

A man and a woman are shown in a close, intimate embrace. The man is on the left, shirtless, with a beard and dark hair, looking towards the woman. The woman is on the right, with long dark hair, wearing a black top, and has her eyes closed. Her hand is resting on the man's face. The background is a plain, light-colored wall. The overall mood is romantic and sensual.

LOST BOYS
BOOK FIVE

JINXED

EMILIA FINN

Jinxed

LOST BOYS BOOK 5

EMILIA FINN



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Dedication

This book is dedicated to banana milkshake dates.

Because the simple act of mixing milk, fruit, and ice cream together, and selling them for five dollars a cup, brought a sick man comfort in his time of need.

What was just another day for a little girl, was everything to that hurting man.

Now he's gone, and she's grown. And it's only as a mom herself, that she understands just how profound those milkshake memories really were.

Go ahead and make a milkshake before you read this book. Then in a few years, or a few months, think back to today's shake and reflect on how you feel.

Are you smiling, even though it hurts?

Me too.

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Drake

T slip a twenty in the teeny-tiny glittering panties of a twenty-something-year-old dancer just doing her best to eat and get through college.

Music thuds through the dark-lit club, and the bass thumps up from the floor until my legs vibrate. A salacious grin slides across my lips as Cora—that’s the name she gave me—turns her back to me and lowers her ass to my lap.

I’m just a man. A mere mortal, doing my best to stay focused while a beautiful woman gyrates on my thighs.

The fact that I’m but a human with weaknesses and desires makes my job difficult as I turn my head and find my partner in almost exactly the same predicament as me.

“I dunno, Gord.” I set my hand on Cora’s hip and push her forward, just a smidge, so she doesn’t brush over the steely length I try so hard to hide.

My gun. FYI. Not my cock.

“These girls are getting younger and younger every fuckin’ day.”

“Just do your job.” Gordon Reginald Fuller is my partner. My closest friend. I was the best man in his wedding and the first, besides the doting parents, to hold his baby girl in the hospital. I became godfather to Matilda Fuller and the funnest uncle any little girl could have.

I am a single man, not unwilling to go the extra mile to sell my undercover identity to the men we’d like to toss into a cage.

And usually, Gord is a dedicated agent, too. He's brave and smart. He's willing to put himself in harm's way to keep the newest cooked-up powder concoction off our streets and out of the noses of teens lining up to die. But he keeps his hands to himself tonight, his eyes scouring the club. Far away from the dancing girl aiming to pay her rent for the month.

"If you tell Violet we were here," he grits out, his jaw tight with frustration and his eyes jumping with equal parts anger and mirth, "swear to god, Banks, you get me in trouble with my wife, and I'm gonna throw you in front of a train."

"You're aggressive." Laughing, I reach into my breast pocket and take out another bill—fuck knows if it's a single dollar, a twenty, or a hundred. It's departmental money, and if I don't spend it, they'll take it back. So, I slide it into the stunning Cora's thong and earn myself a playful grin as she looks over her shoulder. "You're beautiful and smart and will do just fine in your upcoming exams."

She chokes out a giggle, losing her sex-kitten composure, and snorts so little piggy sounds erupt from the base of her throat. "You're somehow *both*, a complete misogynistic pig and a woman's hype man. It's an odd combination for a man inside a club like this."

"I'm a complicated being." Cameras watch from every corner of this elaborate club. Security walks through to keep the girls safe, and others wander past to sell product to young folks looking for a fun night.

I can hardly hear anything but loud music. Cora has to shout to be heard, but Gord's voice, at least, pipes through the hidden device nestled in my ear. "I'm a man who respects women," I tell her. Though I slide my hand along her firm thigh to sell my part to the cameras no doubt panning in closer to make sure we're doing what's expected of a couple of men in a club like this. "I love my mom very much. I love women in general."

"You love sexualizing them," the *stripper* in glitter counters. "You love having that power dynamic where you're the boss and I'm to dance and look pretty."

“It’s literally your job,” I respond, though I do it with a smile. “This is how you’ve chosen to make money.”

“Stop arguing with her,” Gord admonishes in my ear. “You know she picks at you. She’s proud.”

“Yeah, but she likes it.” I flash a charming smile when she glances over her shoulder again and raises a brow.

“You say something?” she questions loudly. “You wanna speak up so I can fight back?”

“Nope.” I catch movement across the room. A trio of suits come through the side entrance, sauntering across the packed club from person to person. The one in front owns the place. He shakes hands and makes friends. The other two on his flanks are his goons. Big guns, small brains, and trigger fingers they’ve never thought to restrict. Taking another bill from my pocket, I slip it into Cora’s panties and murmur for Gord, “Gregory Vallejo. Eleven o’clock.”

“Yeah.” Stony-faced and rigid, he nods. “I see him.”

“We got two soldiers on his wings,” I report, not only for my partner but for the guys in the surveillance van parked a block down the street. “Can confirm one is Gavin Stevens.”

“We already got his jacket,” Gordon inserts. “It’s almost as long as Vallejo’s.”

“You better start enjoying that dance.” I reach across and smack his shoulder the way drunken pals might. It’s in character. It looks right for this kind of place. “You look like the law, stupid. Smile and stop thinking about Vi, or you’re gonna get us caught.”

“Focus.” My SAC’s voice grates against my nervous system and into my heart. It’s an irritating feeling and makes being undercover in a kingpin’s club all the more difficult.

Though, that could be because my Special Agent in Charge is also my dad.

Having him in my ear and on a dangerous op sends my instincts skittering almost as much as seeing my best friend screw up and draw attention from Vallejo himself.

“Gord,” I bite out between tight teeth. Then I wrap my arm around Cora’s trim hips and sell my role more. “Vallejo’s incoming.”

“Shit.” He turns his girl with a simple hand on her thigh and pulls her down to straddle his lap. She does her job well and rides him closer until his face is basically buried between her tits; her long hair creates a curtain of sorts, shielding him from outsiders. “Talk to me, Banks.”

“Twenty feet out,” I murmur. “He’s carrying, and so are his men. Henry?”

“We’re not bringing him in for carrying a concealed weapon,” my father responds. “We’re here for the product. You gotta get eyes on the bulk shipment before we make a move. We’ve tracked small-time dealers for eighteen months already. We followed them up the line, and now we’re onto Vallejo. I intend to shut him down. Which means we need shipments. We need transport. We need an in. Become his best friend or find yourself a soldier who’ll flip for you.”

“For fuck’s sake.”

“Drake?” Gordon mumbles, his voice becoming tenser. “Eyes?”

“Fifteen feet.” I drag Cora closer despite her muscles tensing up. We’re not supposed to touch. She has a right to dance without being manhandled. But I need her to take the asshole’s focus from my partner, so I pull her closer and bite out a grunt when she slides against my weapon and squeaks in the back of her throat. “Just be cool,” I whisper by her ear. “Keep dancing, and I’ll get you home safe and a little richer.”

“What the fuck is going on?” She spins in my lap and straddles me the way Gordon’s girl straddles him. She grinds and rides, her arms going up and her long hair tickling my hand. “Who the hell are you?” she growls.

“Special Agent Drake Banks.” I place one hand on the small of her back to support her weight while she dances, and keep the other close to my weapon as Vallejo wanders closer.

Though every step he takes, someone else moves into his path and tries to become his buddy. “DEA,” I whisper.

“What?!” She shoves back from my lap and snarls. “All this time?”

“Just doing my job.” I pull her in again and slip a twenty in her thong. “Just like you’re doing yours. If you keep dancing, I’ll keep paying. You go home tonight with your rent paid for the month, and I go home without a bullet in the back of my head.”

“You’ve been coming here for ages,” she hisses. But she dances. She accepts her part in our charade and smiles for the cameras. “You’ve been funneling taxpayer money into a dirty club for months already.”

“Into *your* bank account,” I snort. Then I glance past her and lock eyes with Vallejo. “Fuck.” I drop my gaze and press my lips to the girl’s collarbone. “We’ve made contact,” I murmur for Gord and the team outside. “Eye contact.”

“Good work,” my father rumbles, the always switched on professional. “Now wait for him to come to you. If he doesn’t, that’s fine. We’ll come back tomorrow night and wait. If he does, you’ve got a way in.”

“It’s my anniversary today,” Gordon groans. It’s not the same groan as those coming from other high-spenders near us. Not the same sound any other man might make inside this club. “My girls are waiting for me.”

“Special Agent Fuller,” Henry barks, the sharp sound stinging my ear. “Get your head on straight and see this case through.”

“Easy,” I admonish almost silently. “We’ve been under a long time.” Half of me wants to end my sentence with *Dad*. The other half, *Special Agent in Charge Henry Banks*. The first feels dumb, and the second is a mouthful I’ve never enjoyed. “We know they discourage sending agents undercover on dates that pose a risk to their mental state. We all knew today was special for Fuller. You pushed for this anyway.”

“It’s okay,” Gord grumbles. “It’s fine.”

“We got intel that Vallejo was bringing in a shipment tonight,” my father snarls. His marriage to the job, to the next mission, to the next takedown and payday, is the reason his marriage to my mother never worked out. “If you want out,” he continues, “then you stand up and walk out right now. You slip more money into those women’s underwear, make your excuses, and go. But be aware that doing so compromises our case and may result in Vallejo’s refusal to allow you entry into his club in the future. We’ve worked for this, Special Agents. We’ve laid the groundwork, so if you—”

“Mister... Donner?” I disconnect my lips from Cora’s collarbone with a suction-like gasp and swing my head around to find Gregory *fucking* Vallejo on my left, just a foot-and-a-half from where I sit.

Stunned, I follow the line of his body upwards. Past a slick black suit and shined black shoes. His waist is round. His hands, thick and tanned dark. He wears a gold chain around his neck, heavy enough to weigh a lesser person down, and a crisp white shirt, unbuttoned just enough to see a smattering of curly black hair poking out the top.

Swallowing, I bring my gaze up and meet his too-smooth face, dark brown, which is a direct contrast to his almost white hair.

“That is your name, correct?” He tilts his head and raises a single brow as a million thoughts ricochet through my mind. “It is the name on your credit card. And the name you gave Rico.” He casts a glance toward the bar and indicates the bartender I’ve spoken to a handful of times over the last few months.

Gord keeps his head down. His lips busy. And his hand close to his gun, just in case.

“Well?” Vallejo presses impatiently. “Your name?”

“Y-yes.” I pull back from Cora just far enough to free my hand and offer it to the man who towers over me. Though if I stood, I have no doubt it would be him looking up at me.

“Chase Donner.” I flash a friendly smile and watch his henchmen on the sides.

Just in case.

“And you are?”

Vallejo laughs. A fast, coughing sound that makes his chest jump and belly roll. But he takes my hand in a tight grip and pumps. “Gregory Vallejo,” he confirms. “I am the owner of this club.”

“Oh! Of course.” I slide Cora off my lap and slowly come up to stand. Non-threatening. No drama. This is just me respecting a man and meeting him eye-to-eye. “I’m sorry I didn’t know.” I finish shaking his hand and extricate mine from his grasp before setting it on my hip. “I’ve heard good things about this club, Mr. Vallejo.”

His lips twitch into a subtle smile. “Yes?”

“And even better things of the owner,” I press on. “Your dancers speak highly of the man who runs this place.”

“I should think so.” He spares a look for Cora but brings his focus away quickly enough to let us all know he doesn’t give a single fuck about her. She’s neither a threat to him nor valuable. She’s unimportant, and should she stop coming to work, he’ll get another girl in to fill the spot without a sniff of trouble. “I’ve noticed you inside my club for many months, Mr. Donner. You spend well. You treat the girls well.” He looks me up and down—my jeans and shirt to his three-piece-suit—and smirks. “My men tell me you sell companies for a living.”

He’s researched me. Running my cover story long before we ever met.

“You enjoy slicing companies up and getting rich off someone else’s hard work?”

“I enjoy money. It’s how I afford to put girls through college.” I allow my lips to curl, and when Cora sidles a little closer, I slip my arm around her torso and place my fingertips beneath her bra strap, where the fabric meets her rib cage. “I guess some would call me a philanthropist of today’s youth.”

“Hmm.” He brings a hand up, setting my instincts on fire with uncertainty, but he merely flicks his wrist and sends Cora darting away to continue her work.

Elsewhere.

“My companies are not for sale, Mr. Donner.” He leans a little to the left and peers past me, so I know he’s looking at Gord. Then, bringing his gaze back to me, he raises both brows and sends a lava-like sensation sprinting to the bottom of my stomach. “Business partners?”

“Yes.” I fake a chuckle and wave him off. “He’s getting married soon and feeling a little cold about it. So, I figured as his friend and business partner, it’s my job to make sure he’s getting quality pussy before the big day.”

“A philanthropist,” Vallejo repeats. “You’re a good friend, Mr. Donner.”

“Easy now,” my father murmurs in my ear. “He’s got an angle on you.”

Shut the hell up. “Well...” I lift a single shoulder in a shrug and turn my body slightly to the right. “It’s been a pleasure meeting you, Mr. Vallejo. You needn’t worry; my friend and I are here for pleasure only. We have no desire to buy your club.”

“You don’t want it?” he argues. “It’s not good enough for you?”

“Ha.” I choke out a nervous laugh and feel, with my body, not my hands, where my weapon is wrapped around my torso. *Fix this, Drake. Stop pissing him off.* “I buy failing companies, Mr. Vallejo. I strip them back to annoy their disgraced former CEO and sell each portion for a tidy profit. Your club appears, to me, to be a thriving success.”

“Mmm.” Pleased now, no man immune to a little ego stroke here and there, he turns on his heels and takes a step away. “Come with me, Mr. Donner. I invite you to join me in private.”

Dread balls in my stomach and leaves me swinging my gaze around to Gord. He still has his dancing girl, but his face

is white and body rigid with anxiety. “Uh...”

“Now.” One of Vallejo’s soldiers grabs my arm and yanks me away from my chair, toppling it over, though the sound can’t be heard above the din of thudding club music. “No one declines Mr. Vallejo’s invitations.”

Shit. Shit. SHIT!

“You’re going in,” my father barks in my ear. “Fuller, remain where you are. Have Special Agent Banks’ six. Banks —”

“Yeah,” I yank my arm from the soldier’s grasp, taking solace in knowing Vallejo’s back is to me. I owe his men no manners. No kindness. “I got it.”

“We’ve still got eyes on you,” my father announces. “Sending Special Agents Trueman and Gage inside as well. You’ve got time,” he continues. “You’ve got safety. And this is the closest we’ve come to Vallejo in years, so straighten your spine and take control of the situation.”

I guess I should respond with *yes, sir*. Or *affirmative*. Or *I’m a pussy bitch and will do whatever you want, more because you’re my dad and less because you’re my professional superior*. But I keep my lips shut instead and spare a fast glance back across the club to Gord, then to the doors as men amble in.

They don’t look my way, and I don’t linger on them.

But fuck if my instincts aren’t screaming at me the further I move away from my partner.

“Stay sharp,” I command, using the club’s loud music to cover my voice. “This smells bad.”

“Focus, Special Agent Banks.”

“It feels wrong,” I bite back. “It all feels wrong.”

“In here.” Vallejo’s soldier, Gavin Stevens, jerks me out of the main room and into a tight hallway I’ve already studied via blueprints before ever stepping inside this club. Even in the dark, I know bathrooms are situated further along on the left and changing rooms on the right. The kitchen comes off this

hallway too, but as Stevens brings me to a sharp stop and then left, I know where he's taking me. "Heading up to the office," I report quietly. "I only have one soldier on me."

"I see the other one," Special Agent Trueman murmurs. Music still pounds through my earpiece, and again in real-time, so the two compete. "He's hovering near Fuller."

"Fuckkkkkk..." We're trained, all our professional lives, to trust our instincts. To walk through a door when it's necessary, even under fire, but to stay the fuck away from that door when our gut says to.

My gut, tonight, says I'm about to die. It says this shit is bogus, and no way Vallejo is gonna pull a random dude from his club and invite him up to his office for no reason.

He wants something from me.

Or he smells law enforcement and is about to put a bullet in my head.

But to turn around and decline Vallejo's offer ends with a slug in my back anyway.

"What's up here?" I speak louder to be heard over the music, tapping Stevens on his muscular shoulder to draw his attention. "Where are we going?"

"Shut the fuck up." He continues up, knowing I'll follow. But just in case I get a wild hair, he slides his suit jacket back and frees his gun to hold it at his side. So I see it. So I know I'm dead if I make a wrong move. "Mr. Vallejo has requested you come to his office." He visibly, obnoxiously, switches off the safety on his pistol and glares at me over his shoulder. "Means you're gonna go to his fuckin' office."

"Hostiles approaching Fuller's six," Trueman says. I turn and look down the stairs, though I know I won't be able to see him. "Three of them," he continues. "Armed and dangerous."

"Maintain your cover," my father orders. "Stay undercover, Agents. Don't blow this now."

"This way." Stevens turns faster than his beefy body would suggest he could and grabs my shoulder to shove me up the

final stair and into a poorly lit hallway. He pushes me ahead of him, so my situation somehow turns from being led to slaughter to walking the plank instead.

Both versions suck.

“We see you via thermal imaging,” my father announces. “Two hostiles at the end of the hall. Three more inside Vallejo’s office.”

“So I’ve got five,” I sigh. “including Vallejo.”

“What the fuck are you saying?” Stevens grabs my shirt and yanks me around with a fast swing that has my feet skidding on the carpet runner beneath them. “You say something, asshole?”

I look down at his veiny hand, calm and composed on the outside, before reaching up and opening his fingers to force him to release me. “It would seem I’m Mr. Vallejo’s guest.” I shove his meaty fist away and stare directly into muddy brown eyes. “Manhandling me will no longer be tolerated.”

“I asked,” he takes a step closer and grits his teeth so I catch the glint of a single gold incisor, “what the fuck did you say?”

“I was singing under my voice.” I turn on my heels and stride toward the door at the end. Stevens is a gym rat who injects extra juice on the side, and his career inside a drug cartel’s private security, it would seem, has kept his temper and emotions close to the surface.

I’m safer with Vallejo than I am in the hall with his muscle.

One of those men has control. The other, doesn’t.

I come to a stop at the office door and look up at the damn near seven feet of strength posted on each side. “Chase Donner.” I keep my hands to myself and skip the usual pleasantries when meeting someone new. “Mr. Vallejo is expecting me.”

They don’t speak. Neither of them open their mouths for even a second. But they both nod, so their bald heads glisten

under the party lights of the dark club. Then the one on the right grabs the knob and pushes it wide to allow me entry.

Gregory Vallejo's office is exactly how I expected it would be. Rich with tapestries, glittering with diamonds and adornments, and bathed in money. His desk is massive and weighs no less than a ton, I'm sure. His chair, tall and extravagant with dark leather and high armrests.

The two hostiles already reported to be inside, man the door in the same fashion the two on the outside do. While the third hostile—Vallejo himself—sits behind his desk and prepares a cigar for himself.

He clips the end off with a glittering silver cutter and sets the sealed end on his dark oak desktop.

I start forward slowly. Non-threatening. And I look around as though in awe, the way any "Regular Joe" businessman would when in a sparkling new space. But when *Joe* would focus on the pretty gold and dripping money, I confirm where the exits are.

Picture windows on my right. Two of them. A door hidden in the tall bookshelves lining the back wall. I can't see that doorway without walking up and inspecting it closer, but I know it's there. The schematics we already procured assure me so.

I glance back at the door I came through, and all four men who watch me now, then I bring my gaze to their boss and fake a smile. "Your office is fancy, Mr. Vallejo. You're an exceptionally successful man."

"Yes." He brings his lighter up and flicks it to life, the bright orange flames dancing and swirling until the end of his cigar glows and a puff of smoke races from between his lips. I come to a stop six feet from his desk, set my hands on my hips, and wait. "I am an extremely successful businessman, Mr. Donner. As was my father, and his father before him." He sits back in his chair, brings one leg up to rest his ankle on the opposite knee, then he flicks a wrist in my direction. "Sit down. Talk with me."

“I mean...” I cough to clear the nerves from my throat and pull the visitor chair closer. “Sure. Though you have me at a disadvantage, Mr. Vallejo.”

He takes another puff of his cigar and raises a brow behind the waft of smoke he breathes out. “I tend to ensure everyone I deal with is at a disadvantage. Though I ask...” He lowers his hand and meets my eyes, “What precisely do you mean?”

“Well... I guess I’m just unsure why I’m here.” Then I gesture his way. “With you. I came out tonight expecting to help my buddy shed some of his pre-wedding blues, drop a few dollars down the panties of a dancing girl, and make it home by midnight.” I set my hand in my lap and shrug. “I understand you may have heard of me in the business world, but I was never looking to buy any of your companies, Mr. Vallejo. So I wonder if there’s been a misunderstanding.”

“Good,” my father murmurs in my ear. “Good cover. Get him to talk. Trueman?”

“Fuller’s still where he started. Still with his girl. Hostiles are hovering nearby. But they’re not approaching.”

“I’m just gonna keep my head down,” Gord mumbles from the bosom of a woman who was a teenager a few short years ago. “Stay alert, Banks.”

“There has been no misunderstanding,” Vallejo inserts, drawing my focus entirely back to him. “Merely, curiosity on my part. You deal in business. I deal in business.”

“Get him to talk about his business,” my father barks in my ear. “Get him to talk, full stop.”

Swear to god, if he doesn’t shut the fuck up...

“Do you only own clubs, Mr. Vallejo?” I bring my leg up and settle my ankle on my knee, matching the other man’s pose, albeit unintentionally. “I must confess, I don’t know a lot about your ventures.”

He brings his cigar to his lips and inhales, while simultaneously chuckling low on his breath. “If you do not know, then perhaps it’s best left unsaid.”

“Push him!” Henry orders. “Get him to say it.”

I shrug instead and push my father’s voice out. “I don’t intend to pry. A man is entitled to his privacy.”

“You think so?” Vallejo nods toward the men over my shoulder, and though I’m too controlled to glance back and watch what they’re doing, I still catch movement in the reflection of a framed picture on the bookshelves lining the wall. I watch as soldiers file out, and pull the door closed. I hear the lock snick, and then a second, louder, and much more secure lock engage immediately after.

That door is no standard fucking timber sheet. But a steel-reinforced panic room kinda setup. Which means I’m not leaving until they want me to, and Vallejo isn’t at risk as far as they’re concerned.

“What secrets do you hold, Mr. Donner?” Vallejo takes another puff of his cigar and grins through the smoke that comes right after. “What kind of things do you know, but wish to keep quiet?”

“Abort mission!” Trueman’s shouted order makes me jump in my seat and adrenaline to surge through my blood. My eyes cling to Vallejo’s hand as he lowers it down and opens a desk drawer. “I repeat! Abort mission.”

“You come into my club,” Vallejo taunts, taking a Smith and Wesson 500 from the drawer and setting it on the blotter in the middle of his desk. Cover blown, I surge up from my chair and yank my service pistol from beneath my shirt, but he’s fast. He’s practiced, and already has his pistol pointing directly at my face. “You think you’re slick, Special Agent Banks?”

Fuck. Fuck. Fuck!

“You want to speak of fathers and the family business?” Slowly, he rises from his seat, his aim firm and sure. “Mine made us very wealthy. Very, very wealthy.” He grins the grin of the devil himself, pushing adrenaline through my veins so I feel like I weigh a ton, while at the same time, like I could fly. “Yours is gonna be the reason you die today.”

“Abort!” my team shouts in my ear. “Our cover is blown.”

No fuckin' shit.

“Henry Banks is your father, no?” Vallejo saunters around his desk and comes to me, unafraid of the weapon that hangs limply from my pointer finger. “Unfortunately for you, young Drake, you look entirely too much like him. And he and I go back a long way.” He comes to a stop three feet from where I stand and reaches out to relieve me of my pistol.

Its absent weight, like an anvil crushing my skull.

“I clocked you the first time you walked into my club, Drake Banks.” He tosses my gun onto his desk, then takes a step closer and sets the tip of his Smith & Wesson on my forehead. Cold sweat breaks out along my spine and makes my heart knock in my chest. “Henry Banks has been looking for me for decades. In fact, I recall him being up my ass thirty-five years ago, which is about the time you were born, no?” He sniggers so his body jumps and his gun scrapes across my brow. “The birth of a son didn’t even slow him down.” He *tut tuts*. “It’s no wonder your mother left him.”

“I’ll kill you.” Panic makes way for anger, and anger makes it much easier for me to operate. “You speak of my mom, and you sign your own death warrant.”

He chokes out a laugh and cocks the hammer of his pistol. “I fucked your mother, son. I’ve been closer to you than you’ve ever been to me. I’ve been in your home. And not for a single second, not once in all the time you’ve been in this club, have you fooled me or my men. But I take personal offense to some low-rent cop whose rank is a result of nepotism and thinks he can walk in here and put a dent in my organization.” He lowers his pistol and shoots off a round so fast, I don’t even feel the slug pierce my leg, nor when it blows out the back of my thigh.

But I feel the fire. A moment after the explosion, I feel the heat and roar.

“Shots fired,” Trueman shouts from somewhere else in the club. More go off, but in my distraction, Vallejo swings his arm around my neck and spins me until my back slams against

his chest, and the muzzle of his gun, still hot from the shot before, burns against my temple.

“Tell your daddy you’ve been hit, Banks.” He turns us until we face a fifty-inch flat screen TV embedded in the wall, and though he doesn’t touch a remote or bark out a verbal order, the screen flickers to life and reveals security footage of the club downstairs. “I said,” he squeezes my neck and cuts off my air, “tell your daddy you’ve been hit. Bring him in here. We’ve got unfinished business, and the fact he sent you to do the job he started only reinforces what I always knew: he’s a fucking pussy.”

