante says, pride glinting in his eyes as he jerks his chin.

Logan nods sharply. “There’s a deal going down between West Point and Capside. The drop has been set up for tomorrow night.”

“Capside?”

I’ve never heard of them, although that doesn’t mean much.

“Another crew,” Dante informs me.

“Drug dealers,” Logan adds, his pale blue eyes boring into mine. “Dangerous ones.”

I rub my hands on my thighs, my palms suddenly feeling sweaty. I assume a lot of gangs deal in drugs, and I figure it’s a given that they’re dangerous, but something about the way they’re talking about Capside puts me on edge.

I lick my lips. “And? How is this useful? Are they your enemies too?”

Maddoc scoffs. “This is war. Everyone is an enemy. Even our allies.”

I don't acknowledge what he said. I can't. Logan hasn't broken eye contact, and I realize that's why I'm on edge. Usually, his gaze is unnervingly blank, but this time, if I didn't know better, I'd almost think it holds a hint of pity.

"How is it useful?" I ask again, my voice slightly raspy as my throat goes tight. I need to know, but I'm not sure I want to hear the answer.

"Capside is dangerous," he repeats. "And West Point is planning to send Chloe in to do the drop."

RILEY

MY HEART ALMOST STOPS.

“Chloe?” I repeat, my lips feeling numb as they form the word. “But she can’t... she’s not... they can’t do that.”

“They are,” Maddoc says calmly.

I shake my head in instinctive denial, fear for my sister flooding my chest.

“You fucking asshole!” I blurt, turning suddenly and shoving at Maddoc’s chest. “Why didn’t you tell me about the plan to plant the bug before we went to the club? I would’ve gotten her out of there if I’d known they were going to use her for something like this. I could’ve—”

“What? Taken a bullet in the back of the head and gotten her killed too?” he interrupts, speaking over me. “We’ve been over this before, butterfly. Or don’t you remember?”

“I know it sucks to hear, princess,” Dante says more gently, laying a hand on my arm. “But this is a good thing.”

“How is it good?” I ask, my voice cracking.

“Because it’s our best chance to get Chloe out. *Without* getting you or her shot.” He rubs his thumb back and forth over my arm. “We know where and when the drop is happening, and she’ll either be on her own or have limited backup. And ruining the drop will fuck with West Point’s business, not to mention their relationship with Capside. It’ll be a win-win. We get to weaken McKenna’s organization and

get them off our back for a bit while they deal with that shit show, and—”

“I’ll get Chloe back,” I whisper, a vise closing around my chest. I shake my head, panic threatening to swamp me. “But that only works if she doesn’t get hurt, and Logan said this other gang is ruthless.”

Logan makes a small sound, but when I look at him, his face is blank.

Dante takes hold of my chin and turns my face back toward him. “Trust us.”

Do I trust them? Can I, when it comes to something like this?

He chuckles as if he can read every thought in my head, then drops his hand and turns to Maddoc. “Back me up, Madd. This shit is a great opportunity all around, right?”

Maddoc is watching the two of us with slightly narrowed eyes, almost like it bothers him to see the easy, casual way Dante touches me, but at his friend’s words, he nods. “It is. If we play this right, we’ll all get what we want.”

“But it’s—”

“Dangerous?” He cuts me off with a grim smile. “Yeah, it probably will be. But McKenna is gonna send her either way, and like Dante said, this is our best chance of getting her out unscathed. It’s worth the risk.”

“Then I’m going too,” I say immediately.

Maddoc raises one eyebrow. “Going where?”

Dante grins. “Where the fuck do you think, Madd? She doesn’t even know what the plan is, but she’s down for it. Rushing head first into danger for her sister. Our girl knows loyalty, yeah?”

“She’s not ours,” Maddoc says sharply, scowling at him.

Something in the tone of his voice makes me wonder if he has some idea of what happened between me and Dante. I can’t tell if he’s jealous or just pissed that Dante didn’t follow

his rules about not fucking me, but either way, I don't have the mental bandwidth to worry about it right now.

"I can be useful," I insist. "I'll do whatever you tell me to, and I can help keep Chloe calm. She's going to be freaked the fuck out, and she'll have no reason to trust you over West Point unless I'm there."

Maddoc scrubs a hand over his jaw, looking like it pains him to admit that I have a point. But he finally nods. "All right. You can come. But *only* if you do exactly what we say."

My heart leaps, and I straighten up a bit. "So what's the plan?"

He fixes me with a quelling look. "There isn't one yet. We just found out about the drop. We need to do more research before we know exactly what we're dealing with. Logan?"

"I'll start looking into it," Logan says.

Maddoc nods sharply. "Once you've finished your recon, we'll make a solid plan and find a way to use this deal with Capside to our advantage."

"To extract Chloe," I say, wanting that to be clear. It's all well and good for Dante to talk about a win-win, but I need to make sure one of those wins is for me.

I'm not naive. The only advantage I can see for the Reapers when it comes to helping me rescue Chloe is that it will fuck with West Point, but that also means that fucking with West Point will be their main priority, not Chloe's safety.

Maddoc nods, holding my gaze. Something passes through his enigmatic gray eyes, reminding me of the way he looked at me that day in his office when I showed him pictures of Chloe and me, allowing him a glimpse into the most vulnerable, intimate parts of my life.

"To extract Chloe," he repeats softly, and I can hear the promise in his voice.

"Good." I say. Then I clear my throat and add, "Thank you."

"Of course."

He doesn't look away from me, and I wish like hell I could read his thoughts right now. I wish I could know if the warmth I see in his eyes is real.

But I have to believe his promise. He's probably right that this is the best chance to get Chloe out, so it's a risk I need to take.

"I'm going to get started on research," Logan says coolly, stepping away from the little group we've formed.

"Can I help?" I ask, eager to get this part over with so that we can move on to actually *doing* something to free Chloe.

He freezes, his ice-blue eyes cutting toward me as if he's surprised by my offer. He hesitates, his Adam's apple bobbing as he swallows, then he shakes his head. "No. I... I work better alone."

"Okay."

Disappointment fills me, but I nod. I'm not sure how I could've helped anyway, and the idea of being alone with Logan is both thrilling and terrifying—like passing your hand through a flame and seeing if you'll get burned. It probably isn't something I should be adding to my already fucked up emotional state.

Logan's gaze lingers on me for a second longer, then he heads for the stairs and disappears up them. Maddoc strides toward the office near the back of the house a moment later, but Dante stays by my side.

"You good, princess?" he asks once we're alone in the living room.

"Peachy," I tell him with a smile so fake that he busts up laughing.

"You're really selling it," he says, still grinning.

"I'm as good as I can be," I say, opting for honesty this time. He knows me too well by now for him to believe a lie anyway. "I'm worried, and I'm antsy as hell to get this over with. But at the same time, I'm scared of what will happen when we actually do make a move to get Chloe back. Right

now, it's all just possibility and hope... but when it becomes real, what if shit goes bad?"

"Yeah, I get that. The waiting is the worst part. Too much time to imagine all the ways things could go wrong." He purses his lips, then jerks his chin at me. "Come on."

If he thinks we're going to sneak off and fuck again... well, I wouldn't say no. I'm not sure it's a good idea, for a lot of reasons, but it would sure beat sitting up in my room and trying not to let my imagination run wild in the most horrible ways.

"What did I say about trusting me, princess?" he asks when I hesitate.

I shake my head. "Pissing Maddoc off right now could blow my only chance to get Chloe back."

His green eyes warm, and he drops his head a little to meet my eyes. "It'll be okay, I promise. Maddoc gets to decide a lot of shit around here, but not everything. I just want to show you something."

I'm curious in spite of myself, so I follow him upstairs, past my room and past the library where Logan caught me snooping. He opens a door at the end of the hallway that I never got to investigate and leads me up another set of short stairs.

The third floor is a sort of attic space. It's not too fancy, with unfinished walls and exposed beams. Paint spatters decorate the floor, and there are brushes and dozens of tubes of paint set out on a small table against one wall.

It's an art studio.

I blink, then look up at Dante. "This is yours?"

He grins, and I realize I don't need to ask. There are large canvases set up all around the well-lit space, and somehow the abstract paintings... *feel* like him. I'm not even sure how that makes sense, but it's still true.

I wander toward one that might be the view out of my bedroom window if it were distorted through a lens that took

out all recognizable shapes and just left color. The vibrant green is the same as the swath of foliage behind the house, and it reminds me of Dante's eyes.

I run my finger over the thick, uneven paint. "I had no idea you were an artist."

"Nobody is just one thing," he says with a shrug. "Dad raised me to be a hitman, and the Reapers made good use of those skills when I joined up, but that doesn't mean that's all I am."

My fingers go still, my heart picking up speed as he comes up behind me. He's mentioned his father before, and it's clear that he loved him a lot, but the information that his dad raised him to be a hitman is new.

And I'm not sure it's something Dante meant to reveal about himself.

I want to ask more, but I hesitate to draw any attention to the fact that he said it, or to indulge my deepening curiosity to know more about him.

I don't really know where Dante and I stand. It's hard to deny there's a connection between us, but it's so fucking complicated that I'm scared to examine it too closely.

I clear my throat, the silence starting to feel awkward. "There's a lot I don't know about you," I murmur.

He chuckles, resting his hand between my shoulder blades, but doesn't say anything.

Knowing he was raised by a hitman and then followed in those footsteps drives home just how dangerous he is, and the fact that I'm both attracted to and repelled by that danger says things about me that I'm not sure I'm ready to face.

So I focus on the paintings instead. It's easier. And they truly are beautiful.

"Tell me about them," I say, moving to stand in front of a canvas saturated in red so bright that it could almost be mistaken for blood.

“My favorite color,” he says, following me. He takes my hand and rubs it over the ridges and valleys of the swirled paint, mimicking what I did with the green one. “I come up here to paint when I’ve got shit to work out in my head. Helps shut out the noise.”

He leads me to the next canvas, and this one is *all* noise. Noise, but in color. As if he took it out of his head and left it on the canvas.

“I do that too, but with dance,” I say. “Have you always painted?”

“Nah. Not really much of a chance to when I was growing up. I didn’t even know it was a thing. Or like, obviously I knew it was a thing people did, but it didn’t exactly fit in my lifestyle, you know? But I’ve always liked the world better in color.”

He gives me a crooked smile, and it’s so beautiful and *real* that it makes my heart stutter.

“Anyway,” he goes on, “I picked up the painting thing a few years ago, and ever since, it’s helped me unwind when I need it. Process shit, you know?”

He grabs a palette while he’s talking and puts some paints on it. I’ve never been all that artistic, but they look... decadent. Tempting. Thick piles of vibrant color that call to me.

Dante hands me a brush and leads me over to a canvas that already has a painting started on it. Soft strokes in blue and purple jewel tones that remind me of my hair. It’s all color without form, not really looking like anything at all and yet somehow reminding me of the way it felt to have his hands on my body.

“Why did you bring me up here?” I ask, feelings I’ve been avoiding welling up inside me.

“Downstairs, you looked like you needed to process some shit. It seemed like you might need to unwind... again.”

I laugh, that last, cocky word releasing the tension and uncertainty inside me. “Ass.”

He shrugs, grinning at me. “Well, this way won’t get Maddoc’s hackles up. Go on now. Show me what you’ve got.”

I look back at the canvas. “I can’t... this is already yours,” I fumble.

He guides me onto the stool set up in front of the canvas, settling me onto it. Then he takes my hand, the one holding the brush, and touches it to the palette, dipping it into the same purple he’s already used on the canvas.

“Now it’s yours too,” he says, moving my hand to the canvas and smearing the paint there. “I learned a long time ago not to get too attached to anything. It can all be changed or destroyed in a moment. Life is chaos.”

“Yeah, it is,” I say softly, the words striking me in the heart.

I’ve become viscerally aware of that fact recently, and here he is, offering me a way to shape some of the chaos. To process shit, in Dante’s words.

I smile, and he pulls my hand in the other direction, weaving the color in and out of what he’s already put on the canvas.

“Now you,” he says, taking a step back and leaving me with the brush all on my own. “Go ahead, princess. Make your mark.”

I hesitate again, the weight of the brush different without his hand wrapped around mine. But then I quit thinking and let it draw me in, just like I would if I had the chance to get lost in motion and music.

I scrape the purple off on the palette and dip the brush into the red paint—crimson red, *blood* red—and slash the brush across the canvas, making this one small corner of chaos my own.

“Fucking beautiful,” Dante murmurs, and the approval in his voice goes straight to my head.

DANTE

I GRIN as I watch Riley start to paint, not one bit surprised she grabbed the red. It's bold. Violent. Bright. Three of my favorite things.

The color is *her*, and she didn't dab it or make some dainty little line on the canvas. She fucking owned it.

Riley glances back at me, and my cock twitches. Damn, she's sexy. Even here, where the whole fucking room always smells of my art, the scent of her lingers on my skin and reminds me how perfect she felt around my cock.

"More," I tell her, nodding back at the canvas and wishing like hell I could have fucked her bare, with nothing at all between us.

She laughs as she turns back to face the canvas, and the sound does something to me that has me seriously tempted to throw her down right here and claim her on the floor of my studio. I'd love to fuck the stress I saw in her eyes downstairs right out of her system... and get what I need at the same time.

I grin. *Another win-win.*

And yeah, Madd and Logan would hear her scream for me, but part of me likes that idea a hell of a lot.

Riley has the brush hovering over a twining swirl of blue and purple, and I scrub a hand over my face, getting a fucking grip. Now is not the time to push shit with that rule of Madd's, and I know it. Not sure I agree, but I *do* know it.

“Keep going,” I tell her, jerking my chin at the canvas as I move in a little closer.

“I really don’t have any idea what I’m doing,” she says with another laugh that curls around me just like that gorgeous fucking hair of hers did when she was straddling me on the couch.

“Who ever does?” I say with a grin, nudging her shoulder with my hip. “Go on now.”

“You really want me to do this?”

Not sure why, but yeah. I really fucking do.

I tunnel my hand through her hair and wrap my fingers around the back of her neck, enjoying the way her body responds to my touch.

“Maybe this is the blood of the West Point fuckers who took your sister,” I say, indicating the red she used.

Riley stiffens as if her body has just become electrified, her eyes glued to the mark she made. Then she nods.

“Keep painting,” I whisper, heat sliding down my spine as I tighten my grip on the back of her neck. Her breath quickens. “Show me more. Give them what they deserve.”