“Fuck you, Vallejo.” I grit out, searching the room for an exit. “This is between you and me now.”

“Because Henry’s retired?” he laughs. “Come now, kiddo. Fifty-eight-years-old is hardly time to hang up the boots. I’d know,” he adds smugly, cocking his gun a second time so the click-click ricochets through my skull. “I’m two years his senior and have no desire to slow down yet.”

“You’re dealing with me now,” I repeat. “Maybe the old folks couldn’t get you behind bars and rotting away as someone else’s spit roast in prison. But I’m not them, and I’m gonna finish what was started.”

“Uh-huh.” He brings his free hand up and grabs my chin so I’m almost sure he intends to snap my neck. But he forces me to look at the television, instead. Then he orders, “Do it.”

“Do it?” Panic instantly lances through my blood. “Do what? Vallejo, do—”

On the screen, in live time, I get a front-row seat as three of Vallejo’s soldiers corner Gord downstairs and others—dancers and their paying customers—scramble and search for freedom from a club under siege. “No!” I jolt in Vallejo’s grip and heave when reality smacks me just a single heartbeat before three shots go off.

“Gord!”

Another three shots. Bullets pierce my partner’s chest and blood bursts from his body like a gory horror show. Red paints

the floor. Agent's shout in my ear. Some scream about the mission, and others of a man down.

My father, too silent, unfeeling, the way he so often is.

But I hear none of it. Not really.

All I hear is the loud ringing of bullets exploding throughout the club. Upstairs and down. A war being waged among a thug's armed soldiers and that of trained special agents.

Vallejo laughs as Gord collapses to the floor in 5k high definition, and though it's not possible, I hear Violet's cry of anguish. And Matilda's sobs when she realizes her daddy is gone.

"You fucking asshole." My left leg is dead weight. Burning in agony. But I duck faster than his sixty-year-old arms can keep up with and grab the blade I keep hidden in my boot. Then I flick it free of its handle and swing around before the man has a chance to recover. I dig the blade into the side of his neck, the second burn of a bullet wound passing through my arm and out the other side as I drag the knife across in a furious rage. Vallejo drops to the ground, the thunder of soldiers pounding at his door bringing me around in panic.

I've got two through-and-through bullet wounds so far. Better for healing. But I'll have a dozen more ten seconds from now if I don't move, so I dash to Vallejo's desk and snatch up my gun. I step over the old man and afford him only a second of study to make sure he's dying. Then I put a round in his stomach for good measure, before sprinting to the second-story window and emptying another two rounds through the thick glass pane.

My leg burns, and my arm weighs a ton. Worse, I catch a last glimpse of my best friend on the security feed bleeding out, much like the man responsible is doing on his office floor.

Vallejo's men get the armored office door open, so bullets slam into every wall, destroying expensive artwork and shattering crystal vases, but I don't stick around to catch more

than I've already got. Instead, I dive through the broken window and pray my men are outside, and not Vallejo's.

"I'm coming out!" I shout so every agent with an earpiece knows where to find me. "Vallejo's office window. Second story. West facing exit." I float in midair for only a hair's breadth. But it feels almost like an eternity before gravity takes control and the ground sucks me down and gobbles me up.

I slam to the concrete, my dead leg hitting first and the back of my head rapping against the ground second. My vision turns spotty, and my heart slows from blood loss.

Men converge on me. Loaded weapons, heavy boots, and tactical gear wrapped around their bodies completely different from the clothes Gord and I got to wear.

We were sent in as sacrificial lambs. Barely armed. Unprotected. And in the end, for no reason at all, since Vallejo knew who I was.

A black curtain draws across and darkens my vision, but I catch my father's footsteps as he strides closer. My life pools on the concrete beneath my body, my consciousness flickering in and out. I could lie here for a second or an hour. I have no clue.

Maybe I'm dreaming. Maybe I'm dying, and that's why the man in front of me seems a little more... paternal. Concerned, even. Because I swear, Henry Banks kneels beside my wounded arm and places his fingers against my neck.

Maybe I'm already dead.

"Gord?" That one word stings. My throat was drier than a college girl dancing for sixty-year-old men to make rent. But I swallow and close my eyes. It's easier than trying to look past the floating dots. "Gord?"

"He didn't make it." Henry's tone is brisk and unyielding. Then his hands hurt as he lifts me from the ground and slings my arm over his shoulder to carry my weight. "We gotta go."

"Gord?" My head lolls back and consciousness escapes me as a second man grabs me on the left and helps. My boots

drag, and the gunfight continues to ring out somewhere far away. "Gord."

Aurora 'Rory' Swanson

February

My name is Aurora Swanson, and I'm a twenty-one-year-old jinx.

Bad luck follows me wherever I go, like a shadow I was born with and a coat I never asked for. If something could go wrong, chances are, the universe will single me out and make sure I'm its target.

If Armageddon was a real thing, Ben Affleck would have taken the seven-point-something billion other humans up on his spaceship, thus saving their lives and leaving me down here on earth to await the end of days.

If I was a dinosaur, I'm certain they wouldn't be extinct. The asteroid would have smacked me on the head only, sparing the rest.

If I had siblings, I would be the ugly duckling, black sheep, no-brained one of the group.

That's not to say I think I'm unattractive or uneducated. But surely, my sister would be model-beautiful like Miranda Kerr, and my brother... well, maybe a young Ben Affleck.

Luckily for me, my parents stopped procreating after the first. Though, that had nothing to do with their satisfaction with the child they got, and instead, everything to do with the affairs my father had while my mom was pregnant with me.

Like I said, the shadow of bad luck sticks close by.

I walk through the glass sliding doors of the Copeland City Hospital with a limp. I've done this every day for months, which means as I pass the nurses' station and recognize familiar faces, they allow me to go about my business and limp-shuffle toward the elevator.

Three months ago, I'd have chosen the stairs every time. Broke college girls can't afford a gym membership, which means I'd take the incidental exercise wherever I could find it. However, two-and-a-half months ago, I was minding my own business, sleeping in my car atop a hill overlooking a quiet little town, when a drunk driver slammed his shitty truck into the side of my car and shattered my femur.

I was coming home to be with my mom, but that accident destroyed my car, pushed my travel plans back by a month and ended with the surgery that placed nuts and bolts and all sorts of machinery inside my thigh, and a massive bill destroying my bank account and credit rating.

Why should I pay for that hospital stay, when it was his fault for putting me there?

But that damn coat of luck just thrills at the idea of making my life more difficult.

Now I walk with a cane—for a while, anyway—and my leg still smarts in the cold. Februarys in Copeland City aren't much fun. The snow continues to stick, and the wind bites enough to hurt a girl's bones. However, Februarys in *any* city suck when you're staying in an old, tiny, fibro home with lackluster insulation and noisy neighbors.

But when your wealthy father bangs every female colleague past, present, and future while his pregnant wife is at home puking her guts up and unable to get out of bed, jerks like him tend not to hand *anything* over in divorce without a judge prying it from their stubborn, spidery hands.

Which means twenty-one years ago, my mother was left homeless. Jobless. Hopeless. And expecting a kid in a few short months.

The moment I was conceived, I'm convinced I became her bad luck.

The tiny fibro home I speak of was hers. Her hard work. Her blood, sweat, and tears. It was her three jobs, while raising a daughter, and every other weekend when she had to share me with the jackass who screwed everything up, she had a fourth job and used her free time productively.

The home I speak of isn't actually a place I dislike. But rather, a point of pride. It's a safety net and a house filled with peace. Unconditional love. It's resilience and teen anguish. It's talking of the future and excited girly squeals the one or two times either of us had a date.

My mom is still single these days. Her life got away from her, and her spare time was spent on me or repairing things inside that old, decrepit house. She's only forty-six-years-old, so objectively, she should have plenty of time to renovate and still slide on a layer of lipstick before a hot date.

What's the opposite of Lady Luck?

Judy Jinx, maybe?

Well, here comes Judy Jinx, riding in on her stallion and slamming my mom's body with enough cancer that instead of counting down to a fun date, we're counting down to the end.

We had months. Then we had weeks.

Now we have right now.

I hobble into the elevator and come to a stop beside a couple of tall cops who give a friendly smile and head tilt that everyone knows is a polite greeting. One wears a badge hung around his neck, and the other, a chain and wedding band hung around his.

They both stand easily over six feet tall, forcing me to look up as I return their polite smile and spin to face the doors. Whether they were discussing something important, I have no clue, but they keep their mouths shut now as I hit the button for the fourth floor and wait as we ascend.

I don't carry a purse. Nor a bag, except when I'm studying. So, as the elevator comes to a stop, I shuffle forward without the added weight and leave the handsome cops behind to go about their day. I walk the oncology ward and loathe the almost silence, except for the random retching of someone not feeling great.

I internalize the beep-beep-beep of heart rate monitors and wonder if my choice to attend medical school in the new year was my best decision ever.

I'm coming to the very end of my four-year undergraduate. I've sat the MCATS. I've been placed in the medical school of my choice. And now my mom is dying, and I wonder if I might quickly go insane if I'm forced to listen to that wretched *beep-beep-beep* every day for the rest of my life.

Twenty-one-years-old and I think I'm having my midlife crisis already.

"Hey, Rory." Brenda, a sweet nurse who seems to really give a shit, wanders by and winks as I step-shuffle past. "It's a good day today, baby girl."

"Yeah?" I perk up a little and straighten my back, twisting to keep her in my vision as she does her work. "She feeling okay?"

"Like she's gonna tap dance for us all and put on a show." She flashes one last, quick smile before disappearing into someone else's room. So, with hope in my heart and appreciation for a good day, I turn again and use my free hand to rub along my still-healing wound. My femur pierced my thigh back in November during that annoying accident. Which means not only do I now possess a half-bionic leg and set off all the security beepers in the airport, but I also have this chronically annoying spot on my leg that itches and sends me mad when I'm alone at night.

My stitches have healed, and my physical therapist encourages me to use my leg as much as possible. The doctors had me weight-bearing—or, well, doing the best I could—within days of surgery. Because I'm young, they said. Because I'm reasonably fit, and I'm not all that heavy, though the latter

has nothing to do with my eating desires and everything to do with the price of ramen these days.

Coming to a stop outside my mom's hospital room I try, for just a moment, to get my nose twitching under control. I don't like the smell of cancer. I know that sounds dumb, and I'm aware that sounds especially concerning for a woman readying to attend medical school. But this is a thing I've only discovered since her diagnosis.

Something about her changed. The chemo altered her chemical makeup, or the cancer did. Whichever poison is responsible, it changed her hormones, and so instead of her natural perfume scent I've always cuddled up to as I grew, she smells different now.

It's an unpleasant, starchy, sterile scent that itches my nostrils almost as much as the metal plate inside my leg itches my soul.

I take thirty seconds to school my features and adjust to the smell, then I shake my shoulders back, slide the curtain open, and reveal myself to the woman I love more than anyone else on the planet.

"Hey, Mom." I walk stronger, because I want her to see strength. I smile wider, because I want her to see happiness. I stride into her room and bring my cane along for the ride, setting it against the wall so I remember to take it out when I leave again, and then I come to a stop beside her bed and study the beautiful middle-aged woman who was the original jinx before me. "You look good." I fix her blankets and press a kiss to her pale cheek. Her chestnut hair long ago fell out. Her lashes. Her brows. All of it is gone, but I have this magical ability to compartmentalize and remember who she was before.

Her eyes are a stunning concoction of brown and green and speckled blue, which might be my most cherished feature in myself, too. We both share the same thick, brown hair and naturally long lashes neither of us would dare mess with at a salon for fear of ruining what we were born with.

My mother stands, *when she stands*, at five feet, six inches tall. Like me.

And when she was healthy, she weighed in at a perfect hundred and fifty pounds. Which, realistically, with my wide-ish hips and generous C-cup chest, is what I'd weigh, too, if not for living below the poverty line.

"You look tired," she responds weakly, but with a sweet smile and a hand that still takes mine and holds on. I stop moving and focus instead on her. On her chapped lips, but their volume beneath the dryness. Her unblemished skin, if you look beneath the paleness and obvious impending death.

Her fingers wrap around my wrist and hold on with surprising strength; that same strength is perhaps the reason behind Nurse Brenda's good mood today. So, while my sweet mother has the energy, I reach out with my free hand and tug the visitor chair closer instead.

I've been in this room every single day for a month or more. Often, she sleeps. Many times, she's too weak to open her eyes or maintain a conversation.

But not today, so I skip the mental to-do list I've come in here with today and instead take a seat and relax.

"You wanna chat, huh?" I unwrap her fingers from around my wrist, but only long enough to turn my hand and make us both comfortable. Then I link us again and lean my head back to settle in for what, someday, will be just a memory. "How are you feeling?"

"Pshh." She makes the dismissive sound low in the back of her throat and turns in the bed to rest on her side. She's all skin and bones now, guilt lancing through my stomach as she comes to rest on hipbones that have no padding left and on shoulders that must certainly ache. But she places her free hand on her pillow, beneath her cheek, and smiles. "How are *you* feeling?" she counters. "How's your leg?"

"It's okay." I drop my free hand to my thigh and massage the ache I speak of to no one. "Gets a little itchy sometimes, but that's it."

“Yeah?” Her cheeks warm with a sweet pink that makes my heart thud faster. The pink is leagues better than her typical sickly yellow. “Do you remember that time when you were...” she pauses for a beat and moves in a kind of shrug. “I don’t know, nine. Maybe ten? You wanted so badly for me to buy you that cute new bag everyone else had at school. All the girls in your grade had these purses.”

“The ones with our letter initial on the front,” I fill in with a grin. “They were lined in glitter stuff. And everyone who was anyone had one of those bags.”

“Yes.” She exhales a happy sigh as though replaying the day of our biggest fight ever brings her pleasure. “You wanted your bag so much, baby.”

“But we couldn’t afford it,” I remember. “It was so dumb. Such an ugly little bag, now that I think back. And no matter how much I whined for it, neither of us could pull money out of our butts and buy one.”

She sniggers, soft and breathy and hitching almost enough to make my heart ache. “I said you could work to earn the money,” she recalls. “I was picking up shifts at the hotel back then. Stripping the rooms and remaking the beds and whatnot.”

“You said if I helped you work those rooms,” I snuffle and refuse the emotional tears burning the backs of my eyes, “you said I could earn money. The bag cost forty-five dollars back then. Which is so much,” I exhale. “Such a dumb way to spend an income.”

“Yeah, well...” she doesn’t make a sound this time, though I’m sure, deep in the recesses of her soul, she’s laughing. “You wanted it so bad. And to your nine-year-old brain, it was the most important thing in the world.”

“You promised to match me dollar for dollar,” I sigh. “You didn’t have to. You didn’t even like the bag, and to us twenty-something dollars was still a lot. But you knew it was important to me, so you compromised and told me if I earned it, I could have it.”

“And what did you do instead?” she asks, knowing the answer already. “You got your bag, Aurora. But how?”

I drop my gaze, decade-long shame still washing through my veins, leaving me feeling like I’m about two-inches tall. “I asked Dad to buy it. Because I didn’t want to work for it. But I lied and told you I took the money from my money box.”

“You lied.” She grabs on to that one detail and smiles gently. “I knew then, Aurora, when you lied. And I know now.”

I bring my gaze up just in time to catch her focus on my thigh. “So…” She looks into my eyes. “How’s your leg?”

“It hurts,” I admit with a soft laugh, shaking my head. “It wakes me up sometimes and feels like someone is shoving a knife into my leg. But it’s not so bad,” I add quickly, to assuage her worries before she spends her good day obsessing over something dumb. “It’s only been a couple of months, so my body is still adjusting to the extra hardware. But everything is getting better every day.”

“And the house?” she pushes. “You don’t answer my questions when I ask. And I know it’s because you don’t want to burden me.”

“I tell you anything you want to kn—” But I stop my argument when she only raises a challenging brow. *We both know when I’m lying.* “Fine. The house is having a little mold trouble, and the furnace gave out.”

Her smile falls, which is exactly the reason I don’t tell her this stuff.

“I have a friend though, at school, and her boyfriend fixes furnaces for a living. I help her study and take notes when she misses class. In exchange, he’s coming around this afternoon to fix whatever the issue is.”

Mom studies me for a long beat. She searches for the lie—all of it. It’s all a lie. I don’t have a friend at school, and even if I did, no one is gonna fix someone else’s shit for free—but I’m no longer nine or ten, and my lies are more to protect her now than they are to protect me.

Maybe her instincts tell her I'm talking out my ass. But my usual giveaways—the fidgeting hands, the shifty eyes—no longer betray me. I keep myself under control and smile to let her relax. “Everything’s okay, ya know? The house is great. It’s still a house, Mom. And it’s still a roof over our heads. It’s mortgage free,” I add, purely to remind her she’s amazing. She’s resourceful. She’s the best mother a girl could hope for. And though she started with nothing, she’s now the owner of an ugly duplex with a bad furnace, minimal insulation, and crackhead neighbors.

It’s more than other people get in their lifetime.

“How’s Nolan?”

Her unexpected question makes me bark out a laugh loud enough that Brenda is sure to hear me in the hall. “Nolan?” I repeat the name of my cheating ex-boyfriend as though to confirm I heard her right. “Jesus,” I bring myself under control, though my chest continues to bubble with mirth. “We broke up, Mom. Last year.”

“I know.” She slides her dry tongue over her drier lips, but she smiles anyway. “I was only asking. Wondering if maybe you’ve reached out to him or anything.”

“God, no.” I release her hand and lean across to grab the water pitcher Brenda would have placed in here hours ago. Tipping it, I fill the glass to the left and stop when it’s half full. I set the pitcher down and grab a straw, then lean forward in my seat and place the end by Mom’s lips. “Take a sip,” I coach. “Just a little bit.”

And when she does as I ask, I allow the vise wrapped around my heart to release fractionally. “I don’t reach out to cheating assholes. It’s a one-strike system around here.”

She releases the straw between her lips and swallows the ball of liquid, so I watch it move along her throat and disappear into her stomach. “You’re your mother’s daughter,” she rasps. “And I reached out to your father a million times over the years. Even when I told you I didn’t. I wouldn’t judge you if you wanted to talk things through with Nolan.”

“No?” I set her glass on the bedside table and rest my elbows on the side of her bed so we’re closer. So she could touch me if she wanted to. “I would judge me, though. And I’d rather be alone than with a liar and a cheat.”

“Honey...”

“I’m happy.” I take her hand between mine, careful of her wires, and press a kiss to her frail knuckles. “I’m busy with school. And my friends. I’m busy not living up to my father’s ridiculous expectations, and I’m especially busy keeping him at arm’s length so I can live my life and pretend he’s a half-decent person.”

“Aurora—”

“I take his calls, at most, once every two or three months. I assure him I’m still in school and my grades are good. I decline his offer of an internship at his law firm. We argue about it for a minute, then we hang up, and I spend two months processing the fact he’s a dick and the third month wondering if maybe, next time we talk, he might be a better person.”

“I’ve always worked hard not to say bad things about him in front of you.” Her hand begins to shake between mine. Not from fear or worry or upset. But purely because she’s tired. She’s broken. She’s dying. And because she’s the bravest, strongest, sweetest person I know, she’ll pretend she’s not all the way to the bitter end. “He broke my heart, baby. But I never wanted him to break yours, too.”

“He did that all on his own.” I hold her hand tighter to stop the tremors and give her a little of my strength. “There’s this saying, isn’t there, about leopards and their spots. He is who he is, and no one can change that. Especially not him.”

“There’s gonna come a point soon...”

When I’m all alone in this world and need family? Yeah, I know. She’s afraid I’ll run back to my father and fold myself into his world of toxicity. And at the same time, concerned I won’t. She’s sorry she only had one child, so I have no siblings to lean on when she’s gone, and sad she was an only

child too, so when it's all said and done, my choices are to be all alone in this world, or to surround myself with assholes.

She thinks those are my only options. But she forgets that third one I've relied upon my whole life. That I take comfort in my own company. When she worked all day and night, and I couldn't be with her, I was home. Reading a book I'd borrowed from the school library. Cooking a meal with whatever random ingredients we had in the pantry. Watching a movie—really, the same movie over and over again, because it was my comfort watch. When she was picking up extra shifts because I needed braces, I was at home, losing myself in medical books we found at an old secondhand store. They were ten years outdated, but they had sections dedicated to dental health, and I educated myself as best I could on what my mom was working so hard for.

God forbid she ask my dad for a penny and a little help.

Every other weekend, I was taken from our tiny two-bedroom duplex and lumped into an eight-bedroom villa, like having two wildly different homes is normal and okay for a child. I was force-fed junk food as though my dad and step-mom—one of many over the years—thought eating crap for three consecutive days and nights would endear me to them; then they'd send me home with a stomachache and a *'make sure you tell your mom how much fun you had'* pat on the head.

For those six days a month, surrounded by people, things, and belly-aching food, I was lonelier than I ever felt inside my little house with a hard-working mother. And when she's gone, I'd make the wager that visiting my father's home, his fourth wife, his three extra kids, and his complete inability to show unconditional love, will feel lonelier than sitting in a drafty two-story duplex and living the life I've known since infancy.

"You need to stop worrying about me." I lean in and press a kiss to her forehead, only to frown at the warmth I find there. She's running a little hotter than usual, so I pull back slowly and cast a glance across every part of her body I see. She wears a blue and white checked hospital gown that folds at the front because of the position she lies in. I get an up close and

personal view of her port scars and catch a hint of an old bleed that the hospital staff clearly attempted to clean before I arrived.

My mom's head is wrapped in a pink and blue scarf she likes to wear not only for warmth but for her own self-image. Like me, she's always had long hair, so when her treatment began this time last year, and within weeks, she lost every strand from her body, we went shopping for lengths of fabric she could repurpose to cover her scalp.

We're never going to be rich. And she'll never get to buy anything she wants with no consideration for the price tag. But we made an exception that day. Still on a budget, but she got to choose her fabrics without worrying about the number at the end.

At the sound of her pulse quickening through the machines strapped to her body, I cast a glance toward the door and the medical staff bustling through the hall.

Any other time, any other person, any other diagnosis, and I'd not bother a nurse because of a slightly warmer than usual forehead. But this is my mom, and we've already ended treatment. We know what's coming. So I push up to stand and tap the call button on the wall behind her pillows.

Already, when I bring my gaze back down, Mom's eyes are shut, and her breathing begins to even. "I'm just gonna get Brenda in here to take your temperature, okay?" I release her hand and set it gently on the bed, then I turn to make my way toward the door, only to hiss when I remember my injured leg and the walking stick I'm supposed to use.

Like a little old lady being forced to hunch over a cane.

I snatch the damned thing up and use it to bear a little of my weight, then I take a step toward the door, only to stop again when Brenda bustles in. "What's up, baby girl?" She blows right past me and switches off the call button on the wall; then she pulls my mother over to lie again on her back.

Mom mumbles in her half-awake state, but allows the movements and smacks her lips as Brenda sets her fingers

against Mom's wrist.

"I thought she was just feeling a little warm, is all." I turn on my heels and hobble back to take my place on the opposite side of the bed. "She's kinda feisty today," I admit with a smile. "She's trying to lecture me. But she's dozing off already, and when I kissed her forehead, she felt a little hot."

"Let me check." Brenda tugs a thermometer from one of her myriad scrubs pockets and pops the container open to reveal the little white and silver device inside. Slipping a plastic cover over the end, she slides it under Mom's armpit and hits a button to get it started. "She's been awake a fair bit already today," she mumbles, reading the reports that hang from the heart monitor. "You caught the tail-end of it, honey. Which really sucks."

"I was studying." I rest against the side of the bed and hitch my hip up to take a little weight off my leg. "I have a paper to write, and I'm already running late on it. She's been pretty sleepy the last few days, so I expected it would be the same again today and stayed home a little longer."

"You did good." She grabs the beeping thermometer and makes a mental note of the temperature, then she places the device back in its container and the container back in her pocket. "She wants you to succeed, Rory. She wants so badly for you to kick life's ass and do with it the things she never could."

"No pressure." I slide off the side of the bed and sit in my chair instead. "If I'm just a regular girl who achieves nothing special, I become a disappointment to her?"

She cough-laughes and purses her lips as our eyes meet. "You're feeling a little blue today, huh? Swimming in self-pity?"

Scowling, I look down into my lap and shrug. "So? Every woman is entitled to a day of feeling bad for herself."

"Not for as long as your momma is here." She reaches up to the bags of fluid hung from the IV pole and gives one a gentle squeeze. "I'll be the first to hug you when you need it,

sweet Aurora. But I'll also be the first in line to kick your ass and remind you that you come from lioness stock. Folks don't get much stronger than Eleanor Swanson, so for as long as she's here, fighting the good fight, you don't get to curl up in a ball and feel sorry for yourself. She's dialing in at one-oh-one," she adds, reciting the thermometer's reading. "You were right. She's a little warm but nothing too crazy."

"What do we do about it?" I wring my fingers together, now that my mother isn't awake to watch me fret, and tap my foot on the floor. One. Two. Three. One. Two. Three. "Do you wanna call the doctor?"

"Well..." She writes her notes in the file at the end of Mom's bed and glances up at me with a smile. "You're the smarty pants in medical school now. Why don't you tell me what you think should be done?" She casts a quick glance over her shoulder, as though to make sure the hospital's board of directors aren't listening in, then brings her smiling gaze back to me. "Hypothetically, of course. What would you do if she was your patient?"

"Umm..." I drag my bottom lip between my teeth and work hard to separate the patient—my mother—from the theoretical knowledge I've acquired so far. "Fever says the patient is having an immune response to infection. If she presented with no other history, we'd run labs to see what kind of infection she's battling, at which point, we could treat and help the patient."

Brenda leans across the bed and checks the IV tucked into my mother's elbow crease. "However?"

I draw a heavy breath and noisily exhale again. "*This* patient comes with a history. She's battling stage four breast cancer, has exhausted all treatment options, and has since consented to a *do-not-resuscitate* order. Patient is terminal." And damn my voice for breaking on that final word. "Patient is undergoing palliative care and not expected to live more than a couple of weeks."

"The last bit is your opinion." She straightens out and sets her hands in her pockets. "It's not our job to tell a patient or

their family how much time is left, Rory. That's a weight for the treating oncologist to carry. It's our job to provide comfort. Medically, emotionally, spiritually."

I bring a hand up and rub it across my lips in frustration. She's right. I'm wrong. And the fact I am is proof enough that no one should treat their family members. The conflict of interest puts everyone at risk.

"I'm going to administer a little pain relief," she murmurs. "And prepare her for her night's rest. It's possible she'll be out until tomorrow now. So if you have somewhere to be..." She glances toward the window that looks out onto a busy street pulsing with cars and buses ferrying first responders to and from work. The police station is a block or two to the left, and the morgue is the same distance to the right. Apartment buildings fill every empty space for those first responders to live in, and traffic is constantly moving. "Could be a good evening to go out and meet a sexy man, Ms. Aurora."

I sit back in my seat and laugh under my breath. But when Mom's hand moves in her sleep and reaches in my direction, I lean forward and take it between my palms. If she's searching for comfort, I'll give it to her. If she needs me, I'll be first in line to lay down my time and energy.

I could be with her, holding her hand and stroking her cheek every minute from now until the end, and still, I wouldn't come close to how much she's brought me comfort in this life.

"I'm gonna stay here awhile." I open my mom's hand and rest her palm against my face. Her forehead is too warm, yet her fingers are too cold. But I cup hers with mine and lend her a little of my heat. "Can you sneak me a sandwich or something when they're doing the dinner rounds? I want to stay until I know she's really out for the night."

"I'll get you snacks." She turns on her heels and starts toward the door. "I'll get you juice, too. But I'm kicking you out by seven, okay? The next shift starts then, anyway, and you know Berta isn't gonna let you stay after visiting hours."

Berta. Also known as Nurse Ratched.

Brenda tells the truth, and I don't want to sit here and watch Bitchy Berta stomp through anyway, so I nod my acceptance of her terms and wonder what I'm going to do tonight.

I could call my dad. *Not.*

I could head down the street to the bar known as Tim's. *Though I won't. That costs money.*

I could go home and sit in the cold. Snuggle up under a blanket and watch a little trash TV.

That's probably what I'll do.

But that's still hours away, so I half-stand and drag my chair closer to the bed, then I settle in again and rest my arms on the mattress. So I can feel my mother's heartbeat and ignore the beep-beep-beep from the machines that slowly etch away at my sanity. So I can hear her lungs inhale and ignore the rattling exhale that chips away at my soul. I pull her scent deep into my body, and work to differentiate between what's the old her and what's cancer.

What is her natural perfume, and what is the lingering aftereffects of the chemotherapy they've pumped into her veins for a year straight.

I don't turn on the television hung high on the hospital room wall, and I don't take out my phone to watch Netflix. I don't scroll social media, and I don't put a lot of thought into my term paper, though I know it's due.

I work hard to remain right here in the moment. Savoring every minute I have with a sleeping woman because although it doesn't seem like a lot, a few weeks from now, when she's gone, I'll miss this.

I'll grieve the chance to rest with her. I'll look back to my youth and remember how I had my own bed, in my own bedroom. And yet, I can't remember ever sleeping in it until long into my teen years.

Eleanor Swanson has been my comfort blanket from the moment I could breathe. And soon, she's leaving me.

When I'm not grieving, and not living in the moment, I find myself falling down a well of bitterness as I overthink the reality of what I stand to lose soon.

We didn't fight. No one is leaving on purpose. We're not at odds, and neither of us sought out a best friend in someone else. We chose each other. We choose to love one another to the point of obsession.

But there goes Judy Jinx, taking my most precious thing away.

I don't know what the Swanson women did back in the day to start this shitty cycle of shitty lives. My mother's mother's mother went ahead and married a douchebag. They created a daughter, who repeated the cycle no one wanted to see again. Then another Swanson. Then another. All the way down to me.

Fortunately, my father's adulterous ways were discovered before my birth certificate was signed. Which means I got my mother's surname and I would choose that connection to my maternal side time and time again.

Unfortunately, that surname may have come with a curse. Because I've already experienced my cheating sack of shit relationship, and as a cherry on top, now I'm losing my mom.

This is the Mondayist Monday I've ever known. And I doubt things will get better from here. But a few weeks from now, I'll miss even this. So I settle in and focus only on Eleanor Swanson's breath.

For now, that's enough.



At six-fifty-eight p.m. Brenda swings by with her purse in the crook of her arm and a playful smile as she pokes her head into our room and finds me in exactly the same position I was at four. But now, I hum a song under my breath. I wile away time and sing a song my mother sang to me when I was a child.

The lyrics mention angel's wings and butterfly kisses. A mother's embrace. A baby's smile. It speaks of forever, and love, and heartache, and so much more. It's not a traditional song played in a nursery. But I'm glad this is the one my mom chose to share with me all those years ago.

It's special. It's unusual. And it's all ours.

"It's time to go, honey. Berta got here early." Brenda wanders into the shadowed room and takes a fast peek at the monitors recording Mom's blood pressure. But when she finds nothing out of the ordinary, she stands over me and brushes locks of brown hair off the side of my face. "You didn't eat your sandwich."

I draw a deep breath and push up to my elbows, my eyes locking on the small package she set down hours ago. Exhaling again, I release my mom's hand and reach out for the wilted dinner I forgot I'd requested. "I think I was meditating." Sleepily, I turn the sandwich box over in my hand so the plastic crackles and the bread inside flops flaccidly to the left. Then, with a soft snigger, I shake my head and cast one last look up to my mom's sleeping form. "Time went fast."

"Usually does when you don't want to leave." She grabs my stick and sets it on my right, though we both know my left leg is the injured side. "Get up, and I'll walk out with you, sweet pea."

"Yeah." I push up to stand and maneuver my walking stick to the correct side. Then, leaning over the woman in the bed, I press a kiss to her forehead and nod when I find her temperature back down to what I consider appropriate. "I hope she sleeps all night," I mumble. "She deserves the rest."

"Do you ever wonder why bad people live forever and the good don't?" Philosophical, Brenda heads toward the door and waits by the curtain as I make sure I have my things.

I left my bag at the house, and brought only my phone and keys. So I grab my sandwich in one hand and my stick in the other. Then I turn from my mom and start toward the door. "I think about it more often than you'd believe." I meet the

voluptuous woman at the curtain and hand her my sandwich, not so she can dispose of it but so she can help me. “Can you open the packet? I’ll eat while we walk.”

She rolls her eyes skyward, but moves with me into the brightly lit hall and tears the flimsy packaging open. “You need a better diet than curdling cheese sandwiches, baby girl. You need steak. Potatoes. Pasta.” She hands me a triangle and raises a brow as we approach the elevator. “Garlic bread.”

I follow her into the silver cube and take a bite off the corner. “I can buy my own garlic bread, ya know?”

“You *could*.” She smacks the elevator button and starts us down to the ground floor. “But you don’t. You squirrel away every cent you make, and lift food from the trolley every time you walk our halls.”

“So?” I take another bite and scowl. “I pay my taxes. I’ll put my hours in this hospital next year. No one is getting mad about the slice of cheese I pilfer once a day.”

“*I’m* getting mad about it.” When the doors open and reveal the emergency room lobby, she steps out again but moves slowly enough that I can keep up. “I’m mad because you deserve better. I’m mad because you’re the sweetest, hardest working, quietest little mouse I’ve ever met. And it bothers me that you’ll spend your life stealing cheese slices and never actually living.”

“Well...” My thigh aches in the nighttime cold, and my left shoulder smarts from the pressure of leaning on a cane. But I trudge outside and make a beeline for the ramp instead of attempting to survive the concrete stairs. A helicopter swish-swish-swishes in the dark sky above, far enough away, that the noise is barely a bother. But close enough that I can make out the spotlight on the side. Bringing my gaze down again, I shake away the memory of a man I once met. A fireman who, in another time of his life, jumped out of planes and helicopters for a living.

He was my hero the day of my car accident. And he might be the first man, ever, to make me smile and trust he wasn’t a cheating dirtbag.

He spoke of his girlfriend while we hung over the side of a cliff. He talked of love, and forever, how sweet she was, and how smitten he was at the idea of commitment.

When I bring my focus back to right now and to the exhausted nurse who watches me with a single raised brow, I scan my thoughts quickly and search for whatever we were discussing.

“Cheese,” she smarts, as though reading my mind. “We were talking about cheese sandwiches.”

“Oh yeah.” Grinning, I bring my triangle half sandwich up and take another bite. “I like cheese. I like my life. I love being here for my mom.”

“And you’re glad you met me.” She holds the back of my arm as we descend the ramp, tight enough to catch me if I fall but not so tight that she thinks my streak of pride will arc up and brush her away. “It bothers me most of all that good people die young, Rory. And that the evil bastards in this world skip along in their infinite assholeishness and somehow escape karma.”

“Beats me.” At the bottom of the ramp, I gently shake her off and toss the last corner of my triangle between my lips. Then, I come to a stop and accept the other half with a smile. “Assholes tend to feed off bad karma, and the sweet ones are often handed a lump of shit and a *‘too bad, so sad, get on with things’*.”

“Mmhm,” she hums. “It’s not fair. That’s for sure.”

“But I have no clue how to change it. So I stay in my lane and focus on me.” I turn my body to the right and stare down the long street I must walk before I find the next available bus stop. The insurance money on my car is still nowhere to be seen, and I don’t have enough liquid cash to buy another. So I make do with the public transport this city offers, and curse myself every single time I stay out past dinnertime. It’s cold. It’s dark. And if I’m being completely honest with myself, walking this city at night is a little scary. “You heading home now?” I peek back over my shoulder and look the heavysset woman up and down. “Driving or bus?”

“I have my car tonight.” She digs into her purse and victoriously presents a packed keyring with a smile. “Want a ride?”

Yes, I do. A million times, yes. But we live in different directions, and I learned last time that giving me a ride adds at least twenty minutes to her commute. “No, it’s okay.” I show her a smile and hope she believes its sincerity. “I’m thinking of heading into that bar a couple of blocks down first. Get a burger. Look at all the cute cops. Sit in the warmth for a minute.”

She laughs under her breath and turns away. “Alright, sweet pea. You be safe, okay? Walk straight there. Don’t dilly dally and get yourself caught up in drama.”

“This is first responder central.” I take a bite of my dinner and start walking. “Cops on every block. Doctors everywhere in between.” I pause and peek back to make sure she’s not following me. “If I should find drama, I also know where to find cops and someone to take care of me.”

She rolls her eyes and hugs her purse tighter as she takes another step away. “Be safe. I have my cell on me in case you need to chat or whatever.”

“Uh-huh. I’ll see you tomorrow.” I turn back around and start in the direction I’m going. Now that I have half a sandwich in my belly, hunger roars to life and reminds me to keep eating. Two slices of bread and a piece of hyper-processed cheese a day is simply not enough, and ramen noodles are not the least bit nutritional for a twenty-one-year-old healing from a major injury.

It’s all a bit tragic, really, how skilled I am at being the martyr.

It’s not a conscious decision I make. But rather, a way of life after spending two decades trying to help my mom, and before I knew better, please my dad.

I’m forced to save what few pennies I have because soon, I’ll have a funeral to pay for. I must squirrel away every cent I own because soon, taxes are coming in for the property my

mom paid off. If I let those taxes get away from me, I'll lose the one thing she busted her ass to achieve. So that's a non-negotiable for me.

I have college to pay for and student loans piling up. I have four years of medical school to get through before any real money begins flowing in, and though I had a part-time job to help ends meet, the car accident some other douchebag was responsible for made that impossible to keep.

Physical therapy costs money. Specialist appointments cost money.

Life costs money.

I have no clue how my mother got through, raised me on her own, and still got to where she is now without a massive chip of bitterness eating away at the goodness in her soul.

"You shouldn't ignore me when I call you, Lorenzo."

I screech to a stop about a block from the hospital when an angry voice slams into my consciousness. In a panic, I plaster my back to the brick wall and search the shadows on the opposite side of the street where the voice came from.

"V-Vallejo," the scared second voice stutters in response. "I wasn't ignoring you, I swear."

"You owe me money," the first snarls.

Squinting my eyes to cut through the glare of streetlights and headlights, I rest my hands on the wall at my back, but lean forward. This is how chickens lose their heads, I'm certain. They stretch their necks and make the axe's target so much easier.

"I don't take kindly to shitheads not paying what they owe, Lorenzo."

As my eyes adjust to the dark and figures move in the shadows across the street, I catch sight of three, maybe four, overly large men with their backs to me. They stand in the mouth of an alleyway, hidden from the cars passing by and unnoticed by the few pedestrians walking past.

These thugs hold another, smaller man—Lorenzo—against the brick wall. Towering over him. Intimidating. *Bullies*. But when one slams a fist into his gut, I jump in stunned shock when the smaller man cries out in pain.

I was detached. Observing, but not involved.

It was a movie playing out, not an actual flesh and blood man being beat up.

For money?

“Mr. Vallejo,” he cries. Chokes. He retches over the pain and sickness swirling in his body. “I-I swear, I’m getting it to you soon. But this is hard turf to work. A man needs to be delicate with who he discusses business with. Because if I speak to the wrong—”

He heaves when another fist slams into his gut and renders him speechless.

“I said...” *Mr. Vallejo* isn’t the largest man of the group. But he’s tall. Broad. And protected, as the others surround him to keep him safe. But he’s not the one hitting. He doesn’t seem inclined to dirty his hands when his men could do it for him. “You owe me a hundred thousand dollars, Lorenzo. I’ve been generous in the past. But you’re disrespecting me now. Do you think this is a joke?”

“No.” Lorenzo’s head snaps to the side when one of the jerks punches him in the face. Blood spurts from his mouth and lands on the sidewalk, right where pedestrians will step, if only they looked down.

Music thuds from the bar nearby. The flickering neon light illuminating the sidewalk. But it’s still a block away. Too far for anyone in there to come out and discover what I’m witnessing.

“I don’t mean to disrespect you,” Lorenzo cries, wiping his mouth with the sleeve of his jacket. “I just need a little more time.”

“You’ve had time.” Another fist swings out and slams Lorenzo’s head against the brick wall. It hits with a thump that makes my stomach roll and knees knock.

“Hey!” My voice shakes. Bravery wages war with self-preservation, and my hands tremble until I lose my sandwich and almost drop my cane. But as three—four?—men turn to find me across the street, I straighten my spine and work to channel my mother’s courageousness. “You need to leave him alone!” I steel my voice and pretend my stomach isn’t turning to liquid. “That’s assault.”

“Assault?” The snake-like, slithering, sickening tone of *Mr. Vallejo’s* gruff voice makes my stomach jump as he turns from Lorenzo and reveals the sparkle of steel in his hand.

My stomach heaves as my brain locks on and screams *Gun. GUN!*

“Marcos.”

Just one word. A name. And Marcos raises his own weapon, sets it against Lorenzo’s forehead, and pulls the trigger.

The explosion makes me jump.

The shock makes me drop my cane.

But when he says, “Gavin,” and another of his men turns my way and raises a gun, common sense finally catches up with reality, and I swirl away from the wall and sprint. My leg burns as I run, and my heart thunders in my chest. Tears sizzle in my eyes, blinding me as I dash through a faceless crowd, and though I should duck inside the bar and find help, I keep going.

Footsteps pound behind me. Gavin, chasing me down. But I duck through an alleyway and keep going.

Panic and adrenaline make it difficult for my brain to catch up. And at the same time, make it possible for me to run on a still-healing femur break.

“Hey!” Gavin’s booming voice is like a gunshot against my back, but when a real, actual fucking bullet soars past my ear and embeds itself in the wall of the alleyway, I dash through the next available door and find myself sprinting through a little restaurant filled with people and scents and noise and too, too much.

“Someone call the cops!” I knock plates to the floor in my haste. I bump tables and annoy diners. I earn scowls and crash against the next door in my hurry. “Please!” I cry out in desperation. “Someone call the police.”

The glass door at my back shatters as a bullet zings through. Yelping, I turn and grab the door handle and flee for my life.

I saw a murder.

I witnessed someone die.

And now those people want me to die, too.

“Oh god.” I dash back onto the sidewalk of the same street I began on, but when a bus pulls up half a block down, I make a break for it, my leg screaming in pain, and my eyes burning from tears. I duck through traffic and cry out when the corner of a car clips my good leg. I trip and hit the asphalt with a slam, skinning my palms and heaving for oxygen. But I jump up again and run for the bus as the doors begin closing.

I bash my bleeding fist against the windows and jam my body through the doors just four inches before they close. My chest pounds and my lungs grow and shrink in search of fresh air. I duck low, sit on the filthy floor, and straighten my pounding leg so it becomes a tripping hazard for anyone who tries to pass. Squeezing my eyes shut, I chant *please drive. Please drive. Please drive.*

I’m not on my usual bus. Not my usual route. Not my usual driver.

But the universe takes pity on me, and my breath comes out in a relieved explosion as the bus putters away from the curb and Gavin—and Marcos, and Vallejo—are somewhere back there. On the street filling with cops. Those assholes shoot guns and kill people, and they do it with cops all around them.

“Oh god.” I drop my head back and cry in silence. Tears spill from my eyelids, tracking over my temples and burying themselves in my hair. I just witnessed a murder by people

who don't really care that cops are nearby. By people who don't mind killing another for money.

"Miss?" The driver—a middle-aged man, similar to the one I'm running from—drives along the street and does his job. But he leans across his seat and shows me a small smile when I open my eyes. "You gotta tap your card to ride." He points up at a CCTV camera perched above the door and blushes. "They know how many folks get on. So you gotta tap, or I'm gonna get in trouble."

"Yeah." I swallow a ball of nausea and reach with a groan to take my phone from my back pocket. Part of me is surprised I didn't lose it in my panic. Part of me expects my bad luck to continue. But I breathe a little easier when I pull it from my pocket and open the cover to find the screen shattered.

Shaking my head, I take my bus card from the slot inside the cover and reach across to tap it against the tiny yellow reader by the door. Then, collapsing back with a grunt of pain, I curl in on myself and think.

Panic.

Scream, but only inside my head.

I witnessed a fucking murder!

And now they want me dead, too.

Judy Jinx is not yet ready to release me from her ugly clutches.

Drake

Three Days Later

I walk inside my police station and pass cops I've worked with for five years. My desk beckons me, and my life... well, bores me. I was once a man who lived the job. Breathed it. Dreamt of it. I was bordering on obsession, much like my father before me. But when my best friend was murdered right in front of my eyes, and his wife cried on my shoulder for weeks, months... years after, I decided the DEA was no longer for me.

Working for my father was no longer for me.

I didn't want to hunt the kinds of pricks who ship hundreds of thousands of tons of powder across the world, all so they can make money. I didn't want to work undercover anymore.

Fuck, I didn't want to work without Gord at all. So I handed in my rank, took a leave of absence to heal up from a couple of bullet wounds, and then walked into this station and asked for a regular cop job.

My life now is about simplicity. It's about my friends. It's about taking care of those who matter to me and not giving a shit about the rest.

I was given a desk here. Access to a cruiser. I was given a new partner, though I loathed him on sight and wasn't sad when he left again. Day in and day out, I work smaller jobs that mean nothing.

A dad holding up a liquor store to pay for diapers and food for his family? Yeah, okay. I'll work it. I'll solve it. But I don't put my heart and soul into it.

A hit and run? I'll go through the steps.

A home burglary? I'll write the report and help them claim insurance.

I'm a constant disappointment to my father now. Working below my abilities, he says. A flake because I choose this over the career he lives and breathes.

He sleeps with files under his pillow.

I sleep with women as my pillow.

He works eighteen-hour days and reads reports while he's using the bathroom.

I work eight, go home, spend time with my friends, and take pleasure in watching Matilda Fuller grow up. She's nine already. Tall. The cutest little blonde-haired thing who enjoys roller skates and an uncle who'll buy her any damn thing she wants.

It's my duty to spoil a little girl who lost her daddy to a cause neither of us truly believed in.

It's my job to be the father figure that was stolen from her.

That's not to say Gord and I didn't believe in cleaning up our streets and running the dealers out of town. But fucked if either of us was prepared to lose him to the cause. Neither of us would let him die and force a little girl into this life she's in now.

"Hey, Banks."

I spare a polite smile for a colleague. Thompson. Thompkins. Thomas? Jesus, I don't even know. I don't actually care. But I present a pleasant front and put in the minimum effort required to make my way toward a pension and retirement.

I work the cases that land on my desk. And often, I volunteer myself to a little police department an hour from

here when they need the manpower because hell, at least I know their names. At least I give a shit about that little town and the people in it.

I pull out my chair when I reach my desk and tap the framed family photograph of Gord, Violet, and Tilly back before he died. He's my good luck charm. Or maybe my companion. Someone to talk a case through with now that my partner after him is living it up in a hospital for the abusive and deranged.

I draw a deep breath as other detectives wander in, and a new shift begins; then I hit the power button on my computer and wait for the old machine to fire to life.

My phone bleats in my back pocket, a text message chime I've set for only one person in my life, so while my emails load and case files expand, I take out my device and find my mom's name on the screen.

Just like I knew I would.

Phones trill around me. Cases roll in. Once upon a time, I'd have been the first to answer. To throw my name in the ring and hope for a juicy case. But I ignore them all now and hold out hope for a peaceful day instead.

Swiping my phone screen and maneuvering to the text chat, I click on my mom's name and snigger when I find the little video she pulled off the internet of fainting goats. She's new-ish to smartphones. Her 2009 Nokia flip phone, valiant in its efforts, finally gave out last month and forced her to find something else. First, she discovered emoticons. Now, the mini videos. Which means my inbox is always pulsing with these little messages of *'I'm thinking of you'*.

"Have a good day, Mom." I speak and type at the same time. "Be careful with traffic. There's some conference in the city this week that's gonna disrupt things and back the streets up."

Hitting send, I set my phone down and scan the long list of emails that fill my tiny computer screen. Some from the DA, pushing forward on a case I actually put effort into. Another

from the crime lab, confirming a fingerprint match of a guy I figured broke into a little old lady's home.

I don't give many shits about the crimes committed against 'the man'. Ya know, the ones that harm a multimillion-dollar business that'll get an insurance payout anyway. I don't care about unpaid tickets because the city fucking sucks anyway. I don't care about shoplifters, but only the ones lifting life's essential items—bread, milk, diapers, formula? Go for it. I'll close my eyes and wait.

But some thug asshole breaking in and hurting an old lady for money to fund his next hit of snorting powder? Yeah, I'll follow that up.

My desk phone trills, alongside everyone else's, but I ignore it a moment longer and scan the reports I requested from the morgue on a DV case where the woman never made it out the other side. Her children would go live with him, if her ex isn't convicted.

Not happening.

So I make a note to contact victim's services and get that prick away from the kids, while I absentmindedly reach across and take the phone from the cradle on my desk. Bringing it back, I tuck the piece between my ear and shoulder and work on drafting an email. "This is Detective Drake Banks," I murmur, disinterested. "How can I help you?"

"My name's Detective Archer Malone," the dude announces. His voice is hard. His anger palpable. But I'll be damned if his name doesn't pique my interest most of all. Straightening in my chair, I take the phone in my hand and scowl as he adds, "I'm calling from Copeland City PD."

"Alright..." I sit back in my chair and hitch one leg up to rest on the other. "How can I help you, Detective Malone outta Copeland PD?"

"I'm from the homicide division, and I've got a body here that kinda points toward you."

"Yeah?" A grin crosses my lips and leaves me momentarily entertained. "I have an alibi."

He chuckles, his hard exterior breaking away to reveal something a little friendlier. “Lorenzo Lombardo is a twenty-six-year-old banger who pushes product and makes coin working for someone we’ve only just realized operates out of our city.”

Powder. It’s always the fucking drugs when folks call me.

“So you got a new distributor in Copeland and think that’s my problem?”

“Not typically,” he counters, hard again. “But we’ve been on this case two days now, and names are starting to pop up. Lorenzo was knocked off by a guy we believe to be Marcos Buchannan. We also have security footage of Gavin Stevens shooting off rounds in a restaurant within minutes of the murder.”

“Gavin Stevens?” Adrenaline thuds through my system as I shoot up tall and lower my foot to the floor. My head shakes side-to-side without my conscious decision to move it. “Why the fuck is Gavin on your side of the country? And how long has he been there?”

“Well... we kinda figured you’d be interested once I dropped a couple of names.”

“Ya think? Gavin shot at me, Malone. And he worked for some bad motherfuckers over here a few years back.”

“You say *worked*, like it’s past tense. That’s where we’re getting ourselves a little muddled up. Because I’m led to believe it’s *work*. As in, he currently works for those motherfuckers.”

“Who?” My cell bleats with another text, but I ignore it for something bigger. Something huge. “Who picked him up and put him to task? Because Vallejo is—”

“Alive,” Malone cuts in before I can finish. “I have a police report right here in front of me, and I have your signature, as well as that of Special Agent in Charge Henry Banks, and about two dozen others that all vouch for Vallejo’s early demise.”