She grunts like I’ve just punched my cock into her, then brutally slashes the brush across the canvas again. And then again.

“You’re gonna bring them all down,” I murmur, seeing it all unfold as she makes the canvas bleed. “Gonna make those fucking weasels pay for what they took. Avenge the hurt they caused.”

She makes several more vibrant, harsh marks, and I urge her on with my words, completely fucking entranced as I watch her work.

I doubt she’s ever painted before in her life, but I’m not one of those snobby fucking artists who believes someone has to have the right degree or credentials for their self-expression to mean something. What she’s creating is beautiful, because it’s all *her*.

Unrestrained. Passionate. Fierce.

“Fuck,” she whispers as she sets the brush down, breathing almost as hard as she did after she came on my cock.

She sounds almost awed, and I can see why.

It looks like she clawed the shit out of the painting, but I can still see what’s underneath. I’m not sure if I knew I was thinking of her when I started this one, but it’s clear as fucking day now that we’re staring at it together. The waves of her hair. The chaos of her fighting spirit. That vibrant color she spreads in the world, everywhere she goes.

I put all of that on the canvas as a starting place, and now she’s made it her own.

But she’s more than just blood and vengeance.

I slide the brush out of her hand, pressing against her from behind as I bring her fingers down to the palette. I dip them in the blue that reminds me of her hair and press her thumb into the purple. Then I drag her hand back up to the canvas and swirl it through the wet paint, moving it the way I remember her body moving when she danced around that pole at the strip club.

“You did this,” I tell her. “It’s yours. Look at that, princess. Fucking beautiful.”

She laughs, a breathy sound that’s finally free of the wound-too-tight sound it had when we came up here. I like how she’s letting me add to what she made. Showing her that there are no rules.

I guide her fingers back onto the palette, and she takes control, passing by the red I was going back to and instead choosing... summer. She scoops up a yellow so bright that that’s the only word for it, hesitating for a split second before smearing it through the rest, my hand still twined with hers.

“It feels strange,” she says, her movements becoming bolder. Her breath coming a little faster as my cock hardens against her back.

I don't know if she means the feel of the thick paints she's sliding her fingers through, making art this way, or something else entirely. Hell, maybe she doesn't know either.

"Show me," I urge her, untangling our hands and smoothing my palm over a burst of color, blurring a long swath of it and then turning that into a cape for the line drawing I quickly sketch through the thick paint with the tip of my finger.

"Oh shit," she says with a laugh. "Is that me?"

I grin. Her sister's superhero.

Riley leans back again, then scrapes her nails over the cape and drags the color through the blood of her enemies like jagged claw marks.

"What else?" I ask, sliding my hands over hers again, then wrapping them around the wrists. Not trying to control her, just along for the ride.

She hesitates for a second, then adds an orange the color of the sunrise and a teal that reminds me of the sea, our bodies moving in sync.

It's chaos. Beautiful fucking chaos.

It's like fucking and foreplay and therapy, all at the same time. The canvas comes to life, as wild as she is, and I lose track of time as we cover every inch of white together. I'm not actually thinking about sex, even though my cock is hard and I can tell she's turned on too.

After a while, she turns to me, leaning back and tipping her head up.

"Thank you," she says, a smear of purple near that sexy-as-fuck nose ring of hers and a pale hint of pink on her cheeks. "This helped."

I know it did.

I meant it to.

But I didn't expect to feel this... I don't even know what. Connection? Bond? Definitely some shit deeper than I'm

ready for when she looks up at me like that, eyes all soft and that beautiful face of hers vulnerable and wide open, like she's forgotten the first rule of survival that I know damn well she knows.

Always protect yourself.

I lean down before I can process whatever the fuck it is I'm feeling, just wanting to get closer. But I come to my senses before I claim her mouth like I want to, planting a kiss on her neck instead.

"Dante," she breathes out, eyes drifting closed as she tilts her head to the side to give me better access.

My cock throbs. I drag my nose along her throat, hands on her shoulders to hold her in place. She smells like paint and a touch of lilac, and I want to be inside her again. Fuck. I *need* it.

Her nipples are twin peaks trying to punch out of her thin shirt, and she moves restlessly on the stool, a rolling rhythm that tells me her clit's probably throbbing for some attention. Her pussy wet and ready for me.

"Fuck, princess," I groan, biting down on her silky soft skin and getting a hot little moan that almost breaks my resolve.

It would be a mistake to give in, though. She's affecting more than just my cock right now, and all that beautiful chaos of hers feels like it might just wreck me from the inside out if I don't get a handle on it before I fuck her again.

Because I will. *That's* a given.

But not here. Not now. Not until I can figure out why the hell she gets so far under my skin.

I grab her hands when she twists to reach for me, pulling them back to the canvas. "Come on now, this isn't finished."

"The painting?" she asks as I tangle our fingers together and start shaping all that chaos into something new with her.

"Sure, princess."

It's true. This kind of painting, this kind of chaos, is never finished.

But maybe a part of me meant that *we* aren't finished yet either.

I'm not ready to let her go.

LOGAN

I STARE SIGHTLESSLY at the images spread across the array of monitors in front of me, hands clenched tightly enough that my blunt nails dig into my palms. Control. That's my only focus, and one that's normally second nature.

But not today.

Not since *her*.

The faint sound of another rippling laugh comes from Dante's art studio above me.

I flinch, the slight motion finally reminding me to blink. It brings the small 10-point font of the digital clock in the corner of my largest monitor into focus. Riley has been up there with Dante for twenty-three minutes already. Up where I don't have any cameras. Up where I can't... can't...

Indulge my obsession would be one way to put it, but I refuse to think of it like that.

I press my lips together and slowly, deliberately unclench my hands. Stretching my fingers out, I place them on the keyboard.

I have work to attend to. There's always something, and right now our priority is—

“Fuck,” I hiss when she laughs again, the low murmur of Dante's deeper voice filtering through the ceiling too.

It's worse than being forced to endure the sound of her moans the day I watched her touch herself on the security cameras, and I don't even know why.

I bite out another low curse, then angrily flip through the security feeds, reviewing the visuals for all the monitored locations within our stronghold. Our home. What used to be a sanctuary before she invaded it.

But flipping through them is pointless. I can't see her. Anything could be happening up in Dante's studio right now.

I narrow my eyes, dozens of dangerous scenarios running through my mind. It's intolerable that I don't have access to the visuals I need. When we installed the security system, Maddoc's decree about keeping cameras out of our individual private areas in the house made sense.

Now, I'm not so sure.

Riley was upset earlier, and understandably so. Capside is a vicious organization, and McKenna sending her sister in for the drop almost guarantees that the girl won't come back out in one piece. Not that it makes any fucking difference to me. It's as meaningless as the fact that Riley trusted my insight about it earlier.

I don't care whether or not this particular woman relies on me for guidance about what her sister might be facing.

I don't care that she'll never laugh for me the way she is for my brother right now.

And I definitely don't care if she ever looks at me with anything other than fear.

She *should* fear me, hate me, hate the monster that I am... the same way I do. The same way I hate her. That I hate all of this.

I trust Maddoc in most things, but he isn't infallible, and letting this woman fracture our brotherhood is a fucking mistake that he just can't see yet.

Riley laughs again, and I grit my teeth so hard my jaw starts to throb.

It's a good thing I don't have cameras up there. If I did, it would be my duty to watch, to monitor her, to make sure she's

not causing even more disruption at a time when none of us can afford to be distracted.

I close my eyes, inhaling and exhaling to try to regain control. When that doesn't work, I tap several keys on the keyboard in quick succession, turning off the feeds for the security system for the first time since I installed it.

I'm obviously too weak-willed to keep myself from this obsession I'd like to deny, but the least I can do is not feed my addiction right now. I know the cameras will still record even though my monitors are dark. Alarms will be tripped if there's anything that needs my attention. So what I should do, for the sake of my sanity if nothing else, is take myself away from the temptation to... listen.

But I don't.

I hold my breath, ears straining as I try to guess what's going on upstairs.

It's silent long enough that my lungs start to strain, and when I finally let out the air I'm holding, immediately sucking in another breath as my lungs burn, I realize to my complete frustration that my cock is hard again. My hands have curled into fists, my muscles tense and straining as if they either want to fuck or fight.

I can't do either, but I force each of my muscles to unclench, one at a time, then reach for my noise-canceling earphones and put them on.

There's no way to fight, and fucking isn't an option. Not for me, ever. And not for any of us when it comes to Riley, per Maddoc's orders... so whatever the fuck Dante is doing with her up there, he'd better not be sticking his cock inside her.

Jealousy rears up inside me, roaring like a lion, but I don't know what to do with it. I don't know why it's even there, clawing at the inside of my chest. I've never even fucked a woman, so why should I care if it's Dante up there breaking the rules and not me?

Focus on something else.

Extracting Chloe.

Researching Capside.

Anything.

I start by methodically going through every bit of intelligence we were able to glean from the bug I planted, then lose another few hours tracking down the city's planning information on the area, including schematics of the drop-site building and the surrounding neighborhood.

Time ticks away steadily as I fall into the reassuring rhythm of machine-like efficiency I've perfected over the years, one that leaves no room for messy emotions. I access satellite data, analyze ways in and out of the area, identify good vantage points and blind spots, and then map out ways to make an escape and plot routes we can employ if we need to call in backup from the organization.

It's well into the night before I get to the most rewarding part—pulling it all together into a plan that will maximize our chances of success.

By the time dawn brightens my bedroom window, I've calculated how much accelerant will be needed to get a proper fire going, one that will efficiently burn down the building where the drop is scheduled to go down, and arranged for that. I've also put other safeguards into place, ensuring, as I always do, that those few people I care about in this world will be as protected as possible.

I haven't heard anything else from above me.

I haven't let myself.

I blink, focusing on the small clock on the corner of the screen. It's almost time for my morning routine to start, so I carefully save my work, straighten my desk, and change into workout clothes before heading down to the gym in the basement. I don't exactly enjoy exercise, but I do appreciate the way that pushing my body to its limits each morning blissfully empties out my brain.

I'm distantly aware that I'm working at less than my normal full capacity, my body a hair sluggish from lack of sleep, but I push through anyway. I learned a long time ago

that the monster inside me will consume me from the inside out unless I master it, and the way to do that is to build up routines and maintain control at all times, leaving it no chance to overtake me.

Besides, the body is just a tool to the will. And nothing breaks my will.

Once I'm finished in the gym, I shower and head to the kitchen, where I prepare an omelet and two slices of whole grain toast, fill and start the coffee maker, and focus on not thinking anything at all.

Eventually, the others start waking up and filtering down to join me in the kitchen.

"Morning," Maddoc grunts as he heads for the coffee pot.

I nod a greeting, taking another bite of omelet, then following it with a bite of toast. Omelet. Toast. Omelet. Toast.

"Dante up yet?" Maddoc asks once he's finished his first cup and poured a second, turning to face me.

He leans back on the counter, regarding me in that steady, unflappable way he has that made me start to trust him, despite all my misgivings, back when I was living on the streets.

"I don't know. He hasn't come down yet," I answer, killing my curiosity as fast as it arises—along with the rage that flares hot on its heels—when my next thought is to wonder why. And which room Dante spent the night in.

It doesn't matter.

Less than a minute later, Dante saunters in with a drowsy-eyed look and a lazy smile that I've seen more than one woman swoon over in the time that I've known him.

"Morning," he drawls, lifting his chin in our direction in greeting. He scratches his stomach, exposing his abdominals and the trim line of hair bisecting them, and I avert my eyes before I can look for any marks Riley might have left on his body.

Bite marks.

Scratches.

Anything that might accompany the kind of moans I heard through the security cameras the night she touched herself. The kind of moans that my headphones would have blocked out, if they'd been coming from Dante's studio last night.

I tighten my fists, forcing sudsy water from the sponge I hold, and push both the memory and the curiosity back where they belong. Away.

"Good morning," I respond evenly once I'm back in control.

Now that they're both here, I could tell Maddoc and Dante about the plan I've worked out, but I find myself holding off. It isn't until Riley enters the kitchen a few moments later that I realize I was waiting for her.

Dante gives her a lascivious once-over that makes her blush, then offers her a pre-doctored cup of coffee, his fingers brushing hers when he hands it over. "Ready to make today your bitch?"

"I'm always ready," she says with a smile just for him that looks far too intimate, making me wonder if Maddoc is blind. Surely, he can see that there's something going on between them.

It doesn't matter. We'll do this, and then she'll be gone.

I tap the counter, getting my brothers' attention. "I've figured it out."

Maddoc's gaze instantly sharpens, and Dante manages to drag his attention from the woman and give me a feral smile, both of them clearly just as eager to deal McKenna a blow as I am.

Riley looks back and forth between the three of us, her delicate eyebrows drawn together in confusion. "Figured what out?"

"Pretty sure Logan means he's plotted out exactly what we need to do to pull off Chloe's rescue, princess," Dante tells her.

He knows me as well as I've ever let anyone, he and Maddoc both, so of course he understood my non sequitur.

Riley's eyebrows shoot up in surprise, and her warm brown gaze whips around to meet mine. "You have? Already? Even though you just found out about it last night?"

I stare into her eyes, distracted for a moment as I try to pinpoint the color. Precision is vital in all things, and it's been a low-grade irritation that I have yet to identify the exact shade of them. It's not as dark as a well-brewed cup of coffee, but richer than milk chocolate. The color also has glints of gold in it that shouldn't be there. They... confuse me.

This woman confuses me.

"Logan?" she prompts, reminding me that she asked me a direct question and I've been silent longer than is socially acceptable.

I blink, wrestling my thoughts back to the matter at hand.

"Of course I have," I say crisply, the pieces all clicking together in my mind as I prepare to lay them out for my brothers. "I've memorized the schematics for the warehouse the drop is scheduled to go down in, along with the city planning files for the surrounding landscape. I've identified the Capside players most likely to be involved and reviewed all the details we've been able to document for each one. And I've established and arranged for the most effective weapons, escape routes, and equipment. Everything's in place."

"Holy shit. I can't believe you pulled together a plan so quickly," Riley says. She bites her lip, ducking her head a little as she murmurs, "Thank you for doing all of that."

I nod stiffly, the relief and admiration in her expression making something in my chest react in a way that's almost painful.

My hand twitches with the instinctive urge to rub at the uncomfortable warmth behind my breastbone. Riley's gratitude means nothing to me. I didn't do any of this for her.

I did it in spite of her.