“I shot him myself! I put my knife in his throat and a round in his belly five years ago. He’s dead.”

“I’m hearing differently. And I’m searching for our eyewitness before she gets herself buried in a shallow grave.”

“Eyewitness?” My gaze shoots back to my computer screen, though nothing has changed. “What eyewitness?”

“Young,” he rattles off. “Maybe twenty-years-old. Brown hair. Trim body. She has no record. No presence online, and no way for me to find her. But she was running from Gavin and almost lost her head a couple of times. Street CCTV sees her getting on the South 59 bus and getting off again about four miles down the road.” He taps his computer keys and makes a little noise on his end of the line. “Bus footage shows a decent profile and front-on picture of her. But I can’t splash her face on the news and expect Vallejo not to see it.”

“Vallejo is dead,” I snarl. But I lower into my seat when my email dings and Archer Malone’s name pops up. Nerves ball in my throat, and an odd sloshing moves in my gut. But I hold the phone with one hand and maneuver the computer mouse with the other as I open the email and hover over the attachment. “I killed him myself, Malone. So maybe Stevens is taking up where Vallejo left off.”

“Yeah. I might’ve agreed with you. But Stevens, Buchanan, and two other unidentified men came out of an alleyway just seconds after Lombardo’s murder. The first two, we can ID. The third is too shadowed to make out. The last is grainy and difficult to say for sure. But the whispers are saying he’s Vallejo.”

“It’s been five years!” I click on the picture and wait for my computer to churn through the upload and reveal to me this eyewitness who is, in my experience, already dead meat. If Vallejo or his men want her dead, then it’s a done deal. If she’s just one of those unlucky *wrong place, wrong time* types, then she doesn’t have the resources Vallejo’s lot does.

Even with him dead and one of his men steering the ship, they’re too powerful, and she doesn’t have the ability to stay alive when the hunters come for her.

I reach out with a scowl and smack the side of my computer when the screen glitches and goes dark for a beat, but then it clears and reveals a young, beautiful face I've seen before. I shove up from my chair so it bounces backward and slams against the desk behind mine. "Shit!" I snatch my cell with my free hand and shove it in my back pocket. "I know her, Malone." She's pixelated from bad technology and splotchy from fear. But her face is memorable enough, even in the dark, to know exactly who she is. "Malone! I know that girl."

"So who the fuck is she? Give me a name so we can track her down before Vallejo takes her out."



I step off the plane at Copeland City Airport mere hours after our phone call. Uninvited, unwanted, and with zero fucks to give for the cops who objected to me flying to their part of the country today.

I stride past other, slower passengers and glance out the frosted glass windows to the tarmac dusted with a light sheen of snow. A storm swept through overnight, according to the news, and another may be due tonight. So the fact I was able to fly in and land without the plane being delayed is, to me, a sign I'm supposed to be here.

I make my way toward the luggage carousel and through security after that, and as I move toward the airport's exit, I reach back and take my phone from my pocket, switching it on and waiting for the internet to catch up.

Instantly, my phone beeps with texts and voicemails. I told my captain I was heading out for a couple of days off. No notice given. No permission requested. I tossed my B&E to someone else and walked out the door. And I guess word still travels fast because my father wants to know why I'm all the way over in Copeland today.

None of your fucking business.

I navigate next to my mother's texts, though hers are much more sincere. Her questions are because she cares about me and not because she's still reporting my whereabouts to the higher-ups in the DEA.

Heading out on vacation for a little while. It was a last-minute thing for a friend. You can contact me anytime. I love you.

Hitting send, I jump next to texts from a number I've yet to save in my phone. But 'Where the fuck are you, Banks?' and 'We need a name!' give him away pretty easily.

"Detective Banks."

I skid to a stop by the airport's massive electric doors and glance up to find two cops waiting for me on the other side. Archer Malone—he resembles his late father—and Charlie Fletcher. I don't know the latter, except by his records kept in the system. But he seems decent enough. Solid, if not for the notes in his files that mention some underhanded stuff on the job.

So I'll keep my distance. I'll watch my own back, and I'll watch that of Aurora Swanson's, too, because she's too sweet to be left up to chance and too ill-equipped to become Vallejo's shark bait

"Detectives." I slip my phone into my back pocket and switch the handle of my bag to my left hand to free up my right. Closing the space between us, I offer my hand to a six-foot-something Malone. Green eyes, dark hair, broad shoulders, and ink peeking up from beneath his shirt.

I wonder if his partner knows he's Archer Malone of the New York Malone mafia family?

"You flew over anyway." Archer shakes my hand and studies me as intensely as I do him. His eyes narrow, and his hand tightens.

But I know the tightrope I walk by being here, so I disconnect us easily and offer the same gesture to Fletcher. "I appreciate your hospitality, Detectives. It's not always easy or fun letting another cop onto your turf."

“Can’t say we’ve consented to it yet,” Fletcher inserts. He squeezes my hand and looks me up and down. He’s tall, too, all three of us sitting around the same height. Similar builds. But where Malone’s eyes are a striking green, Fletcher’s are a honeycomb that edges toward pure gold. “You insist on being here. Can’t you just tell us her name?”

“You’re obstructing a murder investigation,” Malone rumbles like he thinks I give a shit. “Whether Vallejo is dead or alive, his people are still very active in my city.” He sets his hands on his hips as I bring mine back and meet his stare. “They’re still dangerous, with or without him as their head. You’ve wasted time making us wait for you.”

“And now I’m here.” I circle the shitty car they wait in front of and tap the trunk to let them know they better open it so we can go. “I’ll give you her name, but only on the condition that I’m coming with you.”

“What makes you think we won’t take the name,” Fletcher pops the trunk with a press of his key fob, “leave you behind, and get on with our jobs?”

“She needs protection.” I toss my bag in, but I don’t step away. Instead, I tear the zipper open and reveal an arsenal of weapons that bring their brows up in question. “She needs a familiar face,” I tell them, taking my handgun out, checking the magazine, and then slipping the piece into the holster on my hip. “She and I have a rapport that you won’t.” I grab a second weapon, repeat my steps, and holster it. “You want to solve a murder. As homicide cops, I get it. That’s your job. But I’d like to protect the girl before she becomes Vallejo’s next victim.” I grab a knife, similar to that I buried in Vallejo’s neck five years ago and slip it into my boot. “I’m still not convinced he’s alive, by the way. But even if he’s dead and buried, his name is still being tossed around. For as long as that’s happening, I’m showing up to make sure no one else dies for no fuckin’ reason.”

I fix the leg of my jeans to comfortably cover the blade, then standing tall again, I set my hand on the trunk lid and meet the curious stares of the two watching me. “You’re here for your dead guy. I’m here for the alive girl. Seems to me, our

missions are complimentary to each other and won't pose a threat to the other."

"How the fuck did you get a bag of guns on the plane?" Fletcher backs up and heads toward the driver's seat. "You didn't have time to run that paperwork, Banks."

"I know people." I circle around and pull the back door open. Malone slides in in front of me while Fletcher slips into the driver's seat and turns over the engine. They're parked illegally, blocking cabs and annoying the shuttle bus driver who tries desperately to get through. "Catch me up on your case so we're all on the same page."

"We don't need to be on the same page." Malone turns in his seat and looks me up and down again. He's trying, so fucking hard, to place me. To remember where he knows me from. "You're not part of this case."

"And yet, you need me to identify your witness *and* you picked me up from the airport. Sounds like you need me. Her name is Rory," I fill them in. "She's twenty-one-years-old. College kid."

"She runs with a limp," Archer inserts quietly. Dangerously. "She was massaging her leg on the bus."

"I was one of the responding officers to an accident she was in in November. She was sleeping in her car, and a drunk plowed his truck right into her. Shoved her little hatchback off the side of the hill and almost killed her."

"Shit," Fletcher grumbles. "While she slept? That sucks."

"Why was she sleeping in her car?" Malone counters. "In the winter?"

"College kid," I shrug. "She was driving through town on her way here. She was rushed into surgery right after the accident because the impact broke her femur." I bring my hand up and rub my eye, like the gesture helps me think. "Left leg. The bone pierced her skin. I'm surprised she's running at all, to be honest."

"Must hurt like a motherfucker." Archer reaches up and touches his shoulder absentmindedly. "Alright. So you and her

have a rapport? She'd open the door to you if you were the one knocking?"

"Well..." I look out the window as Fletcher drives us away from the airport and into Copeland City traffic. "If she's smart, she won't open the door to anyone."

Again, Archer twists in his seat and meets my eyes. "Does she even know you, Banks?"

I shrug and ignore his probing stare. "I sat with her awhile. I kept watch over her while everyone else was busy."

"For fuck's sake." He turns back to face the front and pinches the bridge of his nose. "You've busted your way into my case, but why do I feel like you're gonna blow it, too?" Then he turns again and pins me with a glare. "And why do I know your face?"

A phone chirps from the front of the car, "Peaches & Cream" bleats, while Fletcher uses the rearview mirror to watch me suspiciously.

Like I'm the asshole.

"Mayet," Archer answers shortly. "What's wrong?"

"We're heading to the station first," Fletcher says. A cynical man might wonder if he speaks purely to dilute whatever Malone chats about. To distract me from whoever Mayet is. "Checking in. We'll run you through the war room and show you what we've got. You'll give us more than a first name and general bio of the girl. Then we'll go find her."

"What have you got so far?" I keep one ear on Malone—*Lorenzo was shot point blank by a Colt .45. Something about Doctor Emeri. The morgue. Ballistics*—and with the other half of my brain, I focus on Fletcher. "Vallejo?"

He turns a corner and brings us into congested city traffic. "We haven't seen or heard from him yet. We only have circumstantial so far. His name popped a couple of times during canvassing."

"Popped?" I sit forward in my seat. To listen to two conversations at once—*straight-walled cartridge*. "What do

you mean *popped*?”

“Like... we have no eyewitnesses, except the girl. But we have others who think they heard a little shouting. Just before the shooting started, two independent statements mention Vallejo’s name. Another says they heard Lorenzo’s name. Lombardo was a banger who owed someone money. That someone, we assume, is Vallejo. We know Stevens has priors and connects to Vallejo.”

“And you know I connect to Vallejo,” I surmise. “Which is why I got a phone call.”

“Records say you were the last to see Vallejo alive,” he murmurs. “They’ve got you down as DEA, Banks. And you were running an OP inside one of Vallejo’s clubs.”

“I put my knife in his throat.” Sitting back, I exhale as Archer wraps up his call and says goodbye to whoever is on the other end. “I put a bullet in his gut. But then I had to bail out.” I bring a hand up to scrub against my jaw. “I assumed he was dead.”

“We won’t know till we know.” Archer turns in his seat, his phone lowered and crushed in his palm, and his green stare beating into mine. “At this point in time, we’re only hearing his name. We have a single grainy street camera image of a guy who could fit Vallejo’s description. That’s it. But he’s a dangerous man, and so are his stooges. So whoever made that hit the other night still poses a significant risk to our witness.”

“And you want to find the witness first. Not to keep her safe for her own sake. But to plop her on the stand when the time comes to testify?”

His eyes narrow, and his temper alights just beneath the surface. He’s trying to figure out where he knows me from. And yet, I already know exactly who he is. I was DEA for years, and undercover for most of them. You don’t work in that world, especially as Henry Banks’ son, and not get around to each mob family in the country in one way or another.

Malone might’ve been fifteen years old when we last met. I was in my twenties.

It might seem like a lifetime ago. But the world isn't as big as some might think, and the Malones traded in powder just as much as, or perhaps more than, Vallejo ever did.

I wonder how much of his family's temper remains in his blood? And how much of his career is about smoothing the way for his family, as opposed to a search for justice for the victims of crime?

He swore an oath to the second. He vowed to uphold the law when he received a badge and a weapon.

But he wouldn't be the first dirty cop I met, and probably won't be the last.

He wants Rory—maybe he wants to protect her, or maybe she's merely a tool to get to Vallejo, to take a family, however low-rung they are in the grand scheme of the mafia world, out of the business and open up some more of the pie for the Malones.

Whatever his objectives, I intend to get to her first. To step in front of her and make damn sure the war on drugs doesn't leave her with blood on her shirt and six bullets nestled deep in her belly.

"I want to do my job," he finally answers through tight teeth. "To solve a homicide and clean our streets of another killer."

"Uh-huh." I settle back and cast my eyes to the street outside. *We'll see.*

Rory

I'M A COWARD. I'M A SCARED LITTLE SHEEP. I'M
A TERRIBLE HUMAN BEING.

“I ’m sorry I haven’t been by to see you today, Mom.” I sit in the dark, in my cold house, with every door barricaded with dining chairs and every window taped shut. Not that a man with a gun couldn’t get through easily enough. But he’d be noisy, and the tape would slow him down just enough to give me a chance to run the other way.

The news plays on our small television set across the living room with Miranda London’s intensive reporting from the steps of the morgue I walked past a couple of nights ago. She’s a beautiful woman wrapped in a tight dress and with talon-like nails. Her lips are fire engine red, and her hair is windswept and very Pamela Anderson from Baywatch.

Elegant. Classy. And entirely too flawless for regular viewers to achieve in their search for that same touch of perfection.

“The Copeland City homicide division has yet to make an official statement on Lorenzo Lombardo’s murder,” she says by rote. “Which took place a stone’s throw from where I stand right now. Detectives Archer Malone and Charlie Fletcher are the primary investigators on file, but when Channel Seventy-Nine reached out for a statement, we were shut out.” She *tsk tsk tsk* her disappointment, smirking like she knows picking at them will annoy them. “It distresses us down at Seventy-Nine that our local boys in blue refuse to communicate with the public on such pressing matters. But our promise to you, our loyal viewers, is to break the news first and keep you up-to-date on the murderer walking our streets.”

“Do you still have that cold, baby?” Mom’s voice grows weaker. She’s tired. But she holds her phone and takes my call, all because I’m too cowardly to walk out my door and go see her today. “Have you been taking your vitamins?”

“Yeah.” I sit on my kitchen floor, though our home is tiny and open-concept, so my legs almost touch the back of our couch, and my view of the television remains unimpeded. “I’m getting better,” I lie. “I just don’t want to risk getting you sick, so I thought we could talk today and maybe I’ll be able to visit tomorrow.”

“It’s okay,” she croons. Her maternal instincts still, even this close to death, override all else when she thinks I’m unwell. “We can video call too, you know, baby? Save you from trekking into town and wasting hours on the bus.”

“It’s not a waste.” Miranda London flashes a picture of Lorenzo Lombardo on the news, drawing tears to my eyes and nausea to my belly. I reach up and swipe the single drop that falls onto my cheek before it has a chance to dribble down to my jaw. “I study while I’m on the bus. I get loads of work done, and the reward at the end is always worth it.”

“I’m your reward?” she whispers, hopefully. “Really?”

“Yes.” I choke out a sob and swallow it down again before she can hear me and worry. “You’re the best thing that ever happened to me, Mom.” A screeching sound brings my head around like a swivel, lacing panic into my veins at the threat of Lombardo’s killers finally realizing where I live. It’s been my constant fear since I ran through my door a couple of nights ago. The thought of them finding me and dragging me out of bed. The hot slash of what I assume bullets in my body would feel like, making me sick.

I haven’t switched off in days.

I’ve barely slept. And the small snatches I have managed have been for mere minutes and on the kitchen floor. Or the bathroom floor. The living room floor. Wherever was closest and not so high up that someone could shoot me through a window.

Noises continue outside, but the hiss and snarl of cats fighting brings me comfort before a steel trashcan lid slams to the sidewalk and circles, making me jump.

I squeeze my eyes shut and press my free hand to my pounding heart. “Jesus.”

“Honey?” Mom’s voice slurs, sleepy as she gradually loses her battle with the end of another day. “Are you okay?”

“Yeah. I—”

“You seem off,” she presses. “You sound really tense.”

“No.” I bring my hand up, pressing it to my forehead and cough to clear my throat; I make sure my voice is strong. Steady. “I’m okay, I swear. I have this paper due, and it’s dark out, so you know that already makes me a little twitchy. Stray cats are fighting and knocked the trashcans over, so I jumped, that’s all.”

“Are you sure? Is Nolan bothering you? Or your father? Remember, honey, boundaries. As long as you have those up, no one can hurt you.”

Fresh, boiling tears spill onto my cheeks and sprint downward at gravity’s mercy. *No one can hurt me. No one can hurt me. No one can hurt me.* “No one is bothering me,” I rasp out. “But I promise, when they do, my boundaries are strong.” I swipe my tears away and swallow the crackle in my voice. “You taught me to be strong. Just like you are.”

“*If anyone saw the incident on Monday night,*” the reporter continues, “*please call our station, and we’ll connect you with the investigative team.*”

“You’re watching the news too, huh?” Mom allows us to change the subject, completely oblivious to the fact that the news is what hurts me most. It’s been three days since I ran from a madman. I should have called the cops. I should have gone straight to the police station and made a report of what I saw.

But is that what I did?

No.

I ran home, locked up the house, cried in the shower, and poured antiseptic on my torn palms. Besides a fast excursion to see my mom yesterday, I've stayed in and done absolutely nothing else.

Visiting her is a routine for us both. A pattern of behavior we both thrive on. It's not something easily undone, which means that even under the threat of a gunman, it pushed me to go outside in the middle of the day yesterday.

But I lasted only an hour before I thought every voice, every bang, every noise made in the hallways would send me insane. I feel like eyes watch me everywhere I go. And tall men follow me every step I take. I feel the warmth of a gun on my back every moment I'm awake, and when I can manage a moment to rest, I see those shadows from the alleyway in my dreams.

Constant.

Unrelenting.

Unforgiving.

Like karma punishes me for being a coward and not reporting what I saw.

I can't find yesterday's courage today. That hour of bravery to escape my home and see my mom. I can't get up from my place on the floor and go look out the windows. I can't peek into the darkness and not risk my mental health as eyes seemingly stare back at me.

So, I stay down. I don't answer the door. And I sure as hell don't go to the police station and attach my name to a case that has *mob* written all over it.

I can't die yet. Not for as long as my mom lives and is at risk of grieving me. I can't put myself in a situation where they bury me first, and she follows me to the grave days, or hours, later.

She's too fragile. Too sweet. And deserves so much better. So I tell a lie, and stew in my cowardice.

"Rory?"

“Huh?” I drag my eyes from the window and focus again on the television set flickering across the room. “What?”

“The news,” she presses. “You heard about that guy who was shot?”

“Yeah.” My jaw trembles, but I lock it down and refuse to let weakness take over. “Crazy, huh?”

“It was just up the street from here,” she sleepily mumbles. “The police station is on this street too, so you’d think this would be a safe place. But sometimes, the wackiest things happen in the unlikeliest places, huh?”

“Yep.” I turn on my hip and reach out, my fingers stretched, for the strap of my laptop bag. I’ve kept it close for days, like I think I can study while the world outside this house is on fire.

I can’t focus.

I can’t calm down.

I can’t do anything except run through, a million times over, everything I saw that night. A man, only a couple of years older than me, shot point-blank in the head, after getting punched a handful of times. Four other men. Bullies. Killers. Mobsters. I look down at my scabbing palms and remember falling in the street. I massage my good leg, remembering how a car mercilessly clipped it.

I don’t have my cane anymore. But I have crutches, for the moments I do get up and walk more than a few steps.

Mom’s breathing grows heavier on her end of the line. Her body giving way to sleep. She rests, the way I can’t. So I grab the TV remote from beside my leg and turn Miranda London’s voice down. Then I mute our call, so I can hear Mom breathe though she can’t hear me, and set the phone on the floor beside the remote.

Finally, I sniffle back the tears and snot that hasn’t subsided since I watched a man die. Reaching out for a box of tissues, I snatch two out, fold them in half, and bring them to my nose to blow. All things that would startle a sick woman awake if she heard.

She hums the song we sang throughout my youth while she dozes. It's a lullaby for me now. My comfort, as I open my laptop and wait for next door's Wi-Fi to connect. They've named it "StopStealingMyNet" which takes skill and reasonable know-how to achieve, but they haven't yet mastered the ability to change the easily guessed password.

Swallowing dread and opening an internet browser, I lick my dry lips and glance to the right again when a thudding sound comes from somewhere along the street. Cars pass, and people wander by. Some are coming or going to work, and others are eternally jobless and delirious with substances I couldn't afford to buy, even if I wanted to escape reality.

When my perpetually slow computer is ready, I hen-peck 'Gregory Vallejo' into the keyboard. I didn't know his full name before, and I wouldn't know now if not for Miranda London's aggressive and continuous coverage on the subject. But he's the name she throws around every hour, on the hour.

Hitting enter, I take my hands from the keyboard and fidget with the plain silver ring I wear around my thumb. It's tarnished in places and fits snug after I've bent and misused it over the last year or two.

Cars honk in the street outside, and my neighbors argue about... something. Dinner. Drugs. The kids. I don't know. Mom dozes on her end of the line, and the *beep-beep-beep* of her monitors keeps me company as news article after news article slowly fills my laptop screen. Pop-up ads slow things down, and my long out-of-date security software warns me that I may be at risk of viruses.

"Gregory Vallejo: Wanted in relation to nine connected murders over a week-long spree in New York City. December 2017."

"Gregory Vallejo: Believed dead. Who will run his empire now?"

"The body believed to be Gregory Vallejo's third wife, found in the charred remains of a burnt-out luxury sedan. Seattle, Wash."

“Jesus.” I scan article after article with sweat beading on my brow and my stomach churning with nausea. Confusion pulses in my veins as every news piece leads toward a dead gangster whose obituary pre-dates my run-in earlier this week.

Which means it’s impossible he was the man in the alleyway, right?

It’s simply not possible that he’s the man I saw. Which means whatever name the press has picked up is wrong.

I startle on the floor and twist toward the door when a loud bang pops outside my apartment. Tears burn in my eyes, and anxiety makes my stomach ache. Because that pop could be a gun shot. Or a backfiring car. Or a mini firework. They’re all sounds one becomes accustomed to hearing when you live on this street. But even before witnessing a man’s murder, they were sounds that made my heart race and my fingers ache as I clench them tight and prepare to hide.

Or run.

Or curl into a ball and cry my eyes out.

Because I’m a coward. I’m a sheep. I’m the type of woman who watched a man lose his life, but I didn’t report it. I didn’t tell anyone. And I didn’t help bring justice for someone who probably didn’t deserve to die.

“Rory? Honey?”

I drag my eyes from my locked, barricaded, and unopened front door and instead pick up my phone. Unmuting it, I bring it closer and force my lips into a smile. Though god knows why. It’s not like she can see me. “I’m still here, Mom. You okay?”

“Yeah.” She exhales a gentle sigh and edges back toward sleep. “Miss you.”

I reach up and swipe a falling tear from my cheek. “I miss you, too.” Those damn cats screech again, drawing me around and onto my aching hip with a hiss. I look toward the living room window, though it’s closed, and covered with heavy black-out curtains. “Listen, Mom.” Swallowing a ball of nerves, I set my phone on the floor, but only so I can use my

hands to push up to stand and rest on my good leg. Which is still my bruised leg. I'm stiff and sore and running out of appendages to run on. So I set my hand on the counter as I turn and bend to collect my phone from the floor. "I'm going to hang up, okay?" A falling trash can brings my head up again with a snap, my nerves balancing on a razor-sharp edge I'm not sure I can maintain for much longer. "I have to eat dinner and do the dishes."

"Rory—"

"Most importantly," I cut in, "you need to rest. I want you to sleep well, okay?" I hold my phone in one hand and reach out for my crutch with the other. Footsteps on the stoop outside make my stomach drop, but it's not until a loud *thud-thud-thud* knock on my door that my heart stops completely.

I swear, I miss a dozen beats as my eyes shoot to every corner of my home.

"Ms. Swanson?" A man's heavy voice comes from the other side of the door. Then, another knock. "My name is Detective Archer Malone. I'm from the Copeland City Police Department."

"Rory?"

"Sleep well, Mom." I kill the call and shove my phone into the back pocket of my oversized jeans. Then I swallow again and press my newly freed hand to my stomach. "Um..." I clear the croak from my voice. "Hello?"

"Hello." Archer Malone's tone softens. Friendlier. Kinder. "Ms. Swanson. We'd really like a moment to talk with you. Could you open the door for us, please?"

"Wh-what do you want?" I pull a crutch under my arm and reach out for the second to support my other side. "What do you want to talk about?"

"Do you really want me to shout about it?" he counters. "In the street, so all your neighbors can hear?"

"I don't..." I glance toward my back door and whimper when a shadow falls across the stoop outside. Then I look to

the front door again and take a single step forward. Then another. “Am I in trouble?”

“No ma’am.” He knocks again, though it’s softer this time. Gentler. “You’re definitely not in trouble. My partner and I would just like to speak with you. Can you open the door, sweetheart? We know you’ve had a big couple of days. We know you’re scared.”

Shaking my head, I turn back to my kitchen counter and switch a crutch for a long-bladed knife whose mere presence makes my teeth ache. I can’t explain it. I can’t describe exactly why. But looking at the glistening steel makes the enamel covering my teeth quiver and hurt. “I’m calling 911,” I shout back, clutching the knife in my shaking hand. “I’m asking them to send someone else.”

“My badge number is 549248,” he calls back easily. “My partner’s name is Charlie Fletcher. Badge number 249816.” His tone grows more hurried now. Less cajoling. “Please open the door, ma’am. We’d like to speak with you about something important. Your life depends on it, and time is of the essence.”