I did it so that we can finally be rid of her.

I did it to return things to the way they were before she burst into our lives and disrupted everything.

At least, that's what I tell myself as I begin to lay out the plan.

RILEY

LOGAN'S VOICE is smooth and even as he speaks, explaining in precise and exacting detail how we're going to get Chloe back and fuck Austin McKenna over.

I listen with rapt attention, my gaze glued to his face as I try to follow everything he's saying.

I can barely believe it. After the shit show that went down after I saw her at the club last night, I honestly didn't know how we'd get Chloe away from her captors, or if we ever actually would. But now, less than twenty-four hours later, there's a full-blown plan to do exactly that.

Logan's plan.

I bite my lower lip, trying not to smile. I'm not sure he knew how to handle me thanking him, but I really am so fucking grateful that the Reapers have someone like him on their side—and that I do too, for the moment. His intensity can be terrifying and overwhelming, but the way he's so focused and thorough is also reassuring, in a way. It's part of what's always drawn me to him.

Logan pulls out a tablet, pointing to blue prints and grid-like maps on it as he walks us through things. Then he opens a still shot of what looks like the interior of a dimly lit warehouse.

“This feed is thirteen days old,” he says with a slight grimace that I'm guessing has to do with not having totally up-to-date information. “But I haven't been able to find any evidence of current activity.”

“The Crimson Crows used to hold that area,” Dante says, nodding. “Not sure who ownership passed to, but I wouldn’t be surprised if it’s only maintained as a front. We bringing in support?”

Maddoc’s lips press into a grim line. “No,” he says at the same time as Logan.

“West Point needs to think Capside fucked them over,” Logan adds. “The fewer bodies in play, the lower the chance of either gang discovering our involvement.”

“Capside is gonna know *someone* was involved.”

“Yes.” Logan’s smile is malicious and so fucking terrifying that I’m ashamed of how much I like it. “And since McKenna will be sending in some insurance with the girl—”

“What? I blurt. “With Chloe? Insurance? What does that mean?”

“Enforcers,” Maddoc says calmly. “West Point gang members to make sure she does what she’s there for.”

“Enforcers that we’ll take out,” Logan says, “with the Glocks Capside favors.”

I lean forward, trying to absorb every detail of the plan as Logan goes into some technical shit about which equipment, by which he mostly means guns, that they’ll bring with them. Dante will be using one kind of ammunition favored by the drug dealing gang, and Logan will be loaded up with whatever West Side typically uses, so that if everything goes as planned, it will look like they were the only two gangs involved.

“Riley will stay on the ground floor,” Logan says, tapping the screen. “She’s left-handed, so if it’s clear, we’ll keep our approach to this section of the warehouse so that she can maintain good visibility with the most likely drop site.”

I blink, taken aback that Logan has paid enough attention to me to know which hand is my dominant one. But before I can process how I feel about that, Maddoc’s voice draws me back to the conversation.

“She won’t be armed,” he says flatly.

“She won’t need to be,” Logan says, as if he’s already considered this. “We’ll be providing cover.”

That’s fine with me. I’ve never handled a gun and would be more scared of accidentally shooting my sister than doing anything useful if they tried to give me one.

Once Logan is done going over everything, Maddoc nods, looking satisfied. “Sounds like you’ve covered all our bases, and then some.”

Logan goes still, his shoulders tensing. “Do you see any flaws in the planning?”

“Pretty sure you don’t do flaws, Logan.” Dante laughs, shaking his head.

“There are always variables that can’t be fully predicted.”

“And yet you nail ’em anyway,” Dante says with a grin. “Remember how smooth that shit with Wheeler went down a couple years ago? You’re a fucking genius. Nah, better than that. Whatever’s a step up from genius.”

Logan opens his mouth like he’s going to deny it or argue or something, but Maddoc speaks first.

“Logan.”

The blond man’s eyes jerk over to meet Maddoc’s, and Maddoc smiles.

“You did good. We’re going to be walking into a clusterfuck waiting to happen, but we’re gonna walk right back out of it unfucked and ahead of the game... because of you. There’s no one else I’d trust with this shit. Ever.”

Logan drops his eyes at the praise, but not before I see a slight flush rise up on his cheeks.

It’s the first time I’ve seen him blush, and it makes him look more human than he ever has before. Almost shy.

When our impromptu kitchen meeting breaks up, I can’t stop my gaze from lingering on Logan as he and his brothers consult about some small details of the preparation. My mom always told Chloe and me to pay attention to a person’s actions

more than their words, and despite the coldness Logan has shown toward me sometimes, he's also gone above and beyond to give this rescue mission the best chance of success.

And even if he didn't do it just for me, it still means a hell of a lot to me.

As the three men get down to the business of preparing for the mission, I grab some food and head upstairs.

The rest of the day passes at a fucking snail's crawl. I can hear the three of them moving around the house, the muffled sounds of their voices occasionally and even some laughter. But my help isn't needed with this part, and I don't want to risk getting in their way or distracting them and messing things up, so I spend the hours wearing a path between my window and the bedroom door, pacing and worrying. Thinking about the dozens of ways this could all go to hell, and praying with everything in me that it won't.

At around seven o'clock, I'm staring out the window into the back yard when the bedroom door opens.

"Riley?"

The deep voice behind me makes me jump, and I whirl away from the darkened window to face the door.

Dante raises his eyebrows, grinning as he saunters into the room toward me with a rugged-looking duffel in his hand. "Almost time."

"Good," I say fervently. Any more waiting, and I might've gone out of my mind.

"Got you something," he murmurs when he reaches me, tucking some of my hair behind my ear and then letting his fingers linger on my cheek.

"A present?" I tease him, my whole body relaxing when he chuckles.

"Gift wrapped and everything," he says, handing the duffel over.

I unzip it, pulling out some dark clothes and shit that looks like it was lifted from a S.W.A.T. team.

“You’ve got a kink for dressing me, don’t you?”

He smirks, a flash of heat glinting in his green eyes. “Pretty sure my kink is *undressing* you, princess.”

He’s right about that, and I can’t really complain about it. My cheeks warm a bit as I hold up a heavy vest that feels like it weighs twice as much as I do.

“Do I really have to wear this?” I ask, frowning.

Dante’s smile evaporates, his face turning serious. “I’d like you to, yeah. Gonna get hot in there, even if shit goes exactly as planned. Doesn’t hurt to be prepared.”

“Chloe won’t be prepared,” I whisper, my heart suddenly clenching.

He nods, holding my gaze. “All the more reason for us to be, right?”

“Yeah,” I agree with a shuddering breath, squeezing my eyes closed as I try not to picture how wrong this might go. What it means that he brought me a vest like this... and what it could mean for Chloe if she’s not wearing one.

“Hey.”

I open my eyes when Dante tips up my chin, his brilliant green eyes finding mine. “It’s gonna be all right.”

My chest goes tight. I want that to be true so badly that I can taste it. But...

“You don’t know that,” I say, my voice quiet and hoarse.

“Sure I do,” Dante replies with so much easy confidence that I almost believe him. “We’re gonna get Chloe out, and it’s all gonna work just like we planned. Logan is a great tactician. I wasn’t kidding about that genius shit. It’s like his superpower. And when it comes to things like this? Trust me, he’s dotted every fucking ‘i’ and crossed every ‘t’. If he says this is the best plan, then it is.”

That invisible fist gripping my heart loosens, and I nod, blowing out a ragged breath. “Okay.”

Dante smiles. “Need help getting dressed?”

I laugh. “Fuck off.”

“How about undressed?” he asks, sliding his hands down my sides and toying with the hem of my shirt.

“I think I’ve got it,” I murmur as he slips his fingers under the fabric to caress my skin, sending a delicious shiver through me that breaks up the icy chunks of worry clogging my veins, shaking them loose.

“Course you do,” he murmurs, tugging me closer, his gaze glued to my lips.

Then he kisses me.

It’s less hungry and all-consuming than other kisses we’ve shared, but it hits me harder because of that. Because this isn’t a kiss that’s building toward something, or a kiss that’s part of foreplay. It’s a kiss to express something that words can’t quite encapsulate, and I cling to his broad shoulders for a moment as I melt against him, savoring the feeling of his firm lips against mine.

The kiss ends before I’m ready for it to, and I lift my fingers to my lips as Dante gives me one last look, then turns and leaves.

Shaking my head as if I’m snapping out of a daze, I shift my attention to the stuff he brought up for me. The clothes are all black and perfectly fitted, molding to my body when I slip them on, and I quickly switch out my nose ring to the glittering black skull I wore when I first came here.

“Pissed off and ready to do something about it,” I whisper to my reflection in the mirror on the wall, quoting Chloe.

As my reflection stares back at me, I realize that even though I washed up as thoroughly as I could after painting with Dante last night, tiny flecks of color are still trapped around my fingernails and in the creases between my fingers. There are little splotches of blood red and deep blue, as well as the vibrant green of Dante’s eyes, and the exact shade of purple as my hair.

Biting my lip, I run one fingertip over the small bits of paint on my other hand, unable to stop myself from

remembering how they got there.

I can still feel the slickness of the paint on my bare hands, and the weight that lifted off me when I took all the shit in my head and put it on the canvas instead. I can hear Dante's deep voice, talking to me and making me laugh.

Seeing me.

Getting me.

Giving me things I didn't even know I needed.

"Fuck," I sigh, shaking my head and turning away from the mirror. I've made it through my time with the Reapers more physically unharmed than I expected to... but my heart is taking a damn beating.

I leave the room and start to make my way downstairs, curling my hands into fists as if hiding the paint on my fingernails will make the memories of last night go away.

It doesn't help.

It's like Dante marked me somewhere deeper—and unlike the paint on my hands, which will eventually wash away, I can't help thinking that the marks he left beneath my skin aren't going to vanish when this is all over.

That those are permanent.

MADDOC

THERE'S a reason my father is gone, and it's not just that the piece of shit who took him out had good aim. It's that first and foremost, Jonas Gray was out for himself. For his own gain, always. No matter what it cost.

And sure, he looked out for me, was proud of me, taught me what I needed to know to survive, but I never had rose-colored glasses about that shit. If it came down to it, he would have sacrificed even me, his own son, to get ahead. When he died, I vowed I'd never make the same mistake.

Loyalty matters.

People matter.

Not all people, but *my* people do... and helping Riley Sutton puts my people, my brothers, in harm's way.

"Madd?" Dante asks, zipping up the equipment bag full of gear and standing up from a squat. "All good?"

"You tell me," I say with a tight smile. "Everything accounted for?"

He snorts, slinging the gear bag onto his shoulder, and gives me an are-you-shitting-me look.

Fair. I loaded the bag, Logan double-checked it, and Dante is smart enough not to walk into a firefight unless he knows first-hand that he has what he needs to walk back out. The gear is all accounted for.

That wasn't what he was asking.

I scrub a hand over my face.

“Yeah,” I say to his real question, tamping down the agitation brewing inside me. “It’s all good as long as the girl gets her ass down here on time.”

“She’s coming,” Dante says, squeezing my shoulder in a quick show of support, but otherwise letting it go.

Good, because I’m not even sure what the fuck I’m so worked up about. Tonight will be dangerous because we run in dangerous circles, but that’s nothing new. There’s always a risk of something going south. That’s just life. But I don’t actually have any concrete reason to worry that my brothers will be hurt tonight. Not more than during any other operation.

The plan is solid. McKenna will take a hit, fucking with Capside is an added bonus, and the payoff *will* be worth it. If there’s one person I trust to get the details right, it’s Logan.

So why the hell am I so on edge?

“Yukon?” Dante lifts a brow, tossing the keys up and catching them again.

I nod. We’ve already decided on that, since it’s new and the Escalade I prefer is a known Reapers vehicle. The Yukon is also already loaded with what we’re going to need to make sure Riley’s sister stays off McKenna’s radar after the fact, so I know Dante wasn’t really asking. He’s just trying to get me focused.

I check the time, then look up to find Logan watching me. He presses his lips together, looking irritated.

“She’s late,” he says, flicking a glance over my shoulder, toward the stairs, and then away again.

“No, I’m here,” Riley says, coming around the corner. “Are we ready?”

Logan freezes, and my head snaps around at the sound of her voice. Dante grins eyeing her up and down like he’s already forgotten I told him we’re not fucking her.

Not that I can blame him. It’s an easy thing to forget.

I frown, shaking that thought off because it's got no business in my head right now. Neither does noticing that Riley looks both determined and grim tonight, her multi-colored hair tucked under a black knit cap. The black tactical gear and bullet proof vest don't show off her curves the same way the dress she wore to Club Prestige the other night did, but honestly, she looks even better like this.

"We're ready," I answer her, still more agitated than I should be before an operation like this. "Let's load up."

Logan's plan is as airtight as shit like this ever can be, but there are still variables. If it's all going to come together the way we need it to, we've got to arrive and get into place before McKenna's people and Capside show up, and that means leaving now. We all head out to the Yukon, and I slide in behind the wheel, cranking the key in the ignition as the others load up.

"Recap," I tell Logan as I pull out of the garage and start navigating toward the warehouse district where it's going to go down.

Logan starts going through the plan one more time, laying out each phase step by step, and I notice Riley listening closely from where she sits in the back seat with Dante.

"I still don't understand why they have to use Chloe for this," she mutters after Logan has run us through the plan, the back-up plan, and all the contingencies.

"Good faith," Logan explains, surprising me by turning around in his seat to look at her as he answers. "It's the first time McKenna has done business with Capside."

"It is?"

There's a subtle strain in Riley's voice, as if she's working to keep her voice even. I can tell she's nervous about what we're heading into, and I find myself inexplicably wanting to soothe her. Maybe Dante does too, because his voice is gentle as he answers.

"We think it is, princess, yeah. Which makes your sister fucking perfect for the drop, since West Point is gonna see her

as expendable if the deal goes south—”

Riley makes a distressed sound, like a wounded animal, and my knuckles turn white as I grip the steering wheel.

“—but like Logan said, it’s also a gesture of good faith from McKenna,” he finishes.

“How?” she asks.

“Sending someone non-threatening, like your sister, is a way McKenna can let Capside know he’s not planning on trying anything stupid. That it’s just a drop, nothing else. Drugs for cash. Establishing that goodwill so they can start to build a business relationship on it.”

“And because she’s expendable,” Riley whispers, her voice shaking slightly.