“You’re pressuring me.” I lean on my crutch and reach back for my phone. Taking it out and unlocking the screen with trembling fingers, I type “9-1-1” and hit dial. “You shouldn’t try to pressure me like that.”

“I’m trying to save your life!” He slams his fist against the door, so the thud echoes all the way through my home. “Bad people are coming for you. So open the fucking door and let us in.”

“911,” the dispatch lady answers. “What’s your emergency?”

“My name is Aurora Swanson,” I rush out. “I live at 8496 Cardale Street, Copeland City. I have a cop knocking on my door. His name is Archer Malone. He says he’s a detective and needs to speak with me.”

“Ms. Swanson!” he booms from outside. “Open the door!”

“Please help me!” I cry. “I have reason to believe he’s lying. I’m scared,” I tremble. “I don’t know what I’m

supposed to do.”

“Detective Archer Malone?” the woman on the other end of the line mumbles. “Yes. We have it here in our system that Detective Malone, as well as Detective Fletcher and Detective Banks, are reporting to 8496 Cardale Street this evening.”

“Th-they are?” I exhale a gulped breath and shakily set my knife down on the back of the couch. “Are you— are you sure?” I fix my crutch beneath my arm and swipe my cheek clean of tears, using my shoulder. “Are you definitely sure?”

“Ms. Swanson!” Malone knocks once more, so hard that the door rattles on its hinges. “It’s important you open up.”

“I’m coming.” Sniffling, I start forward slowly and internalize every creak of my crutch. Every *grrrrr* as it holds my weight. “I’m co—”

I startle back with a shriek, dropping my phone, when the door busts open and bounces off the wall, revealing two men on the other side wearing almost all black. Shirts, pants, boots. Their hair is black, and their eyes, too, because of the shadows.

The one in front, Archer Malone, smiles the smile of a venomous snake and darts closer as I spin on my heels and sprint. Except, he grabs my hair in his fist and yanks me back until my legs and crutch go one way, but my head and shoulders go another.

I scream in terror and slam to the tile floor with a thud that steals the breath from my lungs. My back aches, and my throat is bone dry as I look up at the man who crouches over me and grins. His incisor glitters gold, while the rest are too white, too perfect, too... dentist-made.

“You shouldn’t open the door without checking the peephole first, sweetheart.” He takes a gun from somewhere on his body and rests the end on my forehead. It’s cold and hard. Chilling in how icy it is, terrifying in how final this moment seems. Tears blind me from anything else happening in my home, and my whooshing breath makes it difficult to hear the shouts from the other men. The orders barked. The

words spoken. “You’ve become a loose end, Aurora. And the people I work for don’t keep loose ends around.”

“I didn’t call the cops about what I saw.” I squeeze my eyes shut, but that only pushes more tears onto my cheeks and into my ears. “I didn’t tell anybody.”

“Mr. Vallejo’s name is on TV, kid.” He pulls his gun away and cocks it, the lack of pressure against my forehead and the sound of metal clicking against metal bringing my eyes open with a snap. “For the first time in five years, his name is being blasted on the news.” He slides his pinky finger along my cheek and shakes his head. “We don’t like that kind of noise.”

“I didn’t tell anyone!” I’m seconds from dying. I won’t move from this spot on my living room floor. I’ll never be able to call my mom again, and I’ll never be able to feel her arms wrapped around me. I didn’t know the last time she held me would be the *last time*. I didn’t appreciate it enough. I didn’t stay in the moment and absorb every last scrap of love she was gifting me. “Please don’t kill me,” I plead. “Please! I didn’t tell anyone.”

Pop! I jump at the unforgiving boom of a bullet going off. I squeeze my eyes shut and wait for death to take me, but when I remain conscious anyway, when nothing hurts, and nothing happens, I open them again and look into my killer’s eyes.

Noise crashes all around me. Shouts. Fists. Voices. My tiny home is filled to the brim with men I don’t know. But then I catch one I do.

A memory from a million years ago, and yet, it was only months ago. A familiar face I’m not sure I ever conversed with, unless our conversations took place while I was sedated and loopy.

He stands over my captor’s right shoulder, hidden from my gunman’s sight. His eyes, green and gold, but shadowed in equal parts rage and empathy, he looks down on me like I’m a dying dog, awaiting the final blow to put me out of my misery. He looks ten-feet-tall from my vantage point on the floor.

Massive in the shoulders and chest, purely because of his placement behind an equally large man.

It's all about perspective, I suppose. And maybe later, when I'm floating in the afterlife and have time to reflect, I might wonder why I was thinking about the man at all when I was about to die. Why did I notice the gold speckles in his eyes? Or the pity in them? Why did I focus on the veins in his forearm, before I spied the gun in his hand?

Why do I accept my fate now, while he stands over me, and not before, when it was just me and Golden-Tooth?

These are all things to discuss with the therapist I can't afford. But the good news is, death is free. I mean, aside from the funeral, and the plot of land I don't own. There's no money in the Swanson coffers, so maybe they'll toss me in the trash and consider it a done deal.

That's the way Judy Jinx would want it, right?

And soon, my mom will join me too. She deserves better than to be tossed away, but the cold hard truth is, we'd both rather decompose in a shallow grave somewhere in the forest—together—than to be placed somewhere else where we run the risk of never finding each other again.

Judy owes me that much, surely.

Men fight around me. Guns go off, and Miranda London's face is shattered when a stray bullet pierces the television screen and sends smoke pluming from behind. Time seems to work in slow motion. Like, super, duper, ridiculously slow, because while I get a chance to categorize the man with the teeth, and the other man with the arms, and then Miranda London's destroyed face, nothing else seems to happen.

And yet, so much chaos surrounds me.

Noises blur and run together. Shadows fall across my body. My living room. My legs ache, but now, so does the back of my head. My scalp stings where Golden-Tooth yanked my hair, and my skull thuds with a headache after it's collision with the tiled floor.

The man behind the man—the second one is from my dreams, not the first, who is from my nightmares—aims his gun too, like I need another pointing my way. But where the world moves in slow motion, his hand moves at lightning-fast speed. The muzzle of his weapon arcs past me and stops instead against the first's temple. But where I guess I thought maybe it would be a "*drop your gun and step away from the girl*" kind of threat, he pulls the trigger instead.

Like a vacuum seal, his weapon's discharge sucks the air from the room. From my lungs. Blood and brains and all of the things I can adequately label when I'm at school, spray across the side of my couch and splatter against the wall. Droplets coat my television, but Miranda's face no longer waits to be used as a canvas.

"Let's go." Time catches up and my body screams as Golden-Tooth falls one way, and the man whose name I can't recall scoops me the other way. He grabs me under the arm with his free hand and yanks me up so my legs scream and my head swims, then he shoves my crutch against my body so it almost feels like he's a pro baseball player taking a swing. "Malone!" He brings his gun up again and shoots off another round as the real Archer Malone spins on his heels and the man aiming his gun at him falls.

Men drop the way rain does on a sweet summer evening. Guns blaze, bullets booming from their weapons and sprinting along barrels to pierce human skin.

I twist away from my new captor's hold. I have no clue why. I can't help those who've fallen, and even if I could, I'm not sure I should. They came here to hurt me. They came to end my life. And yet, my "*I'm a people pleaser*" trauma rears up to take a second swing at getting me killed.

"I need my phone!" I catch sight of the small, silver device lying on my kitchen floor. And beside it, my open laptop. But the man holding me doesn't give me time to go back. His fingers bruise my skin, and his steps are much too fast for my unhealed leg.

But when I fall, he holds on tighter. When I stumble, his hand holds me up.

When we burst into the night outside, eyes watch us, neighbors come out to see what's all the fuss, a car screeches to a stop on the sidewalk and the door swings open before my brain has a chance to catch up.

The man in charge of my life, and death, shoves me into the back seat. My crutch is unforgiving under my body and the screws in the side stab my belly as he continues to push me in.

I don't know about the other cops. I don't know if they followed us out. Or if they lived or died. I don't know about my home. If it's left open to looters, my phone and laptop are literally the only valuables I own. I don't know anything.

I just know this man, who probably doesn't stand at ten-foot-tall, follows me into the back seat, slams the door, and barks, "go" a mere second before the car is moving and the nausea I thought I'd swallowed down ten minutes ago comes bursting out to make a bad situation so much worse.

Vomit fills my hands. My shirt. It fills the gap between my seat and the one the driver sits on, and when we race around a corner and my head raps against the window with a thud, more vomit covers my jeans.

Good one, Judy. I really appreciate that final touch.

Drake

“You fucked up Banks!” Malone charges through the door of a hotel down on West Thirty-Third with rage in his eyes and his gun in his hand. I’ve rented a two-bedroom place that has no connection to me, none to Rory, and none to any of Vallejo’s people. Temporarily, at least, until we can catch our breath and figure out where the fuck to go next. “You don’t get to kill a man in cold blood and expect to keep your badge, dumbass.”

“He was a direct threat.” Unconcerned, I turn on my heels and head toward the kitchenette built into the room and yank the small fridge open to peruse their mini bar options. Six-dollar candy bars. Nine-dollar Pepsi cans. Bags of potato chips, and tiny creamers for when I want to make a coffee. I cast a fast glance toward the bedroom I’ve placed Rory in to sleep off her shock, but I don’t approach the door. I don’t show the cops where I’ve put her, though it wouldn’t take a detective more than a second to figure it out. “We went in there to get the girl out,” I murmur. “We got the girl out.”

“You executed a man!” Fletcher growls, setting a phone and laptop on the coffee table in the middle of the room. “Point blank. And you shot another in the back.”

“First one was gonna kill the girl.” I select a Pepsi and close the fridge, turning to lean against the counter as I pop the top of the can open. “Second one was gonna kill Malone. I can’t really see what the issue is.”

“The issue,” Archer snarls, “is that you’re visiting from out of state. You don’t have jurisdiction, you haven’t formally

transferred. Now you've dropped two men, and both hits look pretty fucking shady to anyone on the outside."

"So you don't take issue with me killing a man..." I bring my soda up and take a contemplative sip. "Rather, you're mad at the method of my kill. Correct?"

"If you're gonna kill a man in the line," Fletcher bites out, "you make damn sure you can back it up when IA takes a look. We disarm around here. We wound. We kill, only in self-defense. We don't execute them."

I merely shrug and take another drink. "Sounds like you've got some paperwork to do then. I shot in *your* defense. And *hers*." I point toward her door, and instantly loathe myself for the mistake as both sets of cop's eyes follow the direction. "I didn't do it for shits and giggles, detectives. And if I stood down, we'd have a hell of a lot more paperwork to do when you," I look into Malone's eyes, "and our witness, were both rolled out in body bags."

"We're gonna have to get the mayor involved." Fletcher brings a hand up and scrubs it over his face. "For fuck's sake, we're gonna need Mayor Lawrence on our side to clean this one up."

"Politics isn't really my thing." I push away from the counter and head toward Rory's room. Since I've already given her away to the other cops anyway. "Talk to whoever you've gotta talk to. I'm electing myself her detail in the meantime." I stop by her door and carefully nudge it open an inch to peek inside. The smell of vomit hits me like a wall. Like curdled cheese and bad milk. But I hold my breath and study the room to find her sound asleep in the middle of the king-sized bed. She sleeps on her back, her legs flat on the mattress. Her jeans, messy with stomach contents and another man's gray matter.

We're on the tenth floor of a semi-upscale hotel. There are no fire escapes on the outside of this one, and no way in, not even through the windows. So I brush the cops away with a wave of my hand and stalk into the room to open the windows and allow a little fresh air in. The panes open only three-

inches. It's a safety feature, I figure. So jumpers can't jump, and burglars can't get in.

Which is precisely why I chose this hotel to hide out in for a couple of days.

I open them far enough that arctic winter chill sprints in and leaves goosebumps on my skin. But it's better, I think, than saunaing in the stench of someone else's death. I cross to the bed and grab a thick blanket from the end, and whipping it open so the breeze kicks the sleeping woman's hair back, I lay it over her body, knowing I'll need to send it away for cleaning once she wakes and goes searching for a shower.

Done, I turn away and leave her to sleep. Then, I slip through the door and close it again at my back, despite the detectives who stand entirely too close to me, their eyes, focused on the door like they think they can see through the thick wood.

"Remind me again how you know her." Unimpressed, Archer turns on his heels and makes himself at home, taking a can from my fridge and popping the seal. "You know the witness, and you know Vallejo. Sounds kinda fishy to me."

"I know Vallejo, because I worked his case five years ago when he died. I know *of* her because she had the misfortune of getting in the way of a drunk driver in the town I was sorta on duty in."

"Sorta?" He raises a brow. "Sorta like how you think you're on duty in Copeland right now?"

Shrugging, I cross the living room of our opulent suite and take a seat on one of the two two-seater couches. My knees almost touch the coffee table, and my eyes study the cracked screen of Rory's phone. The dying battery that flashes for attention. The drops of blood, that somehow get everywhere when a man is shot in the head. "It is what it is, Detective. I'm here. I have a vested interest in making sure Vallejo is *not* alive. And I just so happen to know her, too. Since I don't particularly trust you two to do the job, I'm appointing myself to make sure she lives."

“You don’t trust *us*?” Fletcher circles the room and stands on the other side of the coffee table. His hands on his hips. His chest vibrating with rage. “*You* don’t trust *us*? We called you, asshole. This is our case. You’re the one bringing an arsenal across the country, executing men, and taking our witness to an unsecured, unapproved hotel like you think you’re smarter than the rest of us.”

“I am smarter than you.” Smug, I sit back in my chair and rest my arms on the cushions to study the cop up and down. I see Malone in my peripherals. His anger. His barely repressed temper. “I’ve studied Vallejo for a decade. I’ve been in his clubs. I’ve had connections to him for most of my damn life. And I was the one who killed him.”

“Obviously not!” The man argues, shoving a hand toward the door. “Bastard’s still out there sending guns to take down our girl.”

“If he’s alive, then I’m gonna deal with it. If he’s dead, I’m gonna deal with whoever the fuck is acting in his stead. And besides,” I turn to Archer and grin, “Malones are in the drug trade, right?”

His dark green eyes flash with recognition. Understanding. *Suspicion*. “What did you just say?”

“I worked DEA, Detective. Let’s not sit here and pretend I’m too stupid to make the connection.”

“Malone is a common name,” Fletcher snarls. He stalks across the room to be beside his friend. Support. Muscle, maybe, if I make a wrong move. “There are tens of thousands of them in the continental US alone. It’s as common as Smith. Or Jones.”

Scoffing, I bring my soda across and take a sip. “Let’s not offend each other here by accusing the other of a lack of intelligence. I know you know who his family is,” I nod toward Fletcher, “because of the way you defend him. And I know you,” I look to Archer, “are Timothy Malone’s kid.”

His lips curl into a feral sneer. “Timothy Malone is dead.”

“Which only bumps you up the supply chain.” I lean forward on the couch and pick up Rory’s beeping phone. Setting my soda down, I sit back again to study the simple flowery screen saver. The flashing battery that threatens death any moment now. It’s dark out. Past dinnertime. The woman sleeping off her most traumatic experience is bound to wake hungry and scared soon. “It’s been a hot minute since I was inside the Malone estate in New York,” I tell them, slyly glancing their way, “but we’ve already met. We’ve already shaken hands and conducted business.”

“I fucking knew I recognized you.” Enraged—*because he’s been found out?*—Archer brings a hand up and scrubs it over his jaw. “I knew it!”

“Right.” I flip Rory’s phone over, and over, in my hand. To keep my fingers busy. To keep my brain on track. “So now that we’ve got that covered, do we wanna discuss in more detail why I’m not trusting a dirty cop to take care of that girl?”

“I’m a Malone,” Archer acknowledges through tight teeth, breaking away from Fletcher and coming to stand on the other side of the table. “And I’m Timothy’s son.” He shakes his head. “But I’m not dirty.”

I scoff, the disrespectful sound coming out before my brain consciously has a chance to process it. “You’re mafia.”

“I’m related to the mafia,” he counters. “But I’m only as active in their dealings as you are.”

Piqued, I lift a brow in question. So he pushes on, anger in each word he spits out. “I was born and raised in that house, Banks. You were, evidently, placed in my home undercover for a short while when I was, what?” he ponders, “fourteen-years-old? Fifteen?”

“Fifteen,” I agree with a nod. “Sounds about right.”

“I was a child whose voice was taken from him. I won’t accept responsibility for the crimes my family has committed. And I sure as fuck won’t answer to you about them when they have absolutely *no* bearing on the case we’re running today.

The case you hold no authority on,” he adds. “We called you for information.”

“Instead, you got a former agent who knows Vallejo better than you know your own father. You have your witness back in your control, thanks to me. She’s safe and sound, and you know those men I put down in her house were done in defense of someone else.”

“It was an execution,” Fletcher repeats. Considering he’s friendly with mafia Malone, I’d say his objection to a man’s death has everything to do with paperwork and nothing to do with concern for the guy who lost his life. “You could have apprehended them. Brought them in for questioning.”

“Sure. But your witness would be dead. And chances are your partner would be, at best, in surgery right now. At worst, in the morgue right beside Swanson.”

“I would like for you all to stop talking about me now.”

I jerk in my chair and spin when my brain catches up and my consciousness demands it. I shove up from the couch and turn at the same time, while the other cops remain still, their eyes pinned to Rory’s too-pale self. Her clothes are filthy. Her eyes and cheeks, hollowed out. She swallows nervously, so the bob and movement of her throat are visible, even to me all the way over here. And when I glance along her battered body, I feel a deep stab of guilt when I find my handprint bruised against her arm.

I manhandled her when I already knew she was sore.

I saw her fucking thigh bone poking through her skin a couple of months ago. I saw her injuries, up close and personal. But instead of treating her gently tonight, I probably harmed her more than those other assholes did.

I had to do it. I know I did. But hell if bile doesn’t make my tongue taste nasty, or guilt make my stomach turn.

She studies me too, slowly, curiously, like maybe she remembers me from that accident, too, but whether she does or not goes unsaid, as she brings her eyes to the other guys.

“You’re Archer Malone.” She swallows again and takes a deep breath so her chest grows. “And Charlie Fletcher.”

“You can call me Fletch,” the second reasons gently, watching her like she’s a little doll to be kept safe. “How are you feeling?”

“Like I don’t want to be talked about.” She stands tall. Strong. Her hair is matted and messy, but still manages to sit in an askew ponytail. “The guy that was in my home...” Nervously, she licks her lips and casts a fast glance toward me, “Um... the one who grabbed me and was gonna shoot. He said his name was Detective Archer Malone.”

Rage zings in my blood as I shoot a look at the cop. Though, I know he wasn’t the one who hurt her. I know he didn’t toss her to the floor or hold a gun to her head.

“He told me his name and badge number.”

“Is that how he got inside?” Gently, like he knows she’s apt to run, Archer starts moving closer to her. But he’s slow. Unobtrusive. Unthreatening. “You thought he was me, so you let him in?”

She flicks her thumbs against her pointer fingers, like a nervous twitch she can’t help. “I’ve seen you on the news, Detective. And I’ve seen your wife.”

I glance back at him and raise a brow. *He’s married?*

“The man who hurt me, he was shouting at me to open the door. He said his badge number was something like...” she closes her eyes for a beat and shakes her head. “I don’t know. Five, four, something.” Opening them again, she swallows nervously. “He called me sweetheart in this really icky... sickly sweet way. So I knew...”

“You knew he wasn’t me.”

She wrinkles her nose and shakes her head again. “I know you and your wife are tight, and that you don’t really have a reputation for being overly sweet.”

Fletch chuckles, so his chest and shoulders bounce. “He lacks bedside manners, Ms. Swanson. It’s his biggest flaw.”

“Rory,” she draws a deep breath and sighs. “You can call me Rory. And well...” she lifts her shoulders in a shrug. “I dunno. I didn’t know your real badge number. But I feel like it starts with a seven. I don’t know how or why I know that. Maybe I heard it on the news or something. But I’m just really sure it doesn’t start with a five.”

“You’re right.” Archer takes another step forward and works to smile in a way that would imply kindness. “Badge number 743622. No fives to be found anywhere in there.”

“And you wouldn’t call me sweetheart, either.” She chews on the inside of her lip and leans a little to the right to look at Fletch. “*You* possibly would. Miranda London likes to talk about you both on the news a lot. So I guess I kinda figured that one of you is gentler than the other. But that man at my house... he...” She tries to finish her thought, but her chest heaves and cuts her off.

So Fletch offers, “Bad guy screwed up with that ‘sweetheart’ comment. It wasn’t in character for Arch.”

“I didn’t let them in,” she whimpers, losing her stance of strength and dropping her fidgeting hand to massage her aching thigh. “I swear, I didn’t let them in. I grabbed a knife. But they kicked my door anyway, and then he grabbed me and —”

“You did great.” I finally speak up and show her a gentle smile. Soft and comforting. Because maybe Detective Fletcher is known for being the sweeter partner of the two. Maybe he’s known for putting a witness at ease and making them comfortable. But fuck, so am I. “I don’t know if you remember me, Rory, but I—”

“You were at the hospital.” Tears well up in her eyes and spill over when she nods. She’s not a noisy, sobbing crier. But rather like someone I think is at the end of their rope. She’s tired. She’s emotionally wrung out. And she’s now on a contract killer’s list somewhere. “When that douchebag hit my car,” she rasps, “you came into the hospital after Lieutenant Smiles-A-Lot had to leave.”

“Smiles-A-Lot,” I grin, thinking of the eternally angry firefighter who pulled her out of her wreck a few months ago. “Ruiz. I’m not sure I’ve ever seen him smile. But sure... I know who you mean.”

Her brows wrinkle and seem to collapse in the middle. “Why are you here?”

“In Copeland?”

“Yes,” she exhales. “In Copeland. In my home. In this room.” She lifts a hand and looks around. “Whatever this room is. I saw you in a different town, in a whole other lifetime when I was in distress. And now here I am, distressed again, and here you are, a dozen states away from the first. I don’t...” Dismayed, she shakes her head. “I just don’t understand the connection or how you could possibly be here in the same place and at the same time as me. Again.”

“You saw something I’m guessing some bad guys think you shouldn’t have.” Remembering I hold her phone in my hand, I tighten my grip and come around the couch, so it no longer separates us. So I’m closer, should the *Malone* in Malone jump out and reveal he’s working for Vallejo.

Call me a fucking cynic, but I struggle to trust folks in the mob world.

“Whoever shot that man the other night... they know you saw. I’m thinking they don’t want you to tell anyone else about it.”

“I haven’t told anyone yet.” Her eyes shoot to the detectives and water. “I saw a man get shot, but I didn’t report it. That’s illegal.”

“Well...” Archer starts, “Yes. It is. But—”

“But you will *not* get in trouble for it,” I bite out. Wandering closer, placing myself between the woman who stands somewhere around five-five, maybe five-six, and the cops who are hunters just as determined as the men in her home tonight, I look down and wait for Rory’s brave eyes to meet mine. “You saw something horrible, Aurora. You were

alone. You were scared. You will not get into trouble for choosing yourself first.”

“I googled Gregory Vallejo.” She drops her gaze, only to lock on to my hand, so I lift it between us and offer her the dead phone. It’s a peace offering, I guess. My gesture in hopes it somehow makes her trust me. “I was googling him just before those other guys knocked on my door.”

“Why?” I block the detectives’ view of their witness. I protect her from their probing stares. And when she remains quiet, I ask again, “Why, Aurora? Why’d you google him?”

“Because that’s the name I heard the other night when that guy got shot,” she trembles. “The young one, the one who died, he was saying Vallejo’s name. And then the woman on the news, Miranda—”

“Fucking London,” Archer rumbles across the room. “Always talking. Never helping.”

“She kept saying Gregory Vallejo, too,” Rory finishes. “She was saying his name every hour since it happened. And then she started showing footage of me.” Her eyes swim with unshed tears. “You can’t really tell it’s me,” she explains. “Because it’s super blurry and stuff. But I know it’s me. I know I was the one running through that restaurant. I was running away.” Her breath hitches. “Instead of helping, I ran away.”

“And you lived to help another day,” I press. I fold my back and lower until she meets my eyes. “They were going to kill you, Aurora. They want you dead, so if you’d done *anything* except run, you wouldn’t be here today.”

“I didn’t help,” she whimpers. “Maybe he has a family at home. Or a pet going hungry right now. Maybe he has parents who miss him. Or a—”

“You can’t help him if you’re dead too,” I repeat. “If you’d done anything else the other night, he’d still be dead and without justice. At least by staying alive, you can help him now.”

“How?” she demands jerkily. “How can I make any of this better?”

“You need to tell us what you know,” Archer murmurs. Slowly, he wanders up on my right and comes to a stop beside us. “We’ve been looking for you, Rory. Trying to figure out who you are.”

“How did you...” Curious, she brings her gaze back to me. “You?”

“I have a history with Vallejo,” I concede. “I knew him a long time ago, and because his name was floating around on the news, it was the logical next step for Detectives Fletcher and Malone to find my name connected to his.”

“Why?” She drops her phone into her pocket and goes back to flicking her nails. “Why is your name connected?”

“Because I used to be DEA. A long time ago. He was one of my cases before he killed my partner and blew our case into pieces.”

“He killed your partner?” she blanches. “Like... *dead* dead?”

“As dead as they get,” I sigh. “But then I killed him.”

Her brows pinch tight. “Your partner?”

Finally, a real smile breaks across my lips and laughter comes out in the form of a soft exhalation. “Vallejo. I put a knife in his throat and a bullet in his belly. Then I got out of that place before his men killed me. That was five years ago, and until this morning, I believed him to be dead.”

“But he’s not...” Her eyes well up and spill over, her emotions dangerously close to the surface. “I saw him.”

“You saw Vallejo?” I question. “With your own eyes? You saw him?”

“I mean...” She swallows nervously. “I saw these men. I saw them. And Lorenzo Lombardo, the one who died? He said Vallejo’s name. Then the man he was talking to, the one he called Vallejo, turned and looked into my eyes.”

“You wanted to know how you can help Lorenzo?” Fletch comes up on my left to join our small group. He looks into Rory’s eyes and does that bedside manner thing he’s known for, taking her hand and giving it a gentle pat. “You want to know why being alive matters and how you can bring justice to him and his family? You help us.” He squeezes her hand and brings her focus down. “You come with us to the station. You identify the men you saw that night. And when the time comes, you speak in front of a judge, and you tell him what you saw.”



The detectives stay until after nine. Asking their questions. Pressing for details. They get Rory a fuck load of tissues, and they say nothing about the stench of her clothes, though we can all smell the dried vomit in the fabric she wears.

They explain what it would be like to identify killers on record. And how it would be to take the stand and put a powerful man behind bars. But fuck them, because neither explain that by doing so, she’s agreeing to witness protection from now until Vallejo and his men are behind bars.

They don’t explain the danger she’s in, or the freedoms her participation takes away.

Detectives Malone and Fletcher don’t clarify shit. They only give her the “*do it for your country and fellow man*” pep talk cops spout off when they want to sweeten a witness and get them on side.

And because they do that, I move them out before ten. I hurry them along and slam them in the ass with the door when they don’t move fast enough. Because maybe they’re good cops. Maybe Malone isn’t as crooked as his kin. Maybe they really do care that Rory lives.

But I can’t know that yet. I don’t trust them.

And I sure as fuck don’t trust them to keep the girl alive, when her only crime is to happen across someone else’s bullshit.

“I guess this means I can’t go home tonight, huh?” Sniffling, the young woman who is only, barely, twenty-one-years-old, casts a longing glance toward the single crutch we managed to bring with us. But it’s by the mini fridge, and she’s on the couch.

She wants to get up. She wants independence. So I cross the room and grab it for her, knowing if she tries, she just might fall.

“What do you think is happening at my house right now?”

I bring the crutch back and offer it to her as she shakily pushes up to stand. Her entire body is stiff, her stance weak, as she searches for balance. “Your home is a crime scene,” I tell her quietly. Truthfully. “Men died in there tonight, Ms. Swanson. And even if they didn’t, you won’t be allowed back for a while.”

“Rory.” She fixes the crutch beneath her left arm and hobbles out from the gap between the coffee table and the couch. She shakily makes her way toward the small kitchenette space, but she doesn’t peek into the fridge. She doesn’t grab a drink or a candy bar. “Ms. Swanson makes me uncomfortable. Why couldn’t I go home, if my home wasn’t a crime scene?”

“Because you’re under police protection.” I sit on the arm of the couch and give her more than enough personal space. “It’s all a bit messy right now. There’s a lot of paperwork and shit that still needs to happen before this becomes official. But...” I point toward her, then back to me. “I said it’s happening tonight. Not tomorrow. Which is why we’re here right now.”

“And what exactly is *this*?” She turns her back to the kitchen counter and pushes up to sit. Though I don’t miss her grimace of pain or the emotion that jumps into her eyes when she brings them back to me. “Everything feels crazy and weird.”

“This...” I look down at myself and think of Gregory Vallejo. I think of my partner. And his wife. His kid. I think of all the men I’ve approached Vallejo’s operation with, and all

but me have ended up in a grave. “I’m appointing myself as your protective detail,” I tell her. “Whatever happens tomorrow with those cops, whatever they think they’re organizing, I’m staying right here.”

“Those cops? Aren’t you *those cops* too?”

“I’m *a* cop,” I agree with a small nod. “I used to be a DEA agent, and now I’m the only man alive who’s been inside Vallejo’s world and come out the other side to tell the story.”

“So you think I need to be protected?” She grabs the neck of her shirt and brings it forward to dip her nose inside, grimacing when she smells what everyone else so easily does. “I stink really bad.”

I drop my gaze and chuckle. “You can go shower, if you want. There are robes in the bathroom you can change into.”

“Will you keep answering my questions?” She slides to the edge of the counter and drops down with a hiss of pain, piquing my curiosity as she grabs her crutch and settles it under her arm. “Will you be like those other cops and brush over the details every time I ask a question?”

“No.” Intrigued by the woman in front of me, I look her up and down. “I’ll tell you the truth.”

“Always?” Her eyes, blue, green, gold, and a kaleidoscope of a million other colors, somehow morph and swim and hold me captive. “You promise to always be straight with me?”

“Sure.” I settle my hands on my thighs and lace my fingers together. “If you promise to always be straight with me.” Then I lift my chin as she half-turns toward the bedroom she came from. “Why are you limping so much?”

“You don’t remember?” Snickering, she hobble-walks toward the hall. “Pretty sure you were there that day my femur was outside my body.”

“I remember. I just meant...” I shrug and drag my eyes from her too-big jeans and slouchy shirt stained with blood and gray matter. “I guess I figured you wouldn’t be in quite as much pain anymore. Still sore,” I acknowledge, “but I thought it would be more manageable by now.”

“You’re right.” She approaches her door and peeks over her shoulder. “I got hit by a car the other night when I was running from those people. Hurt like a bitch,” she exhales. “And though it makes walking difficult again, I’m glad the car got my right side. I’d probably be dead if it clipped my left. I’m going to take a shower.” She goes through her bedroom door and leaves me behind with a horrifying image of her lying in the street. Her femur, destroyed. Her heart, pounding in fear. Her last memories, those of a man’s murder and immediately after, her own. “I’ll be back soon,” she calls out. “Then I have questions. And some demands, too.”

“Demands?” I jump off the end of the couch and take a step in her direction. Though she closes the door and cuts me out. “What kinds of demands?”

“Like, I need to see my mom.” She opens the door an inch and pins me to my spot with her piercing stare. “She’s dying. Soon. And I’ll be damned if I’m hiding away till this other jerkoff goes to trial.”

“Aurora—”

“That’ll be too late. And I’m not trading her for him.”

Rory

BUT WHY?

My own stench makes me sick, but the icy barbs of winter air beating across the bedroom keep my nausea at bay. The tang of vomit is more to me than just the embarrassment of being sick in front of another man.

Men.

However many of them there were.

But rather, a sensory reminder of bad things happening.

More death.

More guns.

More bullets.

Too much of all the bad things, and none of the good I swear I deserve in life. I'm a decent person. I don't lie or steal or cheat. I'm kind to strangers, and I always hold the door for others. I study hard and work harder. And when I get to medical school in the fall, I intend to bust my ass and make a mark, and when the time is right, save as many lives as I can.

These are the fundamental rules of life, are they not? Be good, and good will happen to you.

Except, that concept is flawed. Because my mom is good, and she's dying. My dad is a deadbeat, and his life seems to flourish. I do the right thing in life, and I end up with a broken leg. And men like those who shot and murdered another in an alleyway this week, seem pretty satisfied with themselves, to be honest. They're sending hunting parties out to clean up their mess, and not once have they shown remorse for their actions.

Do good, and life will be good back.

“What a crock of shit.” I peel my clothes off and toss them into a bundle of putrid stench in the middle of the luxurious shower cubicle. Then, casting a glance toward the already steaming mirror, I exhale a tired sigh and study the purple bruising that covers me from my rib cage to my knee on my right side.

That car got me good. Which is an ironic twist of fate, considering it was a car that destroyed my left side, too.

“Did you say something, Aurora?”

I look toward the closed bathroom door and double-check—visually—that the lock is in place. When I’m satisfied it is, I turn toward the shower and shuffle in until blistering hot water beats against my back, and my long locks, waterlogged, droop over my shoulder and hang limp. Water runs over my face and into my mouth, but I simply close my eyes and hope, somehow, the shower spray can wash away the shittiest week I’ve ever known.

“Aurora?”

“I didn’t say anything,” I respond, my voice bland and monotone. “I’m okay. In the shower.”

“Do you want me to bring you anything?” he presses. “You want a drink? Are you hungry?”

I’m starving. I always am. Especially now, with the last two days of stomach contents running out of my jeans and down the plug. But I simply grunt out “no” and half-doze under the purifying spray. I focus on the thud of water on my shoulders. The constant ‘*shhhhhhhhhhh*’ of liquid hitting the tiles. I indulge in the steam-filled room, knowing I’ll freeze again when I step out. And worse, I’ll smell puke again.

But those are all problems for later. For ten minutes from now when I get out of this shower and face reality once more.

“I’m just stepping out of the room for a couple minutes,” Drake calls out again. “Aurora? Aurora?” he repeats when I say nothing. “Did you hear me?”

I draw a deep breath so my chest lifts and water sluices across my body differently, then I exhale again and answer. “Yeah. I heard you.”

“I’ll just be in the hall. No one will get past me, and no one can come or go through the windows. You’re safe, okay? So just enjoy your shower, take your time, and I’ll be back in a bit.”

Yep. Heard you. And though I find it ironic that his presence both annoys me and brings me comfort, I know the moment he leaves. I feel the change of temperature in the air around me, even in the steamy bathroom. I don’t even know the man, but twice now, he’s been somewhere I was when I needed help, which means now there’s something in my soul that recognizes when he’s gone.

Goosebumps break out along my arms, and the steel rod nestled in my thigh feels like ice.

The ‘*shhhhhhhhh*’ I enjoyed a moment ago now makes it feel like the walls are closing in. The steam I liked, now making it difficult to breathe. The water’s massage that brought me relaxation, now feels like fists pummeling my back.

What was heaven for me only moments ago, has turned to hell.

So I quickly lather shampoo in my hair and rinse it out almost immediately after, then I pump conditioner into my palm, press the glob to the back of my aching head, and run it through to the ends of my hair, leaving it to sit.

I wash quickly, scrubbing soap all over my body to rid myself of the smell of vomit, and while I’m doing that, I stomp on my clothes to beat the sick from the fibers so hopefully, when they dry, I can wear them again. When I’m done, I rinse my hair and smack the shower faucet off, so the suffocating rain stops with a clunk of the pipes in the wall.

I grab a rolled towel from the vanity and wrap it around my hair to catch the excess water, then I take a second and frown at the ebb and flow of a voice, mid-discussion,

somewhere outside the bathroom. I hear only one voice—Drake’s—but he converses with someone else.

Which implies he’s on the phone.

I make fast work of drying off and collecting every drop of water from my body, knowing that when I step back into my room, the arctic breeze will find any I missed and turn them to ice.

Well, not literally. But it’ll feel that way anyway.

I select a robe from the back of the bathroom door and slip my arms through the sleeves, and with my hair still wrapped in the first towel, I tie a knot in the robe’s sash and make my way through the door in search of Drake’s voice.

I want to know who he’s talking to. I want to know what’s being said, and if any of it is about me.

I want to know that my mom is safe, because if those bad guys found out where I live, what’s stopping them from finding her, too?

What’s stopping them from hurting her, all to draw me out and hurt me?

“I know, Violet. I’m as confused as you are.”

I head into the living area nestled between two bedrooms and step-shuffle my way to the door that sits ajar. If Drake wasn’t on the other side, I’d have a fresh bout of nausea racing along my throat and a dull scream echoing in the back of my head. But he is. His solid form, not ten-feet-tall the way my panicked brain asserted hours ago. But a respectable six and a bit. Maybe six two? Six three? It’s hard to tell when I always have to look up at him.

His hair is a tad longer than I remember from last year, and his eyes are meaner. He’s spoken to me with nothing but kindness and his tone implies patience, but his eyes speak of death. And how serious this all is. And if I step out of line, or do something he doesn’t approve of, I feel he’ll be fast to put me back in my lane.

His kindness is a farce, and his steely gaze is his truth.

It would do me well to not forget that.

“I don’t know, Violet! He’s dead. I was the one who put him down, but now this witness is saying otherwise. I don’t...”

I peek past the gap in the door and find Drake leaning in the hallway. His back pressed to the wallpaper, and his right foot lifted to sit flat against the wall. He wears jeans and a button-up shirt that isn’t one of those tight-fit kinds that men wear these days. The kind that shows off biceps and chests. Instead, he dons the other kind, the more comfortable fit that leaves a woman’s mind wondering and her curiosity roused.

Unaware of my presence, he holds the phone in one hand and runs the other through his dark hair in frustration. “Don’t tell her anything,” he growls. “She’s nine-years-old, Vi! He’s already been buried. Don’t dig this shit up for her again.”

I don’t move. I don’t make a sound. I do nothing to draw the angry detective’s gaze, but he twists his head anyway and locks onto my eyes until the breath catches in my lungs and the turmoil of three days makes standing almost impossible.

“I’m sorry.” I back up a step and raise a single hand, as though surrendering. “I didn’t mean to interrupt you.”

He exhales a soft sigh as though attempting to calm himself. But he speaks into the phone, and not to me. “Listen, honey, I’ve got to go. But I’ll call you tomorrow, alright? It’s late. In both cities, it’s late, and this situation is still unfolding. So try not to get yourself worked up over something that’s not yet confirmed.”

He stops for a beat, to listen to whatever *Vi* is saying. Nods once. Then shakes his head. But I’m done eavesdropping. In fact, I think I’m done with today completely. “Yeah,” he mumbles as I turn on my heels and gingerly make my way toward the couch. I wish I’d grabbed my crutch on the way out of the bathroom. But just like Monday night when I watched something I shouldn’t have, my curiosity tends to get the better of me.

Drake remains on the phone for another minute as I lower to the couch and take the weight off my aching legs, but he doesn't leave me for long before stepping back into the room. When I expect him to close the door—and then he doesn't—anxious sweat breaks out on my newly cleaned skin. He wanders closer instead, and picks up my laptop and phone, before offering his free hand and waiting as I study it.

I stare at his clean nails. His clear skin. No tattoos on his hands or arms. No watch. No bracelet. No ring. He's completely and utterly unremarkable on that front, and when I remember he was once an agent, I figure he does that blending-in thing on purpose.

An old habit he long ago grew used to. One he was trained to do.

“What are you...” Frowning, I keep my hands to myself. “What do you want?”

“We're moving.” He wraps his hand around my arm and pulls me to my feet, holding on when I sway and my towel, piled high on my head, dips to the side. “I got us a new room while you were in the shower. This one is smelly and cold, so...” He leads me across the space and into the hall, and though I wear a robe only, no shoes, no underwear, and no way of defending myself if some of those bad guys come back, he makes our trek short, coming to a stop at the next doorway and swiping a keycard through the sensor to gain entry.

The new room is an exact replica of the one we left.

A living space, boasting a television on the wall, two small couches, a coffee table in the middle, and a kitchen area that comes with a mini fridge, coffee pod machine, and toaster. As he closes and locks the door behind us, I look left to find a hallway that no doubt leads to a bedroom, then I look right and find the same, mirrored.

“This one will be better,” he murmurs, leading me from the door and deeper into the room, “and it comes with the added benefit of no one knowing we're here. Not even the Copeland cops.”

I reach out for the back of the sofa to support my weight as Drake releases my arm and sets my things on the coffee table. “You don’t trust them?” Nerves thunder in my veins at the very thought of this cop not trusting the others to do the right thing. Because this is another one of those universal truths, no? Just like doing good results in good karma, all cops are trustworthy... It’s what we’re taught as children. It’s a promise. “Why don’t you trust the detectives?”

“I don’t trust anybody.” He leaves me by the couch and moves back to the door when a thumping knock sounds from the other side. My pulse skitters and adrenaline floods my veins. But instead of enabling me to outrun gunfire and fight off a monster, it makes my legs weak. It makes my head swim, and my fingers feel fat and clumsy.

I watch desperately as Drake checks the peephole to see whoever is on the other side, then he opens the door, accepts a tray of food, exchanges it for a crisp bill, then he hip-bumps the door closed again, locks it, and turns back to head my way. “I’ve lived inside this world for most of my life, Aurora. I was raised with a father in the DEA, and I was tossed into the deep end the second I had my shield. You’ve only been here for two days. But I’ve known these players for a long time. So, no.” He sets the tray of food on the coffee table and comes around to take my arm again, like he knows I need guidance. “I don’t trust the detectives. I don’t trust their captain. I don’t trust that you saw Vallejo the other night. And I don’t trust anyone else to protect you until we get this all sorted out.” He lowers me to the couch, incidentally knocking my already askew towel off my head, then grabs the silver plate lid and reveals a bowl overflowing with creamy pasta and thick wedges of chicken.

My stomach roars to life, stealing my mind from my towel. From my robe. From my bruised hip and burning thigh. From my entire existence outside this meal. And when Drake picks up the fork and offers it to me, warmth beats in my cheeks and probably makes me look dumb and vapid.

But I don’t care. Because I accept the utensil and dig it into the steaming pasta before my stomach jumps out of my throat and takes things into its own hands.

“I knew you’d be hungry.” He moves away from the couch and leaves me to Hoover carbs into my body. “Nobody spews as much as you did and walks away without an appetite.”

“I’d rather not discuss vomit right now,” I talk around my mouthful. “Puts me off my meal.”

He chuckles and heads back to the door to peek through the peephole. “Can I leave you for thirty seconds? I want to get your things from the other room and close it up. If someone caught wind we’re here, they’re gonna go to that room first. If they do, I’d rather it was locked up and not so easily accessible to them.”

“To keep them out?”

“To make their entry noisy,” he counters. “Gives us a little more notice.” Almost like he’s not thinking, as though it’s just an extension of his arm, Drake takes a gun from his shoulder holster and checks the magazine-y thingy in the handle. But when I remain silent, and un-eating, he turns back to face me and frowns as he studies whatever it is he sees.

A girl in a robe. Bruised and beaten. Sore and tired. Messy hair, no makeup. Unable to run away to save her own life. And despite my ravenous hunger just seconds ago, I now sit with my fork held above my plate; my mouth empty and my stomach silent.

I swear, the way he stares is almost like he’s trying to read my mind. Like he’s attempting to probe my thoughts and guess what it is I won’t say.

Stalking away from the door and across to me, he takes a second weapon from somewhere on his body and places it on the table beside my tray. “It’s loaded. It’s easy to use. I clicked off the safety, and there is a round in the chamber. You aim, you fire. And if you have the extra brain space, you keep a firm grip so you don’t drop it when it recoils. Okay?”

I swallow a painful lump of... I don’t even know. Nerves, maybe. Anxiety. Terror. Adrenaline. But I don’t nod. I don’t accept this new reality of me shooting a gun and trying to hurt someone with it.

“Aurora?” He comes to sit on the table so we’re almost face-to-face and bends to look into my eyes. “Thirty seconds. I need to close it up and give us the best chance of a head start if someone comes looking for you. It’s extremely unlikely anyone knows we’re here. None of Vallejo’s cohorts will catch up this fast. And not even the cops know we’ve moved. You have nothing to worry about.”

“O-okay.” Not okay. Not okay at all. But I chew on the inside of my bottom lip and give him a small nod. “Can you get my clothes from the shower, too? I washed them.” I set my fork down and free my hands for shooting. Like I’d have any clue what to do or how to aim. “I meant to rinse them out and hang them up, but I didn’t get to that yet.”

“I’ll get them.” He flashes a playful wink that sends an odd bolt of electricity to the bottom of my belly and leaves my fat fingers feeling a little different. Tingling, instead of clumsy. Vibrating, instead of unusable. “Thirty seconds, okay?”

“Okay.” I draw a deep breath and surprise him as I stand and sway on aching legs. The fabric of my robe slips along my arm and reveals my shoulder, but Drake reaches out anyway and places his hand beneath my forearm.

“Wait.” He wraps his fingers around my wrist and scowls. “What are you doing?”

“I want to come to the door.” I turn on my feet and step away so his hand has no choice but to fall or yank me back. Thankfully, he doesn’t choose the second, which would be so friggin’ painful at this point. “I need to lock the door.” I limp across the room with no help from him, a walking stick, nor my crutches, and when I arrive at the door, I hold the handle and glance up to meet his eyes. “Please remember my crutch, too. It’s not a lot, but it...” I trail off. “Well, you know.”

“Make sure you unlock the door for me when I come back, okay?” He grabs the second gun from the table and strides across the room, and though I don’t ask for it, he places it in my hand and wraps my fingers around the cold, steel handle. “I could get back in again even if you don’t,” he warns, “but

that would be noisy, and I'd really like to not call any more attention to our room tonight."

My lips are bone dry. My tongue. My entire soul, I think, drier than the Sahara Desert. But I cough away the discomfort and give him a small nod. "I'll unlock it again. I promise."

"Good girl." He chucks my chin and disappears through the door before my brain has moved past his easy use of *good girl*. Like I'm a child in the street, being rewarded for picking up stray trash. Or like I'm a toddler who drew an adequately pleasant rainbow. He's gone before I can truly process the enigma that is Drake Banks, but though my thoughts lag on that front, they're quick to shut the door and flip the lock as he disappears into the room we left behind.

I flip the lock back again, then reset it. To make sure.

I count in my mind, and every few seconds, out loud. And when I hit *ten*, I check the lock again, just to make triple sure it's secure the way it's supposed to be.

"Twenty," I murmur, all alone inside a two-bedroom suite with my eye pressed to the peephole and my left hand wrapped around a gun I'm more likely to throw at an intruder than I am to fire it. "Twenty-one. Twenty-two."

My stomach rolls with nerves, and the pasta I ate already turns. The cream. The chicken. The white wine sauce. It all sours in my belly and leaves me nauseous as I reach *twenty-seven. Twenty-eight*. My fingers flex around the gun's handle, and the robe I shroud myself in absorbs the nervous sweat trickling along my spine.

Twenty-nine. "Oh god." I bring my free hand up and press it to my mouth to hold in the gulp of despair working desperately to claw its way free of my throat. He promised. *He promised!* "Thirty."

My breathing comes faster, and my heart pounds until I want to sink to the floor and pass out. But just when I think I might die from some kind of mystery stroke, the suite door he disappeared behind swings wide and reveals the cop with his

arms laden with dripping clothes and a slightly bent singular crutch.

A ridiculous sob bursts from between my lips, and tears fill my eyes until they threaten to spill over. But I watch Drake through the peephole until his back is to me, the door is closed up tight, and the lock is engaged. Then, before he even has a chance to knock on ours, I unfasten the lock and swing it open to allow him entry.

Hell, to encourage a fast entry and put myself out of my misery.

I grab the sleeve of his shirt and yank him through the doorway, before slamming the door shut so it hits with a thud and rattles the walls.

Adrenaline pulses in my veins and those annoying tears spill over and wet my cheeks. I hate them. I hate the weakness. But I'm so unbelievably at my limit, I have nothing left to give.

I have no more emotional space to work with. No more nerves. No more ability to deal with upheaval. So I close my eyes tight and tip my head back to point toward the ceiling. I work on my breathing and hope, for once, I don't make an idiot of myself.

"Aurora?" I don't have to open my eyes to know he's close. I don't have to look into his, to feel his warmth just inches from my body. "You okay?"

I swallow dread and nod. But I keep my eyes shut. "Yep. Just taking a second."

"You need to sit down?"

"In a second," I repeat. "You promised thirty seconds, Detective Banks. I counted—"

"Drake," he murmurs, close enough I feel his breath on the tip of my nose. "You can call me Drake."

"I can also call you Detective Banks." Drawing in a deep, noisy snuffle, I open my eyes and hold my breath when I find his face a mere two-inches from mine. He's so close, I see the

pores in his skin. Each individual lash above his eyes. I count stray brows and sunspots on his cheeks. My throat constricts, and my lungs refuse to budge. But my gun-holding hand twitches. Clinging to the handle the way I would a buoy in stormy seas. Like I might actually use the damn thing to shoot someone.

“I’m sorry I was late,” he murmurs, almost silent, so I have to quieten the roar of my pulse in my ears to hear him. “I was wringing your clothes out, so they wouldn’t drip as much.”

I lick my parched lips and look down to his hands: water dripping from them and hitting the thick carpet below. “Numbers matter to me.” I swallow again and know I run the risk of becoming a cliché. The brainless damsel. The idiot who can land herself in trouble, but somehow can’t get herself out again.

I’m the woman, raised by a woman, who declared she would be strong and independent and never, *ever* count on a man to take care of her.

And yet, this man, this one I don’t even know, was gone for thirty-six seconds, and I’m literally losing my mind over it.

“Numbers matter,” I repeat on a rasp. “So if you say you’re going to be thirty seconds...”

“Then I have to be thirty seconds,” he finishes gently. “Okay.”

“If you wanted a minute,” I clarify, “you just say you’re gonna be gone for sixty seconds. So I don’t worry. But if you say thirty, and you’re gone longer, I’m probably gonna assume you died and aren’t coming back.”

“So I’ll overestimate from now on.” He exhales again so I taste his breath on my lips, and though my tongue darts out without my conscious decision to do so, he turns away anyway, unseeing, and starts toward the bedroom on the right. “If, in the future, I have to go somewhere without you, and I think I’ll be a minute,” he stalks to the doorway at the end of the hall, but instead of heading into the room and dumping my

things, he pulls a small closet door open and takes out a hidden clothes drying rack.

It's made of metal and stands about three-feet-tall. He hugs my ball of clothes in one arm, kind of how someone would carry a football, and with the other, he carries the metal stand back to the living room and sets it up before proceeding to hang my things. My shirt. My jeans. His expression remains exactly the same, even when he moves away from outer clothes and instead detangles my underwear and hangs them out straight.