“Enough,” I snap, worried that she’s getting too lost in her own head and will end up being eaten alive by her nerves. I’ve seen younger Reaper recruits go through the same thing, and my job as a leader is to keep them from spiraling. “We need to stay focused. Warehouse in five.”

I can feel Logan’s and Dante’s eyes on me, but when Riley finds my gaze in the rearview mirror, I can see the resolve hardening like steel behind her eyes. She looks a bit pissed at being snapped at, but I don’t give a fuck. I’d rather have her be annoyed at me than get swept under by her worst fears.

I drive past the warehouse where the drop is scheduled to go down, looking for the lot Logan identified as the best place for us to stash the Yukon. It’s behind the warehouse but separated from it by an alley and some conveniently placed concrete pylons, and the layout means we should be able to park in it without risking detection once McKenna’s men and the Capside crew arrive.

“How many weasels did McKenna say he’s sending in with Chloe as backup, Logan?” Dante asks.

“Two that we know of,” Logan says without looking up.

I hear a distinctive click and know without looking that he’s just snapped a magazine into one of the Glocks he’ll be

carrying, going through a final gear check.

Good. Because we're here.

“And we don't know how many Capside will bring,” Dante tells Riley as I pull into the lot. “Logan was able to make a guess, but bottom line is that Chloe's gonna be surrounded by hot tempers, short fuses, and a metric fuck-ton of mistrust. Not to mention a lot of very large guns. So, Riley?”

I throw the Yukon into park and check the rearview mirror in time to see her turn to him, her face calm but her eyes wide.

“Yeah?” she asks.

His lip quirks up. “Don't fuck it up.”

Riley laughs, then slaps a hand over her mouth like she can't believe she just did that. But the stiffness in her shoulders bleeds away a little, and I'm glad to see it. My specialty is barking at people and riding their asses until they get their shit together, but Dante's specialty is breaking all of that tension. Hopefully, it will keep her loose and focused as we head into the mission.

I catch Dante's eye and give him a small nod as Logan zips up the gear bag at his feet and pops his door open. “Let's go.”

Riley scrambles out of the back as Dante, Logan, and I move into action, every motion in sync and efficient as we do on-site prep, then silently but swiftly move toward the location.

For Riley's sake, Logan drilled the fact that we'd have to be fast over and over. If either group decides to arrive earlier than we allowed for and catches us out here, flat-footed and out of position, we'll have to roll into a contingency plan that's guaranteed to be both bloodier and less beneficial to the goal of pitting McKenna's organization against the ruthless motherfuckers in Capside.

But so far, we're good. There's no sign of either organization as we fan out. Logan and Dante take their sniper rifles and other gear up to the elevated positions Logan identified, and Riley stays with me at ground level.

She's quiet as she follows me, and when I glance over my shoulder at her, I'm suddenly reminded of the hot fury and the cold stab of fear I felt when she lost her shit at McKenna's club.

When she almost got killed.

I stop suddenly, turning around to face her. She comes up short less than a foot away from me, her eyes widening in surprise.

"What?" she whispers.

Reaching out, I grip her arm and haul her against me, dropping my head so that my lips touch her ear.

"Like Dante said," I murmur gruffly, "don't fuck this up. Don't deviate from the plan. I don't care what you see, what happens, what fucking goes wrong once the action starts. You're here to do one thing, and only one thing."

"Yeah, I get it," she whispers, frowning. "It's *my* sister. Remember?"

"It was your sister at Club Prestige too."

She jerks slightly in reaction to my words. Anger flares in her eyes, followed by a flash of guilt. She swallows, her hand moving up to press against my chest in a way that makes me unsure if she's trying to push me away or ground herself through the contact.

"I won't fuck it up," she breathes. "I promise, Maddoc."

I can hear the sincerity in her voice, and I know she understands how dangerous the shit she pulled at the club was. I doubt she'd let herself get carried away like that again, especially knowing the stakes. But still, somehow, her words aren't enough to soothe the agitation churning under my skin.

"Don't go trying to be a hero," I insist, tightening my grip on her arm a little. "If the plan gets fucked, run."

She sucks in a sharp breath. "But my sister—"

"We'll get Chloe out, I promise you. But you can't help her if you're dead. So don't fucking die. You get me?"

Riley hesitates, her gaze bouncing between my eyes before she finally nods. “Okay.”

“Good. Then go.”

Releasing her and stepping back, I jerk my head toward the darkened corner of the warehouse Logan thinks will give her the best direct line to Chloe once our targets arrive.

She heads to the spot without a backward glance, and I get into the position that should give me line of sight for the drop, hidden behind a dusty stack of pallets across the warehouse from Riley.

If Logan’s prediction about where it will all go down proves true—and his predictions, based on such a stupid amount of research that he’s like a damn machine, usually do—then they won’t be able to see either of us until we move on them.

I can still see Riley, though... and she looks like a fucking queen.

She’s got a mask of determination on, her lips pressed together tightly and her body poised. Still, but ready. Every molecule in her body focused on the task at hand.

She’s not going to fuck this up.

She’s not going to die.

That thought settles something inside me, and I’m finally able to push away the irritating feeling of unease that I’ve been fighting all night.

Maybe it shouldn’t matter to me so much that she gets through this in one piece. After all, Riley isn’t actually one of my people. But if she hadn’t come into our lives the way she did, if the circumstances had been different... she could have been. She would’ve been a perfect fit.

A Reaper.

One of us.

We all underestimated her at first, but the steel she’s shown under that gorgeous face and all her soft curves proves that my

first impression was wrong. When she turned her back on us at Clancy's that first night, I saw her as prey.

She's not.

She's more than any of us bargained for.

"Fuck," I mutter, scrubbing a hand over my face and yanking my gaze away from her. What-if's and could-have-beens are all fucking irrelevant, and I need to keep my own mind focused on the mission.

I fall into a practiced stillness, waiting. Breathing in, breathing out, my senses open and muscles relaxed.

Capside arrives first. There are three of them, the man in the middle holding a bulging duffel bag that must contain the drugs.

I watch them closely, knowing that Dante and Logan are tracking their movements from above and subtly repositioning themselves as needed—even, though, just like my brother predicted, Capside is taking up position in the defensible area toward the loading dock doors at the west of the building.

The three men are far enough away that only the low murmur of their voices come as we wait for McKenna's people to show.

And finally, they do.

Chloe enters first, followed by two West Point thugs. She looks terrified, but it's clear she's got some of Riley's backbone in her. Her footsteps are a little shaky, but she crosses the floor toward the Capside crew, leaving McKenna's two men hanging back by the loading doors.

Logan predicted two, so our original plan stands. He really is good. I clock their location and subtly reposition myself to cover the one on the left, easing my gun into position and steadying it with a firm grip.

Then I wait. *Focus. Breathe in, breathe out.*

I let every one of my senses narrow and sharpen as a second ticks by, then another.

Wait... wait...

The Capside fucker holding the bag crumples to the ground, the back of his head gone in a silent spray of Dante's favorite shade of red, and I move.

Racing toward the action at a flat run, I fire at West Point. Two of my shots hit McKenna's man on the left, taking him down, and I duck and roll behind a stack of crates to avoid a kill shot from Capside.

"Riley!" I bellow. "Now!"

RILEY

AS MADDOC'S voice cuts through the air, I don't think.

I just *move*.

My body lurches into motion, sprinting across the dusty concrete toward my sister as pandemonium fills the dark warehouse. Men are shouting and cursing, and gunshots ring out like fireworks.

I can't breathe, or maybe I'm breathing too fast. It doesn't matter. Unlike the Reapers, the other gangs clearly don't have their weapons silenced, because I'm almost deafened by the sharp crack of gunfire and all but blinded by the flashes of light every time someone shoots.

But none of it matters, because Chloe is *right fucking there*.

She's frozen in place and terrified, sobbing as black rivulets of mascara run down her cheeks, and time seems to slow down as I sprint toward her.

If any of those fuckers hurt her, if she starts to bleed, if this goes wrong and a bullet goes astray...

"Chloe!"

I call her name a second before I barrel into her, taking us both down to the floor and out of the line of fire.

"R-Riley?" she stutters, her eyes so wide that the light brown of her irises are completely ringed in white. She clutches me, panting for breath and fingers digging into my

arms hard enough to bruise. “What are you—? What... I don’t ___”

“Later,” I gasp, my knee stinging where it scraped across the cement floor when I tackled her. “Come on.”

I drag her up and put my body between her and the last standing Capside guy, a skinny man with his teeth barred and his bald head splattered with someone else’s blood. He’s busy shooting like a maniac up toward the rafters where Dante and Logan are positioned, but he could shift his focus to us at any moment.

Shit. I need to get Chloe under some kind of cover.

“Go,” I hiss, staying low as I push her toward a looming stack of pallets off to one side.

I hear Maddoc shout something, and there’s way too much fucking gunfire for the plan to have worked the way Logan wanted it to. If it had, the Capside and West Point men would all have been dead already.

I don’t know what went wrong, and I can’t stop to care, but when someone shouts—a male voice full of pain—it suddenly hits me that one of them could die. One of the *Reapers* could die.

Something sharp and painful squeezes my chest, making it hard to breathe. But then a line of bullets smacks into the concrete in front of Chloe, sending chips of concrete spraying toward us. She screams, shying away from it, and I scramble up next to her and grab her arm.

“It’s fine, come on, keep going. *Move, Chloe.*”

I barely even register the words that are coming out of my mouth. I just know we can’t stop until we get somewhere safer. These damn pallets aren’t enough to stop bullets.

“Go, go, go,” I chant, forcing myself not to think about whether all three of the men who came here with me will walk away from this.

There’s a thick pillar off to our left, and I point to it. “There! Go!”

Chloe clings to me as we sprint for it, crouching low. The second we're behind the thick concrete, I shove her down to the floor and throw myself on top of her, trying to make our bodies as small as possible.

"Fuck, oh my god, oh fuck," I gasp, doing my best to shield Chloe from all this fucking chaos as she sobs and clutches me.

I've got her pressed as tightly as I can between me and the cold column of concrete, but I still want to puke from fear and adrenaline.

"How did you—? Riley! I can't—I didn't..." Chloe is sobbing, her words coming out in wet, broken gasps that make me want to kill Austin McKenna myself. But she's here. She's alive. That's all that matters.

As long as we make it out.

"Shh," I whisper, tasting salt as I bury my face in her hair and wait for it to end.

One of the Reapers will call the all-clear soon. They have to.

Worry surges inside me, and I try to tell myself that the icy shards of fear in my stomach are just for me and Chloe, and not because of what might be happening to the three gang members I've been living with.

They're just a means to an end, and once we get out of here, it *will* end. They'll go on with their war, and Chloe and I will pick up the pieces of our lives.

"Fuck!"

I flinch. That was definitely Dante's voice, and my stomach cramps so hard that I'm almost sick. I don't want to care if he lives or dies, or fool myself that some random connection I feel is actually real... but I still don't want him to die.

I don't want any of them to die.

Then, so suddenly that it leaves my ears ringing, everything goes silent.

“Is it... is it over?” Chloe whispers, her whole body shaking against mine.

“I don’t know,” I murmur, my arms locked tight around her.

I can’t hear anything moving, not anything at all. Which is good, except... all that shooting definitely means Logan’s plan didn’t go the way he wanted it to. Did *everyone* die?

The silence goes on and on, and I have to know.

“Come on,” I whisper to Chloe, still holding her tight as I slowly push us up to standing.

“Princess?”

Everything inside me relaxes when Dante calls out. I loosen my arms, sliding a hand down Chloe’s arm to lace my fingers through hers, then tug her behind me as I step out from behind the pillar.

My legs wobble a little, and I lean against the pillar, letting it take some of my weight so that I won’t collapse to the floor.

“Riley!” Chloe hisses. “Oh my god, you got shot!”

What?

I look down, realizing that one side of my shirt is wet, stained with blood at the waist. *Shit. When did that happen?*

I can’t remember when a bullet might’ve hit me in the thick of everything, and I can’t even feel the pain of it now, my body too wired and high on adrenaline to register the wound.

Maddoc strides toward me, shoving his gun into the waistband of his pants as he grabs the hem of my shirt and yanks it upward. His jaw is tight, his lips pressed together, but when he gets a look at the bullet wound, relief passes over his features.

“It was just a graze,” he tells me. “Missed your vest, but missed everything else important too. You’ll be all right. Let’s get the fuck out of here. We’ll stitch you up back at the house.”

He turns away without another word, calling out to Logan and Dante, and I blink as I stare at the back of his head, trying to process the expression of raw fear I saw on his face before he realized I was all right.

Was he really that worried about me?

“What’s going on, Riley?” Chloe asks in a low voice, clutching my arm. “Who is that?”

“He’s, um, helping us,” I say, keeping my answer vague because she’s already freaked out, and telling her that the men who saved her are Reapers isn’t going to help with that one bit. “I’ll explain after we’re safe.”

“We’re not safe yet?” she whispers, shrinking in on herself.

Shit.

“No, we are,” I reassure her. “I mean, I think we are.”

Maddoc, Dante, and Logan are systematically checking out every inch of the warehouse. Logan’s doing something to one of the dead bodies that I’m guessing will play into his plan and Dante is gathering things—drugs or money, maybe—from another one.

There’s more to this plan, though, and I’ve still got a role to play.

“Come on,” I tell Chloe, not willing to be separated from her at all. “I need to help too.”

“Help do what?” she asks, stumbling after me and all but cutting off the circulation to my fingers with her tight grip on my hand.

“We’re going to keep Austin and his crew from coming after you again,” I tell her as we approach Logan.

“Riley.” His cool blue gaze finds me immediately, and he tilts his head toward the large duffel bag he brought with him.

I nod, hustling over to it with Chloe in tow. “Help me spread this,” I tell her, handing her one of the heavy red containers.

Her nose crinkles. “Gas?”

I shrug. It’s some kind of accelerant, and I didn’t ask for more details than that. Logan says it will get the job done, and that’s all that matters.

“Where?” Chloe asks as I lift up the other one.

“Everywhere.”

We’re going to burn the place down.

Chloe looks over at one of the dead bodies on the floor—a West Point guy, I think—and her eyes harden. “Okay.”

She heads away from him, spreading the harsh smelling liquid as she goes, and I move toward the big doors she came in through.

Headlights spear through the open loading dock, and I freeze, but then realize it’s probably Maddoc and Dante pulling the vehicle around so they can unload it. I don’t see either of them in the warehouse anymore, and the fact that Logan doesn’t flinch at the flash of light reassures me that it must be them.