"I'll tell you two," he finishes his thought at the same moment he finishes hanging my washing. Glancing up, like he wasn't just touching my bra and undies, he flashes a handsome grin and sets the loaded rack to the side. "Under promise, over deliver. Always makes people happy." He strides back to where I stand and taking the crutch from where he set it against the wall, he offers it to me. "I know you're hungry. But I also know you're overwhelmed and sore right now. So I'm back." He takes my gun with easy hands and re-holsters it against his ribs. Then, he tucks his arm beneath mine and takes most of my weight before leading me back to the couch. "I'm not leaving again tonight, so you get to relax, and I'll take guard duty."

He smells of cedarwood. And maybe gunpowder. Perhaps a little engine grease, though I have no clue why, or how on earth I could identify such a scent anyway. His hold is firm, and his smile is easy as he brings me to the couch and lowers me back to where I started just a few minutes ago.

"Why are numbers your thing?"

My brain is slow. My thoughts lagging more than my ancient laptop.

My stomach rumbles now that I'm near food again, but I don't pick the fork up. I don't start eating, though any normal woman with half a brain would.

"What?"

Chuckling, like he knows he's smooth, he takes the fork and places it between my fingers the way he so easily did with a gun minutes ago. "Eat, Little Bird. Then explain the numbers thing to me."

"Um..." *Little Bird? Because of the regurgitation thing in the car?* "I-I guess I get nervous sometimes." I twist the fork in the pasta and appreciate, for a moment, that my meal had the chance to cool down. So when I make a pig of myself this time, it won't burn quite as much. "Life has been a little tense for me," I explain, "it's always felt a little out of control."

"So you count to regain it again?" he surmises. "Like me leaving and going to the other room. It made you anxious, so to feel in control again, you counted how long I was gone?"

"I count how long till you're back." I bring my fork higher and take it between my lips, far more graceful than the first time I began. "Was that your wife on the phone before?"

"My wife?" Like my question stuns him more than anything else today, including the possibility a man he considered dead, may be alive, his head shoots back and his eyes go to the door. "The woman on the phone?"

I nod and take a second forkful between my lips. "Vi."

He snorts, so the sound is almost offensive. "No. She was my best friend's wife, though. She's sweet."

"Was?" I swallow my dinner and wish for a glass of water to wash it all down. And like I verbalized my request, though I know I didn't, Drake shoves away from the table and heads to the kitchen to grab a glass. "She *was* your best friend's wife?"

"Yeah. My best friend was my partner. He died on the job." He fills the glass from the tap, adding, "On Vallejo's job. Violet's a good girl, and she deserves peace. So when she caught Vallejo's name on the news, naturally she called me to ask what the hell was going on." He flips the faucet off and heads back in my direction. "Here." He places the glass in my hand and lowers himself to perch on the coffee table to face me. "She's as shocked as I am that his name is being flashed around town."

“That’s why you’re here? To make sure he’s dead?”

He rolls his bottom lip between his teeth and studies my eyes. “Yeah. And to make sure you live.”

“Me?” I take a sip and lower the glass to the table by his thigh, working hard to still the shaking of my hand. “I don’t understand why.”

I wonder if he, too, is confused. Because he shrugs his shoulders and hunches to rest his elbows on his knees. “You rolled through a small town, Aurora. You needed help because some other asshole did the wrong thing. The first responders who came out that day aren’t just people. They’re not random folks turning up to work and going about their jobs on rote. They’re a family,” he clarifies when I lift a brow. And when I don’t lift my fork, he places his hand beneath mine and forces it. “You became part of the family that day too. So when Malone called me and said he’s got a Vallejo case stinking up his desk, then he sent me CCTV footage of the girl running away...”

“You recognized me,” I conclude, nibbling the end of a dangling pasta before it falls.

“I was coming anyway. For Vallejo. But I’m glad I’m here now, and that you’re alive.” He releases my hand and stands up, stunning me so the rest of my pasta falls from the fork and back into the bowl. “We’re gonna have to go down to the station tomorrow and walk you through a formal statement.”

I twist in my seat to watch him move around the room.

“They’ll probably drop a bunch of mug shots in front of you, and hope you pick out the men you saw the other night.” He checks the door to make sure it’s locked, then peeks through the peephole and steps away again with a frown. “They’ll want a formal identification, and then they’ll walk you through the next steps.”

I turn on the couch, lifting one leg until the fabric of my robe slips away and reveals my thigh. Quickly, I fix it again and wish listlessly for a hairbrush. A phone charger. A

toothbrush. Jesus, any of the small comforts regular people become accustomed to. “What are the next steps?”

He regards me with a fast look before wandering into the hall and checking my room, though we both know no one has come in. “Statement,” he calls back. “Identification. They might bring in some dudes and put them in the lineup. If you point out anyone who has affiliations with Vallejo’s world, then chances are, even if Vallejo himself is dead, it means his faction is still active. That means you’re in danger and will need to go into some kind of protection program.” He stalks back into the hall and drops a comb on the couch cushion as he passes. “Detectives Malone and Fletcher are primaries on this case.” He continues through to the next hall and checks his room.

Speechless, I pick up the plastic comb and run my thumbnail gently along the bristles.

“They’re running this thing,” he adds. “We’re gonna be dragged along for the ride about as elegantly as a dead body behind a bus.”

Mental imagery has always been my best friend and worst enemy. The images my brain can paint are both beautiful and too detailed. “That doesn’t sound like fun.”

“Nope. It’s gonna suck.” He emerges back into the shared living room and glances down at my exposed thigh. Nervously, I fix the fallen fabric again and straighten in my seat, before he shakes himself free of whatever is in his mind and heads to the front door again.

“What about you?” I ask, studying his broad back and wide shoulders as he peeks into the hall a second time. His actions leave me curious, but oddly, not panicked. He’s carrying that mental load for us both. And it’s strange that somehow, I feel safe with this man already, although I don’t even know him. “What’s your role in all this?”

“My role is to keep you alive.” He turns again and presses his back to the door. It’s not a nervous action. But rather, as he lifts one boot and rests it against the door, I understand he’s actually quite comfortable. “I’m not the cop running this case,

and I'm no longer DEA. I'm not a fed, and if folks wanted to get noisy, I could be sent away completely."

I wait for him to finish. To expand. To explain. To put me out of my damned misery. But when he remains silent, I lift a brow in question. "But?"

"But I'm the only person I trust, and I'd really like you to live. So unless they take me away in cuffs and slam me behind bars, I'm appointing myself your exclusive security detail. This is what we're working with until further notice. And just so you know..." He drops his foot and wanders to the end of the couch. Bending, he sets his hands on the arm and meets me on my level. "I'm the only one who'll tell you a different plan. I'm the only one who will assign your safety team. So if some other cop strolls in and says things are changing, you don't believe him, okay?"

"I-I don't?" I stammer. "Even if he's a cop?"

"Even if he's the fucking mayor. You listen to me, okay, Little Bird? Only me. I'm gonna get you through this. Now get ready for bed." He taps the arm of the couch gently, and yet, I still jump in place. "Malone's in the hall," he says. "He's watching both doors, so either he's really lucky, really stupid, or has insider information."

I shoot a look toward the door and wish I could see through. "What's your problem with Detective Malone, anyway? Specifically?"

"I don't have one. Yet. But I know his toes dance amongst the world we're trying to hide you from. That's not to mean he's our enemy," he adds when my breath comes to a standstill. "Not everyone has to follow the plan their fathers set out for them. But it does mean I'm gonna watch him closely." He snatches up the television remote from the coffee table and plops down on the other sofa. "You have a whole bedroom," he murmurs, his tone caring, though his channel surfing implies a fire just beneath a calm exterior. "There's only one access. No windows to come in or out of. Bathroom is all yours, and completely secure." He leans to the side and digs his phone from his pocket, then setting the remote down,

he unlocks his screen and begins typing, while talking out loud, *“Go buy her some pain meds. Toothpaste and a toothbrush.”*

He looks across at me and raises a brow. “You need anything else?”

“Um... a phone charger?” I swallow the bundle of nerves lodged in my throat and look down at the devices on the coffee table. “Laptop charger? Whoever picked them up for me didn’t get the cables.”

“Chargers for her phone and laptop,” he continues typing. “Fresh clothes. Size...” He looks me up and down, before easily guessing, “Size six jeans. Medium shirts? You don’t want it to be too snug, right?”

My cheeks blaze, but I clamp my lips shut and simply nod.

He goes back to typing. “Size six jeans, medium shirts. She’ll need underwear, and size seven shoes. Sneakers. Something comfy. Get her a new set of crutches. A hairbrush, hair ties, and maybe a stick of deodorant.”

Scrunching my nose, I discreetly lift my arm and take a whiff.

He laughs from the other couch and spares me a fast glance. “You smell fresh as a daisy right now, Little Bird. But by tomorrow afternoon, you’re gonna be feeling a little gross. So I’m getting ahead of the curve.”

“You know an awful lot about women’s hygiene needs for an unmarried man.”

Hitting send, he locks his phone screen and pins me with a stare. “I didn’t say I wasn’t married, Aurora. I said Violet wasn’t my wife.”

“Oh.” My heart splats in my chest and a furious blush burns my cheeks. “I’m sorry. I didn’t... I’m not...” I squeeze my eyes shut and shake my head. “My mistake.”

Soft laughter has my eyes snapping open again and narrowing. “I’m not married,” he teases. “Never have been.

No divorces under my belt. No alimony taking half my check. And no kids I'm dead-beating on."

"O-okay." I'm stammering. I'm stuttering. I'm a friggin' idiot. It seems I have a bounty on my head and bigger problems to focus on. But right in this moment, I obsess over the fact that men still make me nervous. "That's cool. This is work," I yammer on. "And that's personal, anyway. And so you don't have to—"

"You develop a bit of a speech impediment when you're nervous." Unlocking his screen again, he goes back to typing. "She'll need snacks, too. You have a wife, Malone, so think of the things she'd want when she can't access her everyday shit. Then bring us that. We're packing in for the night. Catch you at oh-eight-hundred. We'll head to the station together."

Hitting send again and locking his screen, he tosses his phone to the couch and flashes a playful grin that arrows straight to my stomach and leaves it doing cartwheels. "Better than room service," he taunts. "And you watch me *not* reimburse him for the money he spent. He's got bucket loads anyway. He doesn't need mine."

Rory

“Three minutes until we’re out the door,” Drake calls from the hallway outside my bedroom. I stand at the end of my bed and stare down at the pile of clothes that magically appeared for me overnight.

And by magically, I mean Detective Archer Malone, or someone he knows, went shopping for me. Three pairs of jeans, all loose-fitting to make room for my still swollen leg. A half dozen shirts that range in full sleeves, down to no sleeves. Some have buttons, others are pull-over. None have pictures or weird branding on the front.

Completely non-descript, which, I suppose is entirely intentional.

A pair of Nikes sit in a box, and though Drake didn’t ask for coats, Malone thought to get those, too. Plus socks. And Chapstick. Anti-inflammatory medications call to me, and a small first aid kit almost seems like a bad omen.

Like he knows we’ll need it at some point. And that potential future sucks as much as the bus-dragging thing.

Fortunately, Archer was mindful enough to buy a bag to put everything in, so as I choose an outfit for today, I stuff the rest back in the bag and zip it closed. So next time I’m forced to escape in a hurry, I can hopefully take my things and have a toothbrush to clean my teeth with before bed.

“Aurora?” Drake thuds a fist on the door and makes me jump as I work to step into jeans. “I said three minutes. What are you doing?”

“I’m getting dressed.” I slide my right leg into the denim and hiss as the movement hurts my bruised hip. Shimmying to bring the pants up and fixing the button and zipper, I shrug into a long sleeve, but it has a short torso so fabric and denim meet, but there’s no crossover. If I stretch up tall, my belly will be exposed to the world.

Thankfully, I pull on a coat next and brush my hair quickly to tame the frizz from going to sleep with wet locks. I spy the package of hair elastics and grab two, then sectioning my hair, I braid each side of my head and secure it with a tie before sitting on the end of the bed and pulling on socks and shoes.

My life is on fire right now. It’s highly possible I’m going to die soon, and even more likely it’ll hurt. But there’s a small, materialistic shred of my consciousness that notices the expensive new shoes cushioning my feet. The soft socks, not stiff from washing and wearing on repeat for years. There are no holes in my underwear. No frayed ends of my jeans from where they drag on the ground. My shirt is soft and hangs on my body in all the right ways, and though my coat feels a little bulky and warm inside this room, I know once we step outside, I’ll appreciate every morsel of protection it brings me.

“One minute,” I call out, finishing the lace on one shoe and swapping feet to do the same on the other. “I’m hungry, so do you think we could—”

“I already got you food.” Like he knows I’m dressed, or he doesn’t care, Drake surprises me by opening the door and holding a paper bag and to-go coffee. He wears a fresh outfit today, not all that different from yesterday’s. Jeans, a black button-up shirt, and boots that would hurt if he stomped a man with them.

His hair is freshly combed and still a little wet from the shower I didn’t hear him take. When I finish my laces and set my foot on the floor, he wanders into the room and takes my hand to pull me up to stand. “Coffee first,” he murmurs, placing the cup in my hand and nudging it up until the plastic lid touches my lips. “Then food. Eat fast, since you can’t really eat and walk at the same time.”

“I could probably eat in the car,” I argue, but I sip the perfectly warm—not too hot, and definitely not cold—coffee, and swallowing that down, I catch the scent of something else. Pastry and butter. “Is that a croissant?”

He takes my coffee and replaces it with the paper bag. “Ham, cheese, and tomato. If you don’t like that, I can get you something else.”

“No. I like it.” I open the top of the bag and stuff my nose inside to inhale. “I’ll pick the tomato off and call it a day.”

“Alright.” He steps to the door and grabs the crutches I’ve already sized up this morning. But when he offers them, I shake my head and tilt my chin toward the cane instead. He stops for a beat and studies my request before swapping and turning back to face me. “You prefer the stick?”

I reach out and take it in my left hand. “It’s easier to use,” I answer, placing my weight on the stick and breathing a sigh of relief as I bring my breakfast bag down. “One-handed. It doesn’t hurt my arms, and it’s way easier to maneuver.” Drawing a fortifying breath and releasing it again—my signal to myself that a new day is beginning—I step past Drake and head into the hall. “Did you sleep last night?”

“Yeah.” He follows me out and closes the door, the snick of the catch echoing along the hall. “I caught a couple of hours while Malone was on the door.”

“So *he* hasn’t slept?” I emerge into the living room to find both of the other detectives staring back at me. I jump in surprise and crush my breakfast in my fist. “Shit!”

“Sorry.” Archer Malone raises his hands in surrender and stays on the other side of the room to give me space. Comfort. Reassurance. “Detective Fletcher and I took shifts on the door last night. I slept while he was on duty. He slept when I was on.”

“Which means the three cops who swear to protect me today are functioning on minimal, broken sleep?” I argue, my heart pounding so the sound fills my ears. I head to the counter and set my pastry down, then releasing my cane and standing

on my own, I open the bag and flip the top half of the croissant off to reveal the tomato ready for me to pick and toss away. “The men I’m trusting my life to,” I continue, “are at risk of nodding off at the wheel?”

Archer chuckles in dismissal. “We’re always working on minimal sleep, Ms. Swanson. It’s how we function best. What matters is that you got sleep?”

He waits while I pick apart the food he or someone else bought for me. And when I say nothing at all, but reassemble my breakfast, he asks again as I turn. “Did you sleep?”

“Yep.” I take a bite like it’s a big, fat juicy burger and speak around the clump in my mouth. “Got a few hours.”

“Is there anything you need?” Detective Fletcher asks. “Anything we can do to make this is a little more comfortable?”

I choke out a scoff, resulting in a small flake of croissant fluttering from my lip and diving toward the floor. “The men looking to hurt me make me uncomfortable, Detective. Their *reasons* for hurting me, make me uncomfortable.” I bring my gaze up and meet Detective Malone’s. “The fact Detective Banks doesn’t trust you makes me uncomfortable.”

Malone’s eyes harden and jump to the mouth of the hall, where Drake stands. “Really, Banks?”

He only shrugs and lowers his head. But I see his smirk. His devil-may-care arrogance that makes my stomach fizz. It’s ridiculous, really, to feel some kind of loyalty to him. I’ve known him barely a minute longer than I’ve known the other two, but it seems Banks and I have inside jokes already. Some kind of rapport I don’t have with the others.

And why?

Because he was a familiar face from the last time I needed help?

Because he likes to break the rules?

He must be in his thirties, easily. He’s so much older than my mere twenty-one years. He’s got a world of life experience

I don't, and this air of "*don't give a fuck*" I strive for but haven't yet achieved. It doesn't make sense that I gravitate in his direction after knowing him for such a short time. But I'll be damned, because for as long as I stand in this room, I know who to run toward if Vallejo's men turn up.

"I promised her I'd be straight with her," Drake finally inserts, bringing us back to Malone's question. "She asked. So I told her my thoughts on the matter."

"Your thoughts on the matter are not valid in this space," Malone snarls. "And your loose lips in regard to my life will not be tolerated."

Drake merely shrugs away Malone's threat and offers me my coffee, because he knows I'm still staring. "It is what it is, Arch. Public information is public for a reason. She's the only one here with a target on her back, so if she asks me a question that I deem relevant, I'm gonna answer it."

"I have to go see my mom today." I set my pastry aside and bring my coffee up as Detectives Malone and Fletcher peel their glares from Drake and stop on me. "The police station is near the hospital, anyway."

"That's not possible," Fletcher inserts. "Once we make that formal identification, you'll officially be scooped into the system and put somewhere safe until trial."

"Chances are," Archer adds, "feds are gonna try to take over. This is their domain, and you're about to become their little pet."

My eyes narrow to dangerous slits. "I'm no one's pet, Detective Malone. And if you're saying my formal statement leads to me not seeing my mother, then I guess there will be no statement made."

"You don't get to make that choice," he growls. "You're the only eyewitness to Lorenzo Lombardo's murder. You have to make that statement."

"No."

"I can charge you," he tries again. "Ever heard of obstruction of justice?"

I set my coffee on the counter and reach back to touch my still-tender skull. “That man body slammed me last night, Detective. Smashed my head against the tile until I saw stars.” I drop my hand and grin. “Ever heard of amnesia?”

His lips flatten into dangerous lines.

“It wouldn’t be unheard of for a woman suffering blunt force trauma to the skull to lose her short-term memory. It could last months,” I sigh. “Or years.”

“Ms. Swanson...”

“Or just long enough to see my mother.” I grab my cane and look at a smirking Drake. “I’ll eat the rest in the car. I’d like to get this day over with.”



I feel a little famous, as my entourage and I step out of the elevator and emerge into the heart of a buzzing police precinct. Uniformed officers move in every direction. One escorts a woman in sky-high thigh boots and teeny tiny shorts, while another has a man in cuffs and presents no emotion at the screamed insults his perp spits in his face.

Other police officers walk around in casual clothes. Jeans and shirts, like the three who surround me. I don’t miss the way they create a protective shield on my sides and at my back. I don’t miss the guns close to their hands, or the clips of their holsters open and ready to be drawn from.

Our progress is slow, because my entire body aches, and the one good leg I had to count on, is now bruised all the way around.

“Detective Malone?” A uniformed officer rushes closer, and though Malone and Fletcher remain relaxed, Drake’s hand wraps around my arm to keep me close. “I have those men in three, like you requested. And I’ve set up conference room twelve for your meeting.”

“Great.” Archer accepts a manila file and nods. “Thanks, Clay. Stick with us. Take the spearhead and lead us to three.”

“Yes, Detective.” Officer Clay is younger than the others in our group. Probably closer to my age than he is to any of the other detectives who surround me. He looks into my eyes and dips his chin in greeting, before turning on his heels and leading us toward tall escalators that cut through the building. He walks faster than us, but quickly readjusts his speed and slows right down.

“We’re gonna take you into a formal lineup,” Malone informs me. “We’ve been tugging on a few lines the last couple of days and found a few men who connect to Vallejo’s world with a handful of open warrants. That meant we could bring them in and pop them in a room for you.”

“So if the shooter is here already,” my brows pinch in thought as we approach an escalator and start going up. “If I identify him and you keep him in jail until trial, this is all over, right? I can go back to my life?”

“It’s possible. Sure. If our shooter is here—”

“If the shooter is here,” Drake cuts in harshly, “which is unlikely. But *if* he is, and he’s going by the name Vallejo, then he’s powerful enough to kill you, even if he’s behind bars. He’ll have men for that stuff. That means if you point out him or his men today, then you’re still a target.”

“Detective Banks,” Archer snarls. “Let me work with my witness.”

“Work with her then,” he bites back. “But you gotta give it to her straight. No fluff, or she’ll fuck you off and you’ll get nothing out of her. Tell her the truth, so she can be prepared for what’s actually gonna happen.” He drags his attention from Archer and looks down into my eyes instead. “Whether or not you point out a guy today, you’re still a target, Aurora. Whoever shot Lombardo already knows your name, and he already found where you live. He’s coming for you, and he’s powerful enough to pull a name and address when not even the cops could. That means you’re staying in lockdown with me until we have him and his men in a cage.” He scoops me under the arm and helps me off the escalator when we reach the top. “Get comfortable, Little Bird. This is gonna take a while.”

“Little Bird?” Archer dashes off the escalator after us and catches up on my right. “What the fuck is happening here?”

“I’m keeping her alive,” Drake answers for us both. “I’m hunting down a man who either had my partner murdered or knows the guy who had my partner murdered.” He looks over my head and meets Fletcher’s honeycomb stare. “You would do the same. We both know it. I have decades of experience with Vallejo, and just as many in the DEA. You might understand these people,” he looks to Archer. “Maybe they’re related to you somewhere along the family tree. But this is bigger than you know, and I’m not willing to leave her fate in the hands of a man with no experience fighting these fuckers.” Finally, he loosens his grip on my arm, but doesn’t release me, before turning back to the much younger Officer Clay. “Let’s get the witness secure, Officer. She’s not safe in the middle of a bullpen.”

His eyes instantly jump to Malone’s, as though to ask for permission.

Though Archer doesn’t speak, he dips his chin and releases the officer from his moment of uncertainty.

“Yes, sir.” Clay recognizes Drake’s seniority, even without knowing his name or rank. Then turning on his heels, he leads us through a busy office area with a dozen or more desks, set up in twos so the occupants face their desk-buddy. Their partner, I suppose.

Clay leads us into a room labeled “three”, and as Archer and Fletcher file in behind us, I’m left feeling a little struck by the view on the other side of the glass. It’s all a little Hollywood, with the height markers lining the wall, and footprints painted on the floor.

I’ve seen something like this in the movies.

But not in real life.

Never, ever in real life.

“We’re going to bring some men into the other room,” Detective Malone says, his tone softening as he sets his manila file down and turns to face me. “There will be eight men. You

may recognize one, or several. Or you may recognize none. You do not have to choose anyone, and picking someone for the sake of picking like you think you'll get in trouble if you don't, does more harm than good. Clay." He meets the officer's gaze. "Bring them in, line them up. Please."

"Yes, Detective." He darts out of the room and shuts the door at his back so just the four of us are trapped inside our half of a room that spans about six-feet one way, and ten-feet the other. Archer Malone is a serious man, vibrating with a need to find closure on this case I've somehow come to be wrapped up in. Charlie Fletcher, on the other hand, while protective of his partner, isn't nearly as forceful or formidable in his quest for answers.

And then there's Drake. A man who smiles easily, coins nicknames like we've known each other a lifetime, seems to understand trauma, or at least, his role in a traumatized woman's life. But most importantly, I think, is that he's a man willing to press the end of his gun against another man's temple and pull the trigger.

Not a detail I should forget.

"Do you understand what you need to do today, Ms. Swanson?"

"Yeah." I unzip my bulky coat now that we're indoors and locked in a small room, and though I intend to battle with it alone and hope I don't drop my cane in the process, Drake grabs the lapels and drags the fabric back to free me from the material. I glance over my shoulder and give him a small, appreciative smile, then I fix my sleeves and tug my shirt down to make sure my belly is covered. "I understand what I need to do, Detective." I bring my focus back to Archer. "Look at them. Make sure I'm sure."

My head snaps around as the door on the other side of the glass opens and men file in. They wear cuffs on their wrists and ankles, the profoundness of their situation slamming into me like a ton of bricks. If I say any one of them were in an alleyway three nights ago, beating up a man who is now dead, then they're going to jail. Maybe not forever. But for a while,

at least. Until trial, when a judge and jury decide what to do about the things I declare today.

“Take your time,” Detective Fletcher murmurs. He comes up on my right, and though he doesn’t touch me, his body warmth seeps into mine, and his hands wait, like he thinks I’ll fall. “Look at every single face. Study them. Really think about it. The only thing you need to do is say yes, or no, that you saw that person on the night of Lorenzo Lombardo’s murder.”

“If you point your finger at more than one,” Archer inserts carefully, “then we’ll discuss each of their roles. Were they holding the gun? Were they hurting the victim? But none of that is important for right now. You just have to—”

“Yeah,” I cut in, inching closer to the glass and categorizing each man that lines up on the other side. “I got it. Yes or no.” I rest my weight on my left hand and use my cane to relieve my thigh and the metal bar in my leg from holding me up. But when my body screams at me to do better, I twist in place and find the small table Archer tossed his file onto.

Grabbing the corner and breathing a little easier when it moves, confirming it’s not screwed to the floor, I noisily drag it closer. The metal legs scrape the concrete floor. I check the distance of the table from the window, then deeming it suitable, I hitch myself up and exhale when I find instant relief.

“Do you want a drink or something?” Fletcher offers. “Soda? Coffee?”