I keep pouring out the accelerant, and a moment later, Maddoc and Dante enter through the open bay, carrying another body between them.

I look away, my stomach turning a little.

This is the one part of the plan I was never too sure about, but Logan promised me it’s important. And if it helps cover our tracks and keeps Chloe safe long-term, then it will be worth it.

The corpse that Maddoc and Dante brought in will match Chloe’s description closely enough that if Austin digs into what went wrong with the drop, he’ll assume she died here too.

I didn’t ask how they got the body for this mission. I didn’t want to know.

All I did was insist that they wouldn’t kill someone to get it, and Dante assured me that they wouldn’t.

Apparently, he's got some kind of hookup at a morgue or a mortuary or something, and that was good enough for me.

"Got it covered?" Dante asks, sauntering over to me once they've set things up. I nod, and he takes the almost empty canister from me. "Take your sister out to the Yukon," he says firmly, resting a hand low on my back and giving me a little push.

I nod again, feeling almost numb in the wake of all the fear and adrenaline that poured through me earlier. But it's not over yet. It won't be until we're safely out of here.

I grab Chloe, shielding her a little from the sight of Dante emptying the last of the accelerant over the bodies, and hustle her out to the vehicle.

Logan follows us, and all three of us climb into the back of the car. I take the middle seat, with Logan on my right and Chloe on my left. Logan ignores us both, pulling out a laptop from beneath the seat.

Dante slips into the front passenger seat a minute later, and Logan's head pops up.

"Lit?" he asks.

"Maddoc's got it," Dante answers. A loud *thwump* sounds from the building, making me flinch, and Dante grins. "There ya go."

Logan's lip curls up and he nods once, then goes back to whatever he's doing on the laptop.

"Riley?" Chloe asks, her voice shaky as she presses against my side, shivering.

"It's okay," I tell her. "It's all going to burn."

"Damn fucking right it is," Maddoc growls as he slides into the driver's seat.

He drives away from the loading dock, pulling over once we're a block away, and the three of them turn to look back at the warehouse. Chloe is still shaking, huddled next to me with her eyes squeezed shut, and I press a kiss against her temple, smoothing my hand over her hair as I turn to look too.

And just like I promised my sister—just like these three men promised me—everything is burning.

It's fucking glorious.

RILEY

“RILEY, WHAT’S GOING ON?” Chloe whispers as Maddoc peels out, speeding away like a bat out of hell now that we’ve confirmed that the fire in the warehouse has caught.

She’s looking at me with wide, terrified eyes, and I don’t quite know how to answer. It’s not like we’ve actually been apart that long, but everything is different now. *I’m* different. The time I’ve spent with the Reapers has changed me, and now that I’ve finally got her back, I can feel that shift inside myself more than ever.

Chloe is still trembling, though, so I force a smile onto my face and gently push the hair—gritty from the gun smoke and violence we left behind—off her forehead.

“You’re safe,” I tell her, since that’s the important thing. “You’re free from West Point now. That’s what’s going on.”

“Will they come after me again?” she asks, her voice breaking.

My heart breaks along with it, but thanks to Logan’s thoroughness, West Point shouldn’t ever try to get her back.

“No.” I grip her hand, holding her gaze so she can see how certain I am about that.

“But what about Dad?” she whispers, dropping her voice as her eyes skitter toward the front seat. Toward Dante and Maddoc. “And... them?”

I still don’t want to tell her we’re in the car with three Reapers. She’s already scared enough, and besides, I’m not

sure what they want her to know. What's safe for her to know.

But her other question, the first one, is easy, so I can at least give her that.

“You don't have to worry about Frank anymore,” I tell her. “He's going to have to deal with his own fucking debts from now on. I won't let him near you again, Chloe. I promise.”

West Point won't come after my sister again, and Frank won't bother her again either, because he'll think she's dead too.

It truly was a solid as hell plan that Logan came up with.

The genius of the burnt out scene we left behind is that both of the gangs involved, West Point and Capside, will think the other side betrayed them. We made it in and out and left no trace that we were there. The guys took everyone out, leaving no one to report back any differently, and they did it with ammunition that will lead each gang to pin blame on the other.

Logan said it was the first time those two organizations had done business together, and now it will definitely be the last. There will be bad blood between them, each angry about their losses, which will distract Austin from his war with the Reapers.

And the Reapers won't just get a reprieve from Austin's aggression toward them. In the end, they walked away with both the drugs and the money.

I really can't believe it worked.

I can't believe it's over.

“What happens now?” Chloe asks quietly.

Shit. I'm not as good of a planner as Logan is, and I've been so focused on just getting Chloe free that I don't have a ready answer to that question.

There's no way I still have a job at Club M. I've got no idea what happened to our apartment, but I know I missed rent and that both Frank and West Point know about the place, so I wouldn't want to go back there anyway.

And other than the clothes Dante arranged to have brought over for me, I've got nothing anymore.

Chloe has nothing but what she's wearing right now.

Maddoc and Dante have been murmuring to each other in low voices while Maddoc drives, but I guess they've been listening in too, because Maddoc speaks up when I don't answer my sister right away.

"You'll both need to stay with us for a few days," he says, meeting my eyes in the rearview mirror. "We need to make sure everything went smoothly."

"We need to make sure McKenna thinks your sister is dead," Logan adds flatly.

Chloe flinches, twisting around to look at him. "Dead?"

He turns his head slightly, cutting his gaze toward her. "For your safety."

"Oh," Chloe says in a small voice. "Thank you?"

Logan doesn't respond, and Maddoc and Dante go back to talking quietly to each other. I squeeze Chloe's hand to reassure her that it's all okay, and she doesn't ask anything else as we head back to the Reapers' house.

Where, if I'm honest, I'm grateful to know we'll get to stay for a bit longer.

It's strange. The Reapers' house has been my prison, but now, with our future so uncertain, it feels almost like a sanctuary. With nowhere safe to go when we leave, the fact that Chloe and I will have a little protection for a few more days while the Reapers make sure everything worked out the way they planned is a relief.

We arrive at the house a few minutes later, and the guys usher Chloe and me inside with enough efficiency that I feel like they want us under cover.

For a second, fear spikes through me, fast and hard.

Were we followed? Is Chloe still in danger when I just promised her she wouldn't be anymore?

But no. Logan planned for as much as humanly possible before we went into this thing, and whatever he was doing on his laptop afterward probably accounted for anything else. This is just an ingrained caution, the kind that must be as natural to men like them as breathing.

Chloe walks tentatively into the house, her arms wrapped around herself and her head swiveling as he takes it all in.

“Hey,” Dante says quietly as he follows us inside, stepping up behind me, close enough that I feel his body heat. “You did good tonight.”

The way he says it, his voice filled with heat and respect, warms me from the inside out. I slow my steps, not minding at all when he doesn’t, and lean back against him for a second, craning my neck a little to look into those impossibly green eyes of his.

“Thank you,” I whisper. “You did too.”

The weight of those words hits me in a rush.

This man killed for me tonight. He saved Chloe’s life, and probably mine too.

He smiles, and I can’t look away, my heart suddenly pounding so loudly that it drowns out everything else.

I was lying to myself back at the warehouse when I told myself I didn’t want the Reapers to die because it would wreck the plan. It was a lot more than that. I don’t really know how to define this thing between me and Dante, whatever it is. But I don’t have to define it to feel it all the way down to my bones.

If he’d died, it would have wrecked something in *me*.

“Anytime, princess.” His eyes rake over my face like he’s memorizing it, lingering on my lips like a kiss, then he gives me a gentle shove. “Go on now. Go take care of your sister.”

Chloe is still glancing around, shifting her weight uncertainly as she stands in the Reapers’ entryway.

“We need to clean the gear,” Maddoc says from nearby as he drops a bulky black duffel bag on the floor.

“On it,” Dante says, scooping the bag right back up. “You gonna help, Logan?”

“Basement,” Logan says cryptically, already heading out of the room carrying some of the things they brought in from the vehicle.

Dante follows, and I start to step toward Chloe, but Maddoc grabs my arm.

He glances down at the bloodstained part of my shirt, and the wound beneath it throbs at the reminder that I was shot earlier. “That needs to get cleaned and taken care of.”

“There’s a first aid kit in the bathroom upstairs, right?” I say, trying to brush him off, but he doesn’t let me.

“You need Logan.”

“I’m fine,” I insist. “I can get Chloe to help me put a bandage on it.”

Maddoc’s eyes blaze, his grip tightening. “I wasn’t asking. It needs stitches, and he’s the best with that shit. Got a steady hand. You’ll barely have a scar.”

An involuntary shiver rocks through me at the idea of Logan pushing a needle through my skin. Of course he’d be good at it. He’s so fucking precise and particular about everything, his stitches will probably be invisible and as straight as a ruler.

But he likes to hurt me.

He *has* hurt me.

And the most unsettling thing is, some part of me has enjoyed it.

Shaking off that thought, I refocus on Maddoc. He hasn’t budged or loosened his grip on my arm at all, clearly not willing to let this drop.

“Fine,” I tell him. “He can patch me up whenever he’s done with whatever he went to take care of.” I wave a hand in the general direction where Logan and Dante headed. “But I need a minute with Chloe first.”

She's holding herself together pretty well, but I know she must be freaking out on the inside. She needs a break from trying to put up a good front.

Maddoc nods, the hard line of his mouth softening a bit as he glances over at her, almost like he gets it.

"Sure," he says, finally releasing me. "She can stay upstairs in your room with you. Take a few minutes to get her situated." Those stormy gray eyes of his land on me before I can move, intense as always as he adds in a low growl, "But don't forget to see Logan."

"I won't," I promise.

He holds my gaze for another beat, narrowing his eyes like he's trying to gauge whether I'm telling the truth or just saying what he wants to hear so he'll back off. But finally, he nods and strides after Dante and Logan.

I watch him go, then jerk my eyes away.

"Come on," I say gently to Chloe. "Let's go upstairs. I've got some fresh clothes you can borrow."

RILEY

THE WAY CHLOE stays quiet as she follows me up to my room tells me more than anything else how freaked she is. I can't blame her. She's got to be confused, and even before West Point took her, she knew better than to trust men like these.

The minute we're alone in my room, she turns and wraps her arms around me, burying her face against my neck.

"I can't believe you came for me," she whispers, squeezing me tightly.

I hug her back just as hard, and we stay like that for a long moment. Finally, she pulls back a little, swiping at the wet streaks of mascara on her cheeks with the backs of her hands.

"Whose house is this?" she asks, glancing around at the room.

She keeps her voice low, as if she's afraid of them overhearing, and I bite my lower lip. She's not going to like the answer, not after a lifetime of having me drill into her head that we keep our heads down and stay out of gang business at all costs.

But ripping off the band-aid is always better than dragging it out.

"It belongs to the Reapers," I tell her.

Chloe instantly stiffens, her gaze darting toward the closed bedroom door.

"The Reapers?" she repeats, her eyes as big as saucers. "Why have you been staying with them? Oh god, did *Dad*—"

“No,” I interrupt before she can panic any more than she already is. “No, it wasn’t like that. Dad didn’t sell me out. I went to them and asked them for help. They’re the ones who got you out, Chloe. They found out about the deal between Capside and West Point, and they orchestrated that whole rescue mission.”

Her jaw drops open, a little squeak falling from her lips.

“It really is okay,” I tell her, rubbing my hands up and down her arms briskly. “Going to the Reapers was the only way I could think of to get you back. I made a deal with them.”

“What... why...” She pauses and takes a deep breath, then tries again. “Why would they make a deal with you? What did you have to give them?”

“Just money,” I tell her, hoping it will quell her worries about anything else the Reapers might’ve demanded of me. “I offered them payment in exchange for their help.”

A bit of a stretch, but still not a lie. My sister still looks like she doesn’t believe me, though.

“No one helps someone for no reason,” she says skeptically, making me grin even though I sort of wish she’d just drop it.

But I raised her, so she knows how shit works... and she’s not wrong.

“Not for no reason,” I agree. “The Reapers are West Point’s enemies. It’s why I came to them. The two gangs are at war, and getting you out of there fucked up the drop McKenna sent you on. That’s good for the Reapers because it’s bad for West Point, so it was a win all around.”

She nods, chewing on her lip as she processes that information. Then she swallows. “Well, I’m glad the drop got fucked up for West Point. They’re awful. Austin is awful.”

“Did they... make you dance a lot? At that club?” I murmur.

That's not even the question I really want to ask, and still, a part of me wonders if I can handle hearing her answer. I need to, though.

More importantly, I can tell Chloe needs it. She needs to get it out so it doesn't fester.

"Yeah," she says with a snuffle.

Haltingly, she starts to tell me about her time with West Point. How they used her. Groped her and demeaned her. Made her dance in their club and berated her if she didn't perform to their bullshit standards.

At some point, making sure none of the guys are hovering in the hallway, I lead her out of the bedroom and down the hall to the bathroom, gently cleaning her up as she talks. I clean myself up a little too, because we both end up crying by the time she finally gets through telling me everything.

Thank fuck none of those bastards actually raped her, but her time with West Point was still horrible. They treated her like an object, a pawn. And the drug drop we pulled her out of wasn't the only dangerous situation they put her in.

I can't stand knowing how close she was to danger, and how far I was from being able to help her. Not a single member of West Point saw her as anything other than expendable, those motherfuckers, and even though I'm literally washing their blood off our skin, I want to make them pay all over again.

"Come on, let's get you dressed in something better," I tell her softly once we're back in the bedroom, meaning something that doesn't smell like gun smoke and death

"Is this new?" she asks when I hand her one of the shirts Dante bought me.

I nod, deciding not to tell her that she's trading one gang-bought outfit for another.

I'd rather have her in Reaper clothes than in anything from West Point.

The confused mash of emotions I've felt toward the Reapers pales in comparison to how much I hate West Point for what they did to my sister.

Chloe slips into the clothes I hand her, smoothing down her dyed blonde hair as she glances around the room and then back to me. "I can't believe you've been stuck here. That you put yourself through all this for me."

"It wasn't the same as what you went through with West Point," I say, wanting to reassure her. "I hated them when I first came here. They scared the shit out of me. They're *Reapers*, right? None of them trusted me when I showed up begging for their help, but things changed a bit over time. I sort of got to know them."

"What are they like?"

"Complicated. Dangerous. But they're also... more than that. They're nothing like I expected, honestly." I clear my throat, steeling myself as I speak the words I've been avoiding ever since we left the warehouse burning in our wake. "We're going to have to get out of Halston, Chloe."

Her face drops, worry and uncertainty crossing her features. "Are you sure?"

Fuck, I wish I wasn't. And not because I'm so attached to my old job or any of the people I knew at Club M. Not even because our dad, our last living relative, is here.

The reason I don't want to leave is because of the three men in his house.

"Yeah," I say with a reassuring smile, careful to keep my thoughts off my face. "We'll wait a couple of days until the dust settles, but we definitely need to relocate somewhere safer."

While I'm grateful for the protection Maddoc is offering by insisting that we stick around for a few days, I know that the only true safety to be found will be away from this city. Away from West Point and Frank and Capside and all of it.

Chloe twists a lock of hair between her fingers. "Where will we go?"

I've got no idea, but I keep smiling and fake it. "Anywhere you want. We'll look into good schools for you, then we'll just pick one in a new state and start over there."

"But what about your job?"

"Don't worry about it. I'll find another one. Stripping isn't exactly the kind of career that's hard to break into, wherever we end up."

"And... Dad?" Chloe asks hesitantly.

"*Fuck Frank,*" I say fiercely, hoping like hell she won't try to defend him in any way. But her shoulders relax, and I realize that whatever softness she still had toward him dried up and died when he sold her.

Good.

"We've got nothing to keep us here in Halston, Chloe," I say, gentling my voice. "And it will be fun, right? We can go anywhere. Maybe head down south for some better weather?"

"Yeah, maybe," she says, her eyes lighting up a little. "Maybe I could even pick a school by a beach somewhere?"

Neither of us have ever even been to a beach, but why not? We really will be starting over from scratch—including me figuring out how to pay for her to go to college now that I've handed over every cent I saved toward it—but to keep seeing that light in her eyes, I'll make it happen. Whatever it takes.

I drag in a deep breath, and the movement makes the wound at my side twinge with pain.

Shit. I really do need to get it looked at.

I toe off the heavy boots Dante gave me to wear for the mission tonight, then cross to the bed and pull back the covers before glancing at Chloe.

"You've been through a lot tonight," I tell her. "Get some rest while I go let Logan stitch up this scratch, okay? We can figure out everything else in the morning."

"Yeah. All right."

Exhaustion is written clearly across her pale face, and she doesn't push back against my suggestion, crawling up onto the bed and curling up beneath the blankets. She even lets me tuck her in, something I haven't done in years.

"Sleep tight," I whisper, pressing a kiss to her temple. "I'll be back in a bit."

As I pad over to the door and turn the light off, her eyelids are already falling shut.

RILEY

I'VE GOT no reason to be nervous as I approach Logan's bedroom, but that doesn't stop my heart from racing.

The thin cut he made on my chest has healed to nothing but a faint red line, but I can still vividly remember what the knife felt like as he dragged it across my skin. I can also recall the way he almost begged me to tell him to stop... and the way my mouth stayed glued shut.

I pause outside Logan's door to wipe my sweaty palms on the sides of my pants, taking a second to try to get my shit together before I knock.

It's just stitches, I remind myself. In and out, and then it will be done.

I blow out a breath, then lift a hand to the door, and Logan startles me by swinging it open before my knuckle can rap against the wood more than once.

"Shit," I blurt, my fist still hovering in the air. "Um, I guess you were waiting for me?"

I can see some kind of medical kit laid out on the bed behind him, which means Maddoc must have told him he'd have to patch me up. So he probably has been waiting for me.

"Yes." He nods, his expression impossible to read.

He may have opened the door, but he's still blocking my way, as if he's not entirely sure he wants to let me in. I glance around quickly, trying to keep the movement of my eyes subtle. I've only been in his room one other time, and the

memory of that time—and of what happened afterward—makes me shiver.

“Sorry to keep you waiting,” I tell him, clearing my throat. “I was just getting Chloe settled in. She needed to decompress a bit, and I don’t think my wound is even bleeding much anymore, so I figured it wasn’t urgent. Not that I really know what constitutes ‘urgent’ when it comes to gunshot wounds. This was my first time being shot, so I’m not really much of an expert.”

I realize I’m rambling and force myself to stop talking, pressing my lips together.

Logan is still staring at me with those penetrating light blue eyes, so after a long beat of silence, I clear my throat and ask, “Um, should I come in?”

He sighs, his jaw tightening, but finally steps aside.

I guess, in Logan-speak, that’s an invitation.

Now it’s my turn to hesitate. *Do I even really need stitches?* Maddoc was so fucking pushy about it, though, and if I’m about to be on my own with Chloe, it’s definitely a bad idea to risk my wound getting infected or anything.

“Thanks,” I murmur. I slip past him, and he closes the door again.

Instantly, I feel claustrophobic, as if all the air has been sucked out of the room. I’m acutely aware that I’m alone with him in his private space. I’ve already seen the inside of his bedroom, but it’s different now, with him watching me as I take it all in.

I squeeze my hands together so they won’t shake as I glance over at him and ask, “Should I sit on the bed?”

Logan blinks, then lets his gaze slowly slide down my body, hovering over the blood stains at the bottom of my shirt.

He looks back up at me. “No.”

“Then where—”

“Lie down,” he instructs, his voice cool and measured. “On your side. After you take your shirt off.”

My pulse kicks into a fast, almost frantic pace, but I do what he said, undoing the heavy bullet proof vest I’m still wearing and setting it down on the floor, then tugging off my shirt. That leaves me in only my bra, and my nipples peak beneath the thin fabric as Logan stares at me for a long, loaded moment. The weight of his undivided attention is so heavy that I could almost imagine it’s his hands skating over me instead of his gaze.

Goosebumps spread over my skin as I walk over to his bed and carefully lie down on the perfectly made bedspread. I wedge my arm under my head as I roll onto my side, but Logan shakes his head.

“Move your arm,” he commands. I do, wincing a little at the pain in my side, and I watch him carefully as he lifts the lone pillow on his bed and wedges it under my head instead.

I’m surprised he gave me his pillow, honestly. He’s obviously very protective of his stuff, so I would’ve thought he’d be worried I would get blood on it or something.

“Thank you,” I murmur softly. “That’s better.”

He doesn’t answer. Instead, he carefully lowers himself to the bed, sitting right next to me and touching me with a clinical precision that’s so... *him*. He cleans away the blood from the raw, angry wound at my side, puts something on it that stings like an angry bitch, then reaches for the medical kit.

I close my eyes, already anticipating the pain of the stitches.

He doesn’t warn me, doesn’t pause at all when he first threads the needle through my skin.

“Fuck!” I hiss, my body tensing at the sudden bite of pain.

That gets a reaction from him—or a pause, at least, if only for a split second. Then he goes right back to it, stitching my torn flesh back together with an intensity of focus that I can only remember feeling from him one other time.

So many things about this moment remind me of that night. The way he was utterly silent and completely terrifying when he came into my room and sliced the clothes off my body. The sharpness, care, and precision he must've used as he cut up all of my things, leaving only tatters and shreds.

I can still feel the touch of that knife... and I'll always bear the scar.

A shiver passes through me, and a small sound almost like a moan escapes my lips before I can stop it. Logan pauses again, his eyes lifting to mine for a moment. Then, as if he can read my mind and knows what I'm thinking about right now, he looks down at my chest.

His gaze traces the red line where he cut me, right between my breasts.

Then he lifts his hand, his finger following the same path.

I suck in a breath, my body suddenly desperate for oxygen as if I'm drowning. But the deep inhale only has the effect of making my chest press harder against the gentle touch of his finger. His gaze leaves the thin scar, darting to my face, and the air in the room seems to thicken.

"Admiring your work?" I rasp out, my voice oddly husky.

He stiffens, as if he's been caught doing something he shouldn't, and he jerks his hand away.

"Hold still."

His voice is a cool monotone like always, but there's a raspy quality to it just like there was in mine.

Silence falls between us as he finishes stitching up the gash at my waist, and although the first push of the needle hurt like a bitch, my body starts to get numb to it after a while. Even though I feel every thrust of the needle, every tug of the thread, I'm barely aware of those sensations. I'm too caught up watching Logan. Too confused by the way my body remembers the pain he's inflicted, twists it up with the pain he's causing me right now, and still feels drawn to him. Attracted on some truly fucked up level that should probably repel me.

It doesn't. And his silent intensity just makes me feel like the two of us are trapped in some sort of strange bubble together. One of pleasure and pain. Attraction and anticipation. The feel of his hands on me, the way he pierces my skin and controls my body as he puts me back together, is both invasive and intimate.

Logan is dangerous. I've sensed it from the start, but even knowing how easily he can hurt me and that a part of him clearly wants to, it's almost impossible to fight the part of me that's drawn to that.

To *him*.

His fingers brush against my skin, a smooth counterpoint to the line of pain he's stitching into my flesh, and goosebumps erupt across my body.

He notices.

Of course he notices.

This man notices *everything*.

His gaze roams over them, a look of utter fascination on his normally blank face, as if he's never seen anything like this. Then he blinks, shifting his focus back to the stitches. He ties off the thread and cuts away the extra before rising smoothly to his feet.

"You're done." he says flatly, looking away.

He picks up my shirt and holds it out to me. I take it from him, then wince a little as I pull it over my head and the raw line of stitches—another mark I'll always bear from him—pull at my waist. Logan stands at a distance, keeping his gaze averted.

He's always seemed so enigmatic and terrifying, but now he seems almost afraid of *me*, as if he's scared to let me get too close, or even to look at me. For some reason, that thought makes me feel less anxious than I did when I arrived. I may be completely off-balance here, but at least I'm not alone in that.

"Thank you," I murmur as I tug down the hem of my shirt. "For the stitches. But also for Chloe. For helping to get her

back tonight.”

I really mean it. I’m grateful from the bottom of my heart that they actually got her back. I owe a lot to all three of the men in this house, but Logan is the one who planned it, who made sure all bases were covered despite the variables he couldn’t account for, who thought everything through and left no room for mistakes. And then he took out the Capside men as easily as he flipped the French toast he made me the other day.

Smoothly. Effortlessly. Precisely.

I draw in a breath, fighting back my emotions, and Logan looks up in time to see me blink the tears from my eyes. His brows draw together, and he takes a small step closer to me.

“Thank you,” I repeat, my voice dropping.

“You’re... welcome,” he says stiffly.

“I know you didn’t want to have anything to do with me at first. I know you hated me,” I whisper. “And I know it’s been hard on you to have me here, in your space and in your home, but I’m still so grateful for everything you’ve done. And at least it will be over soon, right? I’ll be gone before you know it, me and Chloe both.”

“You’ll be gone soon.”

Something flickers over Logan’s face as he speaks, and it seems almost like he’s just now realizing that I’ll be leaving with Chloe as soon as Maddoc gives us the okay. That my time in this house is almost done.

I’m not sure which one of us moved this time, but we’re standing closer together now than we were before. We’re so near to each other that I feel each breath he exhales flutter over my cheeks. Close enough that his ice-blue eyes are all I can see, staring into mine like he’s trying to pull me apart with his gaze. Dissect me in a way only his mysterious brain can ever hope to understand. Figure out what makes me tick, the same way a curious little boy might take a watch apart to figure out how it works.

A shiver runs through me, my breath catching in my throat, because I have to wonder...

If he takes me apart, would he be able to put me back together again? And should I be scared that I'm not sure I care?

A part of me wants him to do it, even if it hurts. Even if there's nothing left of me afterward.

It's the part of me that's born of darkness but drawn to that eerie intensity of his like a moth toward a blazing flame, compelled to move closer to what's guaranteed to make me burn.

"You're leaving," he whispers. "You'll be leaving us."

His fingertips skim down my wrist and drag over my palm, a touch so light I shouldn't even be able to feel it.

But I do.

I feel it everywhere.

His gaze dips to my mouth, and my stomach swoops. He's not quite holding my hand, but it almost feels like he is, and it makes my chest feel suddenly too tight, my breath catching in my throat. My tongue darts out to wet my lips, and I sway toward him without meaning to.

"Logan..."

My voice is barely more than a whisper, but he jerks as if I shouted his name. The shutters fall over his face again, and he steps back so abruptly that I almost lose my balance.

"Get out," he says, his voice raspy.

I take two quick steps back, my heart thundering against my ribs, then turn and leave his room without looking back.

What the hell is going on?

As insane as it sounds, I can't escape the feeling that Logan almost just... kissed me.

And even more crazy than that?

I wanted him to.

RILEY

I DART DOWN the hallway away from Logan's room, heading toward the door to my bedroom, but when I reach it, I pause. Chloe is probably sleeping by now, and I'm feeling too ramped up and off kilter after what happened with Logan to try to join her.

Now that I'm not distracted by adrenaline, worry for my sister, or the strangely arousing feeling of Logan's fingers on my skin, the full pain of the newly stitched up wound in my side is beginning to set in. A dull throb radiates outward from my waist, pulsing in time with my heartbeat.

So I detour to the bathroom to dig up some aspirin, swallowing them and then staring hard at myself in the mirror. I left the bullet proof vest in Logan's room when I left, and the blood staining the dark shirt I wore on the mission tonight is starting to dry, making the fabric tacky and stiff. I pull up the hem of the shirt and check out the stitches Logan gave me, unsurprised to find that they're as tight and neat as if they'd been done by a machine.

Did he really almost kiss me?

I feel a little insane for even thinking that, given how clear he made it that he disliked me when I first arrived here. But things have changed between me and all three of the men during my time living under their roof, and I can't deny it. Even though I still get nervous around Logan, it's not for the same reasons I used to. The fluttering of my heart feels much more like attraction than nerves, and I can't help but wonder

how much more things might change between us if they were allowed to grow and develop.

Do we really have to leave Halston?

The voice in my head sounds partly like Chloe's and partly like mine. I know she wasn't thrilled about the idea of leaving, and if I allow myself to be honest, I'm not either.

But could we stay? Would any of these men even want that?

Or would they cut me out of their lives anyway, happy to forget everything that's happened between us even if Chloe and I remained close by?

I don't have answers to any of those questions, but the good news is, I also don't have to decide anything tonight. Shit always seems clearer after some sleep, so I'll start making a real plan tomorrow morning.

But since I can't see myself actually falling asleep quite yet, I decide to head down to the kitchen. I've got no interest in eating right now, my stomach still squirming with the aftereffects of all the shit that's gone down tonight, but it would be nice to bring something up for Chloe to eat when she wakes up.