“No.” I set my feet on the lip of the window and rest my elbows on my knees. I make myself shamelessly at home inside this police precinct viewing room—I honestly have no clue what else to call this place—and when Officer Clay finishes lining his men up and turns to face the window, I swallow down the knowledge that everyone on the other side now knows we’re here.

I mean, anyone who has watched a cop show in the last fifty years knows one-way glass always has someone hidden on the other side. But still, the way he turns and faces us

makes my skin break out in goosebumps. Because it's almost like he's staring directly into my eyes.

"Alright." Archer steps toward the glass on my right, and leaning in, he presses a button I hadn't noticed before this moment. "Number One. Take two steps forward. Then stop and wait for my instructions."

My heart thunders, not because the slightly-too-short man with stubble on his chin and heavy brows shadowing his eyes is not familiar to me. But because this is on me now. My decision to make. My memory to rely on. It's all so much pressure, and if I screw up, I either let a guilty man free, or I'm responsible for locking an innocent man up.

"Rory?" Fletch perches on the table beside me. "He look familiar to you?"

I shake my head and reach up to pinch my lips together to have something to do with my hands. Nerves wreak havoc on my system, and though everyone in this room is calm and quiet, my mind screams a thousand things at once, making it nearly impossible to break through the chatter and focus.

But *Number One* is not someone I've ever seen, so I lick my lips and rasp, "No."

"Good. Alright." Archer presses the button again. "Number One, step back. Number Two, take two steps forward."

I try to focus only on the man whose number has been called. On Number Two when he moves forward, and Number Three when I dismiss the former and Archer calls the next. But my gaze jumps to Seven and his sharp eyes that burn me where I sit.

I will myself to focus on Three. Then Four when it's his turn. But Seven scalds me, and each time I let my gaze stray, I lock on to his eyes and know he's one of the four from Monday night.

"Him."

Archer's determined focus whips around to me. "Number Four?"

I shake my head and sit taller again, to allow my lungs room to expand, and for air to fill them up. “Number Seven.”

Drake comes to stand on my left, and though I don’t turn to face him, I still see him in my peripherals. I see his sharp jaw and unshaven chin. The regrowth is a day old at best. Maybe two. His hair has dried, but it sits exactly in the direction he combed it before we left the hotel.

His brows pinch and his hand comes up to roll his bottom lip. “Seven?” he clarifies. “You sure?”

I swallow the dread in my throat and sniff, though I’m not sure anything is leaking. “Yeah. He was there the other night. I’m sure of it.”

“Shooter?” Archer demands. Then he presses the button, “Number Four, step back in line. Number Seven.” His change of order ruffles feathers on the other side of the glass as Five and Six jerk to the side and look at the man they’ve been skipped over for. “Step forward.”

He releases the button and studies the side of my face so I feel his warmth. “Make sure, Rory. Where do you recognize him from? What was he doing on the night of Lorenzo Lombardo’s murder?”

I close my eyes, which is probably counterproductive and frustrating to the police, but I remember back to the worst night of my life and replay what I saw. The shadows filling the street, and the streetlights battling to win in the winter evening. I remember the back of a man’s shoulders. The shooter, the one Lorenzo cried ‘Vallejo.’ But then I shift my mental gaze to his right and tilt my head as I remember. He hit Lorenzo, over and over and over again. His hair was short, and his skin, clean shaven. I don’t know what color eyes he had, it was too dark and he was too far away. But I open mine now and look down at the prisoner’s knuckles, scabbed and sore, and white today as he clenches his fists.

“He was the one who punched Lorenzo,” I whisper for Archer. “I remember very clearly, he was standing on Vallejo’s right. On Lorenzo’s left. He hit Lorenzo three times before the other one shot him.”

“Well done.” Archer gifts me with a pleased smile and casts his gaze back to the room. “Anyone else?”

So I follow his focus and re-check Five and Six to make sure I haven’t skipped them naively. I check the shapes of their jaws. Their hair. Their eyes. I recall again what I saw on Monday, and I try to place their faces. But I come up with nothing. Shaking my head, I look to Eight, but it takes only a moment for me to dismiss him, too. He’s the wrong shape. Wrong size. Wrong weight. It’s all wrong. “Number Seven only,” I mumble. Then I draw a deep breath and noisily exhale again until Drake’s hand settles on my shoulder and makes me jump in surprise.

I look to my left and follow the long lines of his body up to his face. But he’s not looking at me. He stares through the window with an expression that immediately contradicts his gentle touch.

“Number Seven,” Archer announces through the speaker box. “Step back and rejoin your line. Officer Clay, please escort the men back to holding.”

“Hey Aurora?” Seven’s smug tone steals the oxygen from my lungs and the strength from my bones. I swing my eyes from Drake and back to the man who licks his lips. “You live at 8496 Cardale Street, Copeland City. You’re your mother’s only child, though your father has a couple more on the side.”

“Hey!” Archer barks through the speaker. “Officer Clay!”

Clay jumps forward to wrestle his prisoner back into line. But the man continues anyway. “You attend NYU, and live in a shitty walk-up apartment with your cheating boyfriend and his college professor.”

Surprised, Drake’s gaze jumps down to lock on to the side of my face.

“You sat the MCATS in September, and you’re enrolled in medical school in Copeland for the next four years.”

“Come on.” I don’t even realize that tears burn my eyes until Drake slips his hands beneath my arms and lifts me from the table to place me on my feet. “We’re leaving.”

“Your mom is dying!” Number Seven shouts, even as Archer and Fletcher bound out of our room and dash through the next door. “She’s all skin and bones, Swanson. She might even die in the time it takes to book me. She’ll definitely kick the bucket before this goes to trial.”

“Enough!” Archer booms. “Officer Clay, move the others back to their holding cell. Now!”

“He knows about my mom.” A terrified sob breaks free of my throat as Drake bundles me up and forces me into the bullpen. “He knows about my mom!” I smack his hands away when they remain firm. Unyielding. “Drake!”

“He’s in custody,” he bites out, whipping another door open as cops glance up from their work and watch us. He tosses me in so my pinned leg smarts from the jolt and nausea swirls in my gut. But he doesn’t release my arm, so when my legs fail and would have me dropping to the floor, he keeps me up and saves me from another concussion.

Slamming the door shut and turning back to face me, he pins my hands close and glares when I continue to twist and fight.

“He’s not leaving this station, Aurora. Your mom is safe.”

“You said they have people outside who can do things for them!” I struggle against his powerful grip and consider biting. If only I thought it would make him let go. “You promised to be straight with me! You said you’d always tell the truth. So don’t stand here and tell me the fact he’s in cuffs means she’s safe.”

“Aurora—”

“He knows where she is!” I cry. “He knows she’s dying. He knows everything, which means Vallejo’s people have already been there. They’ve already seen her.”

“And she’s still alive.” He fists my wrists and yanks me closer until our chests slam together and the collision empties my lungs. His eyes, green and gold and fiery enough to make my heart squeeze, burn me where I stand, and scare me enough to still. “She’s alive, Little Bird. If she wasn’t, you’d

have already been called. So whatever their plans, they aren't to kill a dying woman."

"Drake..." I whine, tears plopping onto my cheeks. "She's vulnerable."

"No." He gentles his tone and rolls his bottom lip between his teeth. "*You* are vulnerable. You are their target. You are the one who saw what you saw, and now they want to shut *you* down. Not your mom. Not a woman who can't leave the hospital anyway. She serves no purpose at all, except to be your Achilles."

"What if they hurt her anyway? What if they do it to flush me out?"

"They won't." He releases my wrists but wraps his arms around my shoulders and crushes me close so I feel his heart pound against mine. I feel his anger coursing through his veins. The way he cares that I live, so my testimony can avenge his friend's murder. "I'll say this as gently as I can, Little Bird." He pulls back, but only so he can look down into my eyes. "Your mom is useless to them. She's already too sick. Her death is already too close."

"She's not useless." My soul aches with a pain so deep, I'm not sure I'd be standing if not for Drake holding me up. "She's the most amazing human on this planet. It's not fair that they've—"

"I know." He pulls me in again and squeezes. "It's not fair."

"She deserves to have me with her right now. She deserves to see me every single day," I cry. "She doesn't have many left."

"I know." He rests his chin on top of my head and exhales so his breath warms my scalp. "It's not fair you've been tossed into this shit show."

"I don't want to be here anymore." I sniffle back the long line of snot working to escape my nose and close my eyes. "I didn't ask for this."

“I know.” He squeezes me closer and rubs the tips of his fingers against the ball of my shoulder. “Those bad men did this,” he croons. “They did all this. You were just in the wrong place at the wrong time.”

“Like with the car accident,” I whimper. “Wrong place, wrong time.”

“And now you have pins in your leg,” he agrees. “It’s not fair.”

“Judy Jinx,” I sigh. But those words are just for me. No one else would understand them. No one else would have the capacity to process just how hellbent Judy is on ruining my life. “I want to see my mom.”

“I’ll make it happen.” He draws a pattern against my shoulder and brings me down from *panicked chaos* to a more reasonable *heart is broken but we’re all okay*. “I promise. I’ll get you over to see her.”

“Alright.” The door slams open, startling me back until I hit a table I hadn’t even noticed was in here. Then Archer Malone strides through with a different folder. A different file. But the very same rage in his expression he left with. He spares a glance for me and Drake, as Drake places my cane in my hand and wraps my fingers around the handle. But he says nothing about the tears on my cheeks, or the swelling I feel in my eyes. He says nothing about how Drake stands over me, or the moisture soaking into his shirt. “Marcos Buchanan.” Archer pulls out a chair at the table and holds it, waiting for me to sit down.

I draw a shuddering breath deep into my chest and straighten my shoulders. Judy wants to hurt me, but I’ll be damned if I take it with my body hunched and my nervous system spazzing out in fear.

“Number Seven?” I settle into the chair and glance back as Detective Fletcher wanders into the room and closes the door. “Are you saying Number Seven’s name is Marcos Buchanan?”

“Yes.” Archer pulls out a chair opposite me and spreads the file so I catch mugshots and rap sheets. Pages and pages of

crimes Marcos has committed. Warrants for his arrest. Time he's already spent in prison. "Do you recognize him from anywhere else in your life?" He places a head shot down between my hands and peers into my eyes. "Thirty-six-years-old, unmarried, three kids to three women, but he sees none of them regularly. He's not a well-known gun around these parts, but we've caught a couple connections between him and Vallejo. Which is why he's here."

"Do you know him?" Fletch asks, leaning over the table and resting his hand by the file. "Ever seen him before Monday night?"

"No." I spin a long braid around my hand and study Buchanan's horrible eyes. His stubbled jaw. His receding hairline. "No," I repeat when I realize they're waiting for more. "I've never seen him before Monday. I remember hearing his name when I was running after the murder. Someone shouted '*Marcos*,' I think." I inhale a deep breath and let it go again. "I remember him from the murder. I have no doubt in my mind." But then I shake my head. "I haven't seen him since."

"He wasn't in her house last night either," Drake inserts seriously. "Why was he part of the initial kill crew, but not the cleanup?"

Archer only shrugs and sits back in his chair. "Dunno. But he made it really fucking easy for us to pull him in here today."

My heart shudders in my chest. "W-what do you mean?"

"He means," Fletcher rumbles, "Buchanan has been a wanted man for the better part of eighteen months. Detectives inside this station have twelve active cases open with his name attached. Cops have been looking for him for a while, and today, he just so happens to get caught lifting a car?"

"He wanted to be here." Drake turns from the table and inches the door open to peer into the bullpen outside. "He needed to be near her."

“To let her know he knows,” Archer ponders thoughtfully. “To let her know they know who she is.”

“To scare me?” I ask. “He did it to intimidate me?”

“Everything they do from now, till it’s over, will be to intimidate you.” Drake closes the door with a thud, eliciting another nervous jump where I sit. “They want to silence you, Aurora. They’ll kill you when they get the chance. But for as long as you’re in police custody and safe, their next best plan is to scare you into shutting your mouth.”

“Detective Banks,” Malone growls. “Are you done?”

“They’re gonna take the shot,” he continues, coming to crouch by my chair so our eyes are almost on the same level. “The first chance they get, they’re gonna take the shot. And yeah, you’re gonna be scared to talk. Whoever pulled the trigger on Lombardo this week is powerful enough, Buchanan got himself arrested, just so he could pass on a message.”

“S-so what do we do?” My hands shake. My fingers quiver. My entire body jolts so the pain bites at my aching hips and legs. “A man just *willfully* walked toward a lifetime of prison, purely to upset me. That’s not a small deal. What the hell do we do about it?”

“We stay alive.” He pushes up to stand but grabs me under the arm and brings me up with him. “We stay hidden. We stay strong.” He wraps my hand around the handle of the cane and looks at Archer. “We’re gonna need somewhere safe to go.”

Panic lances through my blood. “Is the hotel not safe?” I look from him to Archer. From Archer to Fletcher. “Why isn’t the hotel safe?”

“It’s not *not* safe,” Drake answers gently. His lips curl into a small, friendly smile. “But it’s still a risk. We slept last night because no one knew where we were. But that won’t last long, especially in a public establishment.”

“I have a place.” Archer leans back and takes out his chirping phone. He reads the screen for a beat, and swipes to answer, but he brings his eyes back to me. “I’m gonna put you up somewhere that’s as safe as any in the city.”

“She should be moved *out* of the city,” Drake snarls. “This shit is all over Copeland. Get her out and hide her in the middle of the Appalachian fucking Mountains.”

“Appalachian?” I jerk under Drake’s hold and sneer when his eyes come to me. “I’m *not* leaving my mom. I’m not leaving this city.”

“Feds are gonna try to take her soon,” Archer inserts. “And Vallejo’s men are gonna expect her to end up in the mountains. Stay here, and we control the situation.” He lifts his finger, as though to tell us to wait, then he brings the phone to his ear and rumbles, “Mayet. What’s wrong?”

“You shouldn’t stay in the city.” Drake grabs my chin and forces my eyes up to his. “Vallejo’s army only stretches so far. Right now, you’re in the belly of the beast and at the most risk. But if we move you even a few hundred miles away, you’re still close enough to get back in a pinch, but Vallejo’s guns are far less likely to reach you.”

“I’m putting her up in a safe house,” Archer tells his caller. “I’m not saying where over the phone.” He stops to listen, his jaw clicking with tension before he nods. “Yeah. It’s gonna take months before this goes to trial, and we still don’t have our shooter, anyway.”

“I can’t sit in hiding for months,” I mumble. *To myself? Maybe to Drake.*

He hears me anyway, bending to meet my eyes. “You don’t have a choice.”

“But I do. Life is all about choices, right? I can choose not to participate in this bullshit.”

“You could try,” he grits out. “You could even pinkie promise Vallejo you’ll keep your mouth shut and not tell a soul. But he’ll still kill you the second you’re exposed. If you think these people work within fairness and trust, then you’re being naïve as fuck, Aurora. You’re involved now. From here to the end.”

“I don’t *want* to be involved!” I explode. “I want to see my mom. To go to school. To write my damn paper and forget this

week ever happened.”

“And I want you not to be at the end of another man’s scope,” he counters. “Right now, neither of us is getting what we want.”

“I’m choosing to be out.” I fist the handle of my cane and step around his broad form to head toward the door. “We’re only a block from the hospital, so I’m walking there to make sure my mom is okay. You guys have Buchanan in custody, and according to Google, Vallejo is dead. I’d say that pretty much takes care of—”

A squeal of surprise rushes from my mouth as a muscular arm wraps around my stomach and lifts me from my feet. But more shocking to me is the fact I don’t scream in fear, which is ironic, considering I’ve never been in a more dangerous situation in my life. “Let me go!”

“If you walk out of here alone, you’re dead.” Drake crushes me close, his breath scorching my neck with every word he speaks. “That’s not me trying to scare you, Aurora. I’m not trying to spook you into compliance. I’m telling you: your life will be snuffed out. Just like that. That fuckin’ easily.” He sets me on my feet, but he remains wrapped around me while the other two watch in stunned silence. “I’m not trying to intimidate you. And I’m not trying to control you. The one thing you want most right now isn’t to annoy the cops. And it’s not to study or go home. You want to see your mom.”

“I haven’t made that a secret!” I snap. “I need to see her.”

“And if you walk out of here alone and you get dead anyway, how do you think your mom will feel when she finds out?”

Drake

“The old Malone house?” I cover Rory’s back as we exit the car and make our way toward a four-story minimansion in the hills of Copeland City. “Are you fucking kidding me right now, Malone?”

“It sits here empty.” He walks ahead of us and unlocks a massive wrought-iron gate that shields the front door. Only ten-feet stand between the gate and the door. Expensive Spanish tiles make a pathway, dusty from misuse and chipped in some corners by what I fucking swear are ancient bullet holes. “We need a place to put her.” He unlocks the heavy front door and swings it wide to reveal a home drafty with cold and stale. The house is dark. Windows are covered, and furniture fills the space but is draped in fabric to keep the dust away. “She doesn’t want to leave the city, and I don’t think sending her away will solve anything, anyway. To keep her close is to keep her safe.”

“Sounds more like, *I don’t want to leave my wife, so I’m gonna put my witness in danger to serve my own issues. But it’s cool, because I’ll let her use an old fuckin’ kingpin drug dealer’s house to assuage my own guilt.*”

“Keep talking about Malones and drugs, Banks, and you and I will have beef.” He crosses the threshold, taking the keys from the door. But he holds it wide and allows us to enter. Rory, just a foot ahead of me, and Fletcher a foot to her right. “You’ve already made it clear you know my family’s history.” He slams a meaty hand to my chest, stopping me before I can pass. “Everyone here now knows about it. *Including* our

witness. But for as long as my chief and the mayor think I deserve my badge, I'm done letting you talk about it."

"Our father's shadows tend to follow us all the way to the grave, Malone." I brush his hand away and trail Aurora into the cold house. I'll be damned if I bring her to the safest place this city has to offer, only to discover Vallejo got here first. "Your shadow seems a little heavier than most. That's all I'm saying."

"Did anyone grab my things?" Rory walks the dark living room, which I guess was once a sitting room for powerful old men drinking whiskey and puffing on cigars. She wanders to the massive fireplace and runs the tip of her finger along the old brickwork before turning and facing us. She works hard to carry an air of anger. But just beneath the surface, I know she grieves. "I didn't bring my bag or laptop from the hotel."

"We'll get your stuff brought across," Fletcher answers easily. He strolls to the huge windows that cover almost all the front of the house. But he doesn't yank the drapes open. He doesn't dare disturb the stillness of the home that hasn't been occupied in probably two decades. "We'll also have food delivered so you can be comfortable."

"There are nine bedrooms," Archer rumbles. "Eight bathrooms. There's a pool out back, but it won't be warm. The kitchen has a hidden wine cellar beneath. You can access it through the walk-in pantry."

"Do you expect me to drink away my worries while I'm here?" Rory drops her hand from the fireplace and leans heavily on her cane. "Alcohol will numb the ache?"

"The cellar acts as a panic room," he counters dryly. "It's hidden, so unless you *know* it's there, you won't know it's there. If the house is breached, you run to the cellar, lock yourself in, and wait the raid out."

"So I need alcohol *and* a panic room?" She stresses, bringing a hand up and scrubbing it over her cheek. "Awesome."

“There’s an old armory,” he brings his gaze to me. “I’m not sure what’s left, but it’s worth taking a look. There’s a shooting range too, but it’s not soundproofed, and to use it here would let the entire city know someone is in residence.”

“So don’t,” I conclude with a nod. “Alright.”

“Closets probably still have clothes in them, so hunt around and see if anything works for you.” Then he looks at Rory. “Much less likely you’ll find any women’s clothes. Except maybe a seedy box of panties or some shit.”

Her lips curl into a sneer. “Gross.”

“Don’t go looking. This was a home made for, and outfitted by, the mob. They’re much like the men hunting you down now. They aren’t typically friendly toward the women, so don’t expect anything in this house besides a bed that’ll make your life comfortable.”

“So I won’t find a hair dryer?” she smarts. “Or tampons.”

He smirks. It’s small and pained, but her attitude amuses him. “Unlikely. But we can get you that stuff if you need it. Fletch will bring you your laptop and bag within the hour, then you can just settle in and...”

“Wait?” she growls. “For months and months until you catch a killer whose name *may* be Gregory Vallejo, but also, may not be, since he’s dead?”

“You can study.” He rolls over her barb and focuses on the positives he can pluck out of nowhere. “You can attend virtually and keep up with your peers. We’ll get the internet fixed up so you can access all your class materials. You can video in, and we’ll have the mayor contact the school if they give you any grief.”

“I’m not a Copeland student until the new school year, Detective Malone. And the mayor of *this* city has no pull over the schools on the East Coast.”

“He will,” Fletch inserts. “Mayor Lawrence is a powerful man, and Vallejo’s network stretches all the way to New York. Plucking him out like the weed he is, and tossing him into the incinerator will benefit both cities.”

“And my mom?” She lifts her chin and juts it forward. It’s pride. But I’ll be damned if it isn’t the cutest bullseye ever. “Will you provide a car and plain clothes police officers to take me to see her... *daily*?”

“Plain clothes?”

“I don’t want to scare her, and having a bunch of men following me around will make her ask questions.”

He chuckles lightly in the back of his throat. “Going to your mother isn’t an option, unfortunately.” He reaches up and slides a hand through his short hair. “It’s just not possible.”

“Make it possible!” she snaps, louder than I expected she would. “It might only have to be once. She’s already weak, Detective. It might only be a week. It won’t be much longer than that. But I can assure you,” she takes another step forward and threatens, “I will not desert her now. I refuse. So figure it out and make it possible.”

“You can videocall her.” He tries to smooth his words. To lace compassion into the things he says. “I know it’s not the same. I know this sucks. But what you’re asking just isn’t going to work. It’s too dangerous.”

“Make it work! I will not let my mother die, all alone in that fucking hospital room, thinking I’ve left her. She deserves better! And if I have to walk there my damn self, then that’s what I’m going to do.”

“Rory—”

“A hat and sunglasses never hurt anybody before, Detective.” She stalks forward, slowly on her bad legs, and comes to a stop in front of Archer. She’s smaller than him. Almost a foot shorter, so she’s forced to look up into his eyes. But she’s not afraid. “I’ll dress any way you want me to. I’ll wear a wig and massive sunglasses. I will walk without a stick,” she adds, lifting her cane to prove she can do without it. “I’ll wear scrubs and come in through the employee entrance if that’s what you want. We went out today, and everything was completely fine. Not one, single person tried to hurt me. So if you think it’s appropriate to go out and snitch on a bad

guy, then you will approve of me going out to see a dying woman.”

She lowers her cane again and casts a glance to Fletch. Then to me. “Make it work. She has *not* already hugged me for the last time.”

Leaning on her stick and circling the detective, she heads out of the room and toward whatever else this house is made up of. Her cane creaks with every movement, and her breath comes faster from exhaustion. But she disappears from our sights and sends a bolt of anxiety to the bottom of my stomach, growing and pulsing every second she’s gone.

“We have to figure it out for her.”

“It’s impossible!” Archer snarls, his voice low so only a hiss travels across the room. “She’s asking to be shot in the fucking head.”

“She’s asking for compassion,” I argue back. “And a chance to say goodbye to her dying mother.”

“And when Vallejo’s soldiers take her out on the way there?” he growls. “What was even the point? Her mother still doesn’t get to see her. She gets no closure before she dies. And our witness is dead.”

“Our witness is a person.” I stalk closer. “A living, breathing human being who had a life three days ago. She didn’t ask to be brought into this, and she still hasn’t agreed to testify. She’s being told what to do at every turn, and no one is stopping to give her a voice.”

“Her voice is the one shouting about fake mustaches and big hats! She’s twenty-one-years-old. She doesn’t know this world the way you and I do. She doesn’t seem to grasp the finality that is death. So forgive me for not putting a lot of weight in her voice, Banks.”

“I’m four years into pre-med.” Rory’s gentle tone tears me around and brings me to a stop to find her standing in the doorway. The rage in her expression has been replaced with a deep pain. The tantrum she was throwing, swapped with wisdom beyond her years. “I know exactly how final death is.

I know that, after this week, or maybe next if we're lucky, my mother is going to be dead. And once that happens, it's forever. I won't get to bring her back. I won't get to share anything with her anymore. I won't get to hug her. And I won't get to make sure she knows she's loved. *That,*" she presses, swallowing so her throat bobs, "is the finality in death. I'm asking you in the nicest way possible to help me see her."

Her phone bleats, surprising us all, but none more so than Rory herself as she jumps and rescues the device from her back pocket. She reads the screen, and the instant whatever name on the front registers in her mind, her entire body slumps. Sniffling, she looks up and shows us the ringing phone. "It's the hospital. But it always hurts, because I don't know if it's *her* calling to talk to me. Or if it's her doctor, calling to tell me she's passed."

Licking her lips and swiping her thumb across the screen, she turns from us with moisture in her eyes, tears that strip my soul. "Hello? This is Rory."

I hold my breath, like whatever she says next has the power to make or break us all. So when her voice cracks and she exhales, "Hey, Mom," I release my breath again and turn away. "For fuck's sake."

My entire being is tangled up in the life and death of a woman I've never even met before.

"We're gonna have to get them back in the same room," Fletch rumbles, scrubbing a hand through his inch-long hair. "It's all fun and games to keep a girl alive. But letting her mother die in her absence is cruel and goes against everything we stand for."

"I don't know how to make it happen." Archer walks to the fireplace and rests his hands on the mantel. He wraps his fingers around the edges and bends, as though to stretch his shoulders and back. "Vallejo's people already told us who she is, where