As I start to pad downstairs on bare feet, I'm so caught up in my thoughts that it takes me a minute to notice the hushed voices coming from the first floor. Logan is still in his room, so unless someone came by the house this late at night, it must be Maddoc and Dante.

I'm glad they're still awake. I should go thank them too.

When I reach the first floor, I head toward the office, the floor cool under my feet. It's definitely Maddoc and Dante talking in the office, and even though I can't make out everything, what I do hear has my footsteps pausing.

Chloe.

They're talking about Chloe.

I go as still as stone, holding my breath as I strain to pick up what they're saying.

“...you think McKenna knew?”

That’s Dante, and there’s none of the laid-back charm or easygoing good humor I’m used to in his voice. Right now, he sounds like a killer. Like a *Reaper*.

Maddoc’s low laugh in response has a vindictive edge to it. “Fuck no, he didn’t know. You think he would have been using her in a drop like that if he knew what he had on his hands? But now that they’ve lost her and we have her, we’ll finally be able to...”

Whatever it is that Maddoc thinks they can do now is lost to me, becoming nothing more than a low mumble, as if he’s covered his face or moved farther away or something.

I stare straight ahead, not really seeing anything as my mind races. *What the fuck? What’s going on?*

Dante speaks again, and although I miss the first part of what he says, I catch the tail end of it.

“... gonna seriously come in handy if Logan’s intel is good.”

“Of course it’s good,” Maddoc answers, pausing for what sounds like another drink. “But if we’re... stay in control, one of us will have to... and she won’t want... her choice.”

“Damn,” Dante says, making my eyes prick with tears as I picture the wry smile on his face and the way he’s probably shaking his head when he says it like that. “But better us than those fucking weasels, yeah?”

Maddoc snorts. “Better us than anyone. This is war.”

“The princess isn’t gonna like it.”

“What she likes isn’t a consideration,” Maddoc says in a hard voice that makes something shrivel up inside me. “She delivered her sister right into our hands, and it’s up to us to make this situation work for us.”

I bite back a noise, clenching my fists tight enough that there will be half-moon divots carved into my palms. I still don’t know exactly what they’re talking about, but I’ve heard

enough to piece together the fact that they were only pretending to be on my side.

They told me they were going to help me get Chloe back as a way to fuck with West Point and do damage to a rival gang. But that was a lie. What they really wanted was *her*.

I don't know why. I can't even imagine a reason my baby sister would be part of any "intel" Logan dug up. But they clearly want to use her for something, and the next words I hear send my heart into my throat.

"...force her?" Dante asks.

"If we have to," Maddoc answers grimly. "But I bet we can find a way to be persuasive."

I've heard enough.

As tempted as I am to burst into the room and rail at them, to pound against Maddoc's broad chest with my fists as I tell him what a fucking bastard he is, I can't afford to let my emotions get the better of me this time. Moving carefully and quietly, I retrace my steps down the corridor and then creep back up the stairs, avoiding the step that I've learned sometimes squeaks a bit.

It was all a trick. The Reapers fucking used me. But I'll be damned if I'm going to let them use my sister too, let alone force her into something.

Or fucking "persuade" her.

My heart is thundering so loudly in my chest as I finally slip into our room that I'm amazed it doesn't wake Chloe up or bring the Reapers running. Neither happens, though, and for a second, I lean against the door and stare at my sister.

She looks so damn peaceful. So safe and innocent, curled around a pillow with her face relaxed in sleep. None of that is true, though. We're not safe here and won't be until we get the fuck away.

Think, Riley. Think.

There's nothing of value in this room except the clothes Dante brought up for me, but I do know where Maddoc has

my phone.... and the money I gave him.

“Fucking bastard,” I hiss through clenched teeth, then press away from the door. Moving quickly and quietly, I pull on some clothes that are a little more practical for running, then slip on the boots I wore earlier. I grab the same type of outfit for my sister before tiptoeing over to stand beside the bed.

“Chloe,” I whisper, shaking her lightly and then covering her mouth when her eyes drift open.

They go wide, but she doesn’t make a sound. She’s smart enough to realize that if I’m waking her up like this, something has gone wrong.

Once I’m sure she’s fully conscious, I take my hand away, leaning even closer to whisper in her ear, “Get up and get changed. We have to leave.”

She nods again and reaches for the clothes I picked out for her, following my lead. My mind races as she dresses quickly, agitation crawling through my veins. We can’t run yet. Maddoc and Dante are still downstairs, and if we try to slip out now, they’ll catch us. As far as they know, I still trust them. They think I’m up here sleeping with Chloe, completely unaware that they have plans for her that they kept secret from me.

We’ll have to wait until they fall asleep. Then we’ll slip out and run for it.

“Where are we going to go?” Chloe whispers, her gaze darting toward the bedroom door.

She’s dressed in the best I could find for her out of what Dante provided. Dark jeans with pockets. Two layers of shirts and a lightweight hoodie that she can pull up over her hair. Industrial-looking ankle boots and a pair of fingerless gloves that are meant for style but might offer a little warmth, a little protection, depending on where the night takes us.

I swallow back my real answer—that I don’t fucking know—and come up with something on the fly.

“I know a guy,” I say, which is only half true. I know a shit-ton of guys. None I’d trust with my sister. None I’d trust to help us get away from the Reapers, or any other gang. But we’ll figure it out once we get out of here.

Chloe chews her lip, uncertainty crossing her face. “We can’t just go back to the apartment?”

I smooth my hand down the back of her hair, shaking my head as I listen with half an ear for any signs of movement in the hallway outside. “No. You know we can’t. Too many people know we live there, and no one can know where we are. We can’t trust these men, Chlo. I was wrong.”

She nods, tucking her hands into the sleeves of her hoodie, and she looks so young and lost that it breaks my heart.

I *just* promised her she was safe. What a fucking liar I was, even if I didn’t realize it at the time.

“Don’t worry,” I whisper. “We’ll take it step by step. First, out of Halston, okay? Then we’ll have a little breathing room to pick which beach you want to head for.”

She nods again, and a knot forms in my stomach.

It was stupid to trust the Reapers. Stupid to let my guard down. And downright reckless to actually believe that these three men cared about me.

Those moments I thought I had with Maddoc, the concern in his eyes when he realized I’d been shot tonight? Lies. Even the things that happened between me and Dante—the painting, the sex, the times when his easy charm made me laugh—were nothing but bullshit.

Because they all knew they were planning to use my sister, and they kept that from me.

I’m not sure how much time passes while we wait, but eventually, I hear the telltale signs of Maddoc and Dante each heading to their bedrooms. Their doors close, and the house goes quiet, but I force myself to wait longer, giving them time to fall asleep. Every minute that passes by feels like torture, and only once I feel confident that enough time has passed do I nod to Chloe.

She nods back, a sharp jerk of her head, and I crack the door open a little and peer outside. *Clear.*

I ease the door open wider and lead my sister out of the room, moving carefully as we head down the hall.

There's a step that sometimes creaks on the stairs, and I silently point it out to my sister. She nods and skirts around it, sticking behind me like glue and moving as quietly as a shadow as we make our way downstairs.

Once we reach the first floor, she tilts her head toward the front door, raising her eyebrows in a question.

I shake my head.

If we're going to make this work, I need my phone, and I need that fucking money. There's a back door just past the office, and it will probably be smarter to leave through that one. It will give us less chance of being seen by any neighbors, and I'm pretty damn familiar with the landscape back there from all the time I've spent staring out my bedroom window, so I've got a good idea of which direction to head.

I squeeze Chloe's hand and lead her back toward Maddoc's office.

"What's that?" Chloe breathes as we enter, her eyes darting to the dim outline of the map on the wall.

"Halston," I answer, sparing it a glance that's more of a glare. Whatever the Reapers' end game is, I know it has something to do with that. With the gang territories Maddoc marked on the map, making this corner of the city I grew up in look like something foreign and sinister in the dim light coming through the window from the streetlights outside.

I shush Chloe when she tries to ask something else. She knows better, but she's nervous. I get it. Now isn't the time, though.

I check a couple of drawers in the desk, grateful that they slide open smoothly and silently, and finally find what I'm looking for.

“Here,” I whisper, handing Chloe the envelope of cash and my phone. “Put these in your pockets.”

She stows them carefully, and I usher her out of the office and then turn us toward the back door. But as we start to move in that direction, a noise from behind and above us draws my attention.

The creaky stair step.

THE BLOOD FREEZES in my veins, every atom in my body seeming to seize up.

Fuck.

We’re not the only ones who are awake.

RILEY

MY HEART LURCHES. I have to get Chloe out of here, but if we run, whoever it is I just heard on the stairs will follow.

At least, if we *both* run.

“Go,” I breathe quietly, tilting my head toward the back door. “Head east.” She stares at me blankly, frozen in place, and I point emphatically. “That way. I’ll just be a few minutes behind you.”

But Chloe is already shaking her head, one hand covering her mouth as her eyes shimmer brightly in the faint light.

She doesn’t want to leave me. I get that. But she *has* to. The Reapers are ruthless, and this is my only chance to get her out of their house.

“Go,” I hiss. “Now, Chloe!”

I give her a little push, and she finally jerks into motion and slips past me, heading for the back door.

I want to watch and make sure she gets out of the house okay, but I don’t have time for that. Every second counts, so I quickly shuck off my shoes and socks, pants, and sweatshirt, then dart back toward the stairs, keeping my footsteps as light as possible.

I need to cover for Chloe for as long as I can, giving her a chance to get away from these fucking monsters that I was stupid enough to start to trust. I’ll figure out how to leave the house myself once whichever man suddenly decided he needs a late night snack goes back to sleep.

It turns out it's Maddoc, and he's just reaching the bottom of the stairs when he looks up and sees me.

"What are you doing up?" he asks, his eyes heavy-lidded from sleep. He's dressed in a pair of gray sweats and a soft looking t-shirt that clings to his muscles.

Dammit. If he came downstairs because he heard us, I'm fucked.

But instead of looking suspicious, his gaze slides down my body before slowly coming back to my face, a hint of a smile hovering around his lips. I knew what I was dressed in before wouldn't pass as sleep clothes, but now all I've got on are a pair of panties and a thin t-shirt.

Desire flares in his eyes for a half second, there and then quickly masked behind his usual stoic expression as he tilts his head. "Couldn't sleep?"

"No," I tell him, keeping my voice light as I do my best to block out every single worry about Chloe getting away, every memory of him laughing with Dante about how they're going to *use* her like a pawn. "Chloe's out like a light, and I dozed for a little bit. But I guess I just have too much adrenaline leftover from the fight at the warehouse."

He nods. "That can happen. After the first gunfight I was in, I drank half a bottle of whiskey and still couldn't sleep. It gets easier. And you did well. A hell of a lot better than I did, my first time out."

He chuckles quietly, and it fucking hurts. If I didn't know what I know, the way he's looking at me right now would make my stomach flutter. It would almost make me believe that those moments when he seemed to care about me were real.

I don't know if Chloe has made it out of the house yet, but either way, I need to keep him distracted. I can't let him go poking around downstairs and realize that she's fled.

"Um, I'm actually glad you're awake," I say quickly, moving toward Maddoc, desperate to keep his focus on me in

case Chloe makes a noise as she slips out the back door. “I was going to head to the kitchen for something to eat, but...”

I dig deep, putting everything I have into summoning back the way I was feeling about him before.

Before I heard that damning conversation of his.

Before I knew about his betrayal.

I rest a hand on his chest, right over the soulless void where his blackened heart beats, and let him see everything I felt then—*before*—in my eyes. “But since you’re here, I wanted to say thank you.”

My gut twists as I speak the words, but I ignore it, keeping my focus on Maddoc.

“For Chloe,” I go on, smiling softly up into his eyes. “For saving her. Tonight meant everything to me.”

It’s the same thing I said to Logan, and I meant it with all my heart when I whispered it to him, but right now, it’s just a performance. The most important one of my life, with stakes a hell of a lot higher than just getting a few dollars tucked into my g-string.

Maddoc stares down at me, his face half in shadow at this angle. Then one hand brushes lightly down my side, skirting around the stitches at my waist.

“You’re welcome, butterfly,” he murmurs quietly, sounding so sincere that it makes me hate him even more. “Did Logan fix you up?”

I nod, not trusting myself to say anything that isn’t “fuck” followed by “you.” But then I hear something in the distance, a faint sound from outside. I’m not sure Maddoc even heard it, and I’m not sure if it’s Chloe, but I can’t afford to have him investigate.

So I do the first thing I can think of to draw his focus. Acting on pure instinct, I go up on my tiptoes and kiss him.

He stiffens, not kissing me back at first, and for a split second, I think I’m truly fucked.

He knows.

He's going to push me aside and go after her. Chase her. Catch her.

But then it's like a damn breaks inside him. His arms band around me, hauling me against his tall, broad frame. His lips turn hungry, forcing my mouth open as he backs me against the wall at the base of the stairs and pins me there. He kisses me back, hard and hot and completely unchecked, like he's been starving for this. Like he can't help himself.

The kiss feels like being bowled over by a tidal wave, like I'm drowning in it with no hope of surviving.

"Fucking hell," he grunts, nipping at my lip before sliding his tongue into my mouth again. Devouring me. *Consuming* me. His hands roam my body as if he's trying to map every inch of it with the same precision as that damn map in his office, groping and squeezing my ass, my breasts, my hips.

"Goddammit, you taste so good," he groans. "Why do you have to taste so fucking sweet?"

All of his usual calm control burns up in a flash of heat that feels like it could burn us both to the ground as he grinds against me, his tongue sliding into my mouth like a promise.

His cock thickens, pressing against my stomach, and my heart jackrabbits in my chest.

I want to kill him for his betrayal, but I still wind my arms around him as an undeniable, throbbing heat spills through me. The attraction between us has always been something chemical and dangerous, something that defies reason or logic. And now that the fuse has been lit, it's too late to stop it.

His lips move down my throat. Biting. Marking. Lighting me up in ways that I hate myself for.

He lied to me.

He wants to use my sister.

He's the enemy.

I close my eyes and repeat it over and over as I tangle my fingers in his thick dark hair, holding his head in place and moaning when he sucks hard on the delicate skin.

It fucking hurts. And it's fucking fire.

Arousal arcs through my body, and his hands go to my ass, lifting me against him. I wrap my legs around his waist, the cold metal of the gun he always tucks in the back of his waistband a stark reminder of who he really is.

"Maddoc," I gasp, rolling my hips as the pressure of his cock against my clit makes sparks flash at the edges of my vision.

"Gonna make you come so hard," he promises, the hand he's got under my ass urging me to grind harder against him.

I groan, burying my face against his shoulder as hatred battles with the fierce heat blazing inside me. I'm only vaguely aware of the dirty things he keeps whispering as he carries me away from the stairs.

Chloe's gotten clear of the house by now. She must have. But she's smart. She'll keep going. She'll trust me to find her, and the farther she gets, the safer she'll be. So this, whatever I have to do to keep Maddoc occupied, is necessary. I need to give her as much time as I can, so that she can get as far away from this pit of traitorous vipers as possible.

Maddoc carries me into the kitchen and lowers me to my feet, attacking my mouth again like he's feasting on something he's denied himself for too long. He growls against my lips, his hands skimming my waist lightly enough that I know he's being careful of the stitches despite how obviously turned on he is. Then he grabs my ass again, gripping it in a possessive hold.

I want to scream at him. He's already hurt me where it counts, so acting like he gives a shit now, acting all careful and considerate of my injury, is nothing but another lie. Another reason to hate him.

I deliberately twist away, needing to feel the pain as the move pulls hard on my stitches.

I hope it bleeds.

But Maddoc doesn't let me get far. He grabs me again, his lips and tongue and teeth working their way down my throat and driving the pain into the background. Pure sensation, electric and sharp, shoots through me like lightning, straight down to my core.

"Fuck," I gasp, hating how good it feels.

Maddoc laughs, low and dirty, as he carries me through the kitchen. We crash into one of the stools at the island, and it wobbles, almost toppling to the floor. It stays upright, thank fuck, and Maddoc's tongue traces the throbbing pulse point on my neck as he sets me down on the counter next to the fridge. One of his hands stays at my waist while the other pins my wrists against the cabinet above me.

"I've been going fucking crazy," he mutters. "You drive me goddamn crazy, butterfly, do you know that? Never been so tempted to break every one of my rules."

"So break them," I pant, a challenge in my voice.

He groans against my mouth and lets go of my hip to delve his hand into my panties, sliding his fingers through my folds. I'm wet already, and we both moan at the feel of it as he presses a finger inside me. He slides it deep, and even though it's not as thick as his cock would be, the intrusion makes my inner walls clench down tightly around him as he pumps it in and out a few times.

Using my arousal to slick the way, he circles my clit with the finger that was just inside me. Once. Twice. The third time, I buck against his hand, my fingernails digging into his shoulders, and he flicks my clit in response. I can't tell if it's meant to be a punishment or a reward, but the sparks of pleasure cascading through my body really don't care what it is.

"Lose the shirt," Maddoc commands, letting go of my wrists to allow me to pull off the thin t-shirt.

As it drops to the floor, he tugs sharply at my panties, sliding them down my legs and tossing them away.

“Fucking beautiful,” he murmurs once I’m fully naked, running his hands over my body with a firm, possessive touch. “Been wanting this for way too fucking long.”

He cups my breasts, thumbs rubbing harshly over my pebbled nipples, and I bite my lip to try to control my reaction to him. The way he’s touching me, rough and possessive and unrestrained, would be fucking perfect... if it were anyone else but him.

If it were any moment but this.

Instead, it’s torture.

It’s too fucking much, now that I know it’s all built on lies.

Tears leak from my eyes, and I kiss him hard to distract both him and myself, reaching down to palm his cock through his pants.

“Fuck.” He bites out the word, grabbing my hand to stop me. “Easy. I’m not coming in my pants tonight, butterfly. Not when I’ve got you right where I’ve been wanting ever since you came to our house.”

Taking a small step back from me, he tugs the gun he almost always has with him from the waistband of his pants, setting it down on the counter before kicking off the gray sweats and his boxer briefs.

Then he moves like lightning, spinning me around and planting a hand between my shoulder blades, pushing me down over the counter as he leans over me. He rubs his thick cockhead along my wet slit as he nudges my legs apart.

“Fucking need this,” he mutters, lining himself up. “You want me to fuck you? You want my cock?”

I can’t make my mouth form the words, but it doesn’t matter. My head is already nodding, my body having completely lost track of the line between subterfuge and raw desire.

“Such a good fucking girl,” Maddoc groans. Then he drives into me, bottoming out with a single thrust.

“Jesus fuck,” I pant, my hips slamming into the edge of the counter and my pussy clenching around his thick shaft.

This is all just a ploy to distract him, but my body doesn't care. It craves the hard fuck he promised. It wants this, no matter what the consequences may be.

“Shit,” Maddoc grits out, gripping my hips tight enough to bruise as he grinds into me, already buried deep but still trying to go deeper.

He sucks in a shuddering breath as his hips press against my ass, like he's struggling for control.

“You shouldn't feel this fucking good,” he mutters, finally pulling back before slamming home again. And then again. Going just as hard as he promised. Fucking me brutally enough to make my legs shake.

“Fuck, yes, please,” I beg, telling myself the words are just an act. That the pleasure is a lie. I'm so fucked up in the head that I don't even know what's true anymore.

He drives into me, then cracks his hand against my ass without any warning.

“Oh *god*,” I gasp, my pussy tightening around his cock as the sharp sensation rocks through me, too hot and urgent to be called pain, too fucking intense to be pleasure.

“God isn't listening, baby,” Maddoc mutters, one callused hand rubbing over the hot sting as he keeps fucking me hard. “But I am. And I want to hear you scream my fucking name.”

He spanks me again, and I go up on my tiptoes as an electric current of sensation surges through my body. “Shit. Don't... stop.”

“Won't,” he grunts out. “Can't. Fuck, I need to see my marks on you again.”

His palm collides with my ass two more times, each one intensifying the feelings building up inside me, and when he suddenly stills with his cock buried to the root inside me, my jaw drops in surprise.

“Red looks really fucking good on you,” Maddoc murmurs, dragging me upright and pushing my hair aside to press a hot, open-mouthed kiss behind my ear. “But I want to see your face when you come for me. I want to see every expression. Every breath. Every-fucking-thing.”

He pulls out and turns me around to face him, his eyes burning into me, and my pulse jumps.

I don't want him looking at me right now. I'm too raw. So full of fucked-up, conflicting emotions that it will be a struggle to keep him from seeing too much truth if his eyes are on my face as he fucks me.

So instead of letting him watch me, I palm the back of his head and crush my lips to his again, throwing myself into it as if I'm hurling myself off the edge of a cliff.

He groans into my mouth, gripping my thighs and lifting me onto the counter a split second before he slams into me again.

“So... damn... good,” he grunts with each thrust after finally breaking our kiss. But thank fuck, he doesn't look at me. At least, not at my face.

He stares down at my pussy instead, his eyes full of desire and a fierce possessiveness as he watches his cock ram into me.

He's taking me apart, driving into me so hard that each thrust shoves me backward on the counter. Each time, he drags me close again with a tight grip on my hips that keeps me anchored. And each time, it makes me feel owned and *wanted*, fucking with my head even more.

Letting out a low, feral noise, I nip at his bottom lip and then kiss him hard. It's just as savage as the way he's claiming me, and it's exactly what I need to unleash all the twisted feelings inside me. A wild, totally out-of-control kiss that's as cruel and punishing as I can make it.

Maddoc takes it all. Hell, he seems to like it, fucking me even harder when I bite his lips and claw his back.

It pushes me over the edge, forcing me to finally give him exactly what he wants.

I come in a rush, an orgasm tearing through me and dragging a guttural cry from my lips. His name is buried in the sound somewhere, and I rip my mouth away from his and muffle the noise against his neck, hating how good it feels.

He fucks me right through it, cursing roughly as his hips stutter.

“Fuck, baby. *Fuck*. Gonna fill you up. Take my cum. Just like that, you’re so fucking good.”

His relentless rhythm finally breaks as he follows me over the edge, his hips jerking. I feel his cock swelling, pulsing inside me with each jet of cum, and then he finally slows to a few final, deep thrusts.

“*Shit*,” he breathes, the sound dragging out on a slow exhale. “I’ve imagined this way too many times. But this was better.”

His body is draped over mine as I lean back on the counter, his cock still buried inside me, barely softened at all. For a single, blissful moment, it’s all gone. All the anger, the hurt, the pain. Nothing else exists but the two of us and the connection that shimmers between us like a spiderweb.

Then the fierce pleasure that rocked through my body turns into something toxic and poisonous.

Maddoc nuzzles my neck, and my skin crawls.

I have to get out of here. I can't fucking be here anymore.

Chloe is long gone by now, I’m sure of it. She’s free. But I never gave any thought to how I might get out after she escaped. All I cared about in the moment was covering for her so that she could get out of the house without being seen.

As Maddoc lifts his head and smooths my hair back, his eyes warm and his face flushed, my gaze drops to the gun he left on the counter.

Moving in a flash, I wrap my fingers around the cool steel, gripping it tightly. Before I can stop to consider what I’m

doing or second guess myself, I lift it to Maddoc's temple.

He stiffens, the warmth in his expression turning to shock. He pulls back, just far enough to look into my eyes... and rolls his hips just enough to remind me that his cock is still buried inside me.

"What the fuck do you think you're doing, butterfly?" he asks, his voice eerily calm as he narrows his eyes.

I grit my teeth and press the gun harder against his skin, grinding it into his temple.

"What I have to," I bite out. "What you *made* me do. You forced my hand when you betrayed me."

My finger curls around the trigger, my pulse racing. Maddoc's nostrils flare as he senses the movement, and tension crackles in the air as he holds my gaze, his gray eyes churning like storm clouds.

Then he moves.

It's so sudden and smooth that it catches me by surprise, one muscled arm shooting up and knocking into my forearm with bruising force.

The gun flies out of my grasp, and he jerks away from me, his cock slipping free as he dives for it.

Fuck. No!

I push off the counter and land on him with a grunt, grappling for control as we both reach for it, my hands sliding on his naked, sweat-slick skin. The gun goes skittering across the floor, and I cling to his back as he lunges for it, then scratch and claw at his face, digging my fingers into his hair and yanking his head back to keep him from reaching it.

He's a better fighter than me, stronger and more well-trained, but I'm running on pure adrenaline and a primal, bone-deep will to survive. I lash out with everything I have, managing to land a lucky blow against the back of his head with my elbow.

He grunts, going down to the floor, and I scramble forward and grab the gun. The second it's in my hands, I roll onto my

back, holding it with both hands this time as I aim it at him.

Maddoc freezes, already up on one knee with an arm extended toward me.

“Don’t. Fucking. Move,” I bite out.

Slowly, he lowers his arm to his side, shaking his head. “Whatever you’re thinking about doing, butterfly, I promise you, it would be a mistake.”

“Don’t call me that. And my only mistake was trusting you,” I say. I’m panting as hard as I was while he fucked me, but now it’s from adrenaline and fury. “This whole goddamn time, you three assholes have been after Chloe for your own gain. I *heard* you and Dante in your office. You lied to me. You want to use her for something that will benefit you. Rescuing her was never about helping me.”

My voice cracks on the last part, and something shifts in his eyes, his expression hardening.

A part of me is still waiting for him to tell me I’m wrong. That there’s some other explanation. That I can trust them after all.

That I mean something to him.

But of course, he doesn’t.

I don’t dare blink as I steady the gun with both hands and keep it pointed at his face, slowly sitting up, then getting to my feet.

“What do you want with my sister?” I demand.

“That doesn’t concern you,” he murmurs, his face completely shuttered now. “And I never lied.”

“The *fuck* you didn’t,” I hiss. My hands shake before I steady them again. “I need to know what this is about. Why do you want her? Tell me!”

“That wasn’t part of the deal,” Maddoc says flatly. “We did what you asked. We got her away from McKenna. We never discussed what would happen after that.”

His words twist in my chest like a knife, the sharp pain making it hard to breathe. I knew he could be cold and calculating, but hearing him speak so callously of the bargain we made breaks something inside me.

Maddoc slowly rises to his feet, his hands at his side as his gaze locks with mine. I know he'll try to get the gun again, that he's probably already looking for an opening or a weakness in my stance. I know he's used to winning, and that he built his gang up into the force that it is because he'll do whatever it takes to survive.

But so will I.

I shove aside the painful, chaotic mess of emotions in my chest and raise the gun. I know by now that the man in front of me doesn't have a heart, but I aim the barrel where one should be.

"You're right," I say calmly, my hands completely steady this time. "None of that was part of the deal. And neither was this."

Then I fire the gun.

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I saved his life.

Now he's invaded mine.

Two years ago, a split-second decision changed everything. I risked my life for a man I didn't even know and nearly died for it.

I've tried to forget him. To forget that whole night.

But he hasn't forgotten me.

He's been watching.

Obsessing.

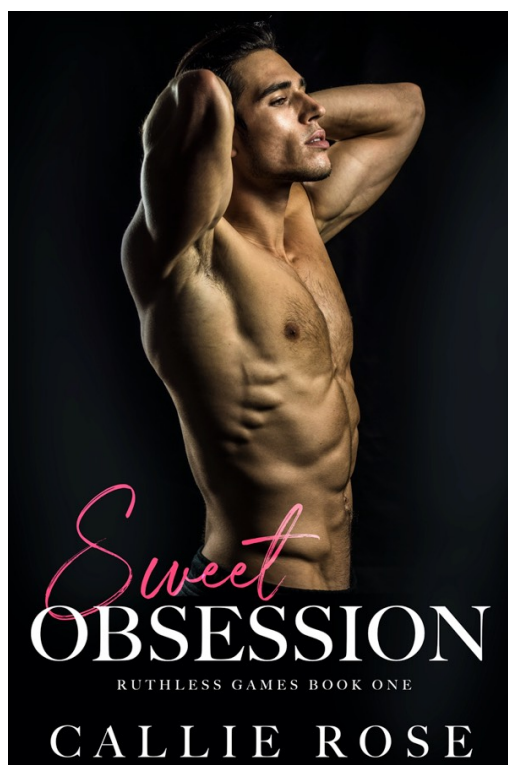
Craving.

And when he crashes back into my life like a wrecking ball, accompanied by two dark shadows—men he calls his brothers—the life I've been trying to rebuild for myself shatters into a thousand sharp-edged pieces.

He believes our souls are bound by blood, and he's come back to claim what's his.

Two years ago, I saved Marcus Constantine's life.

Now I wish I hadn't.



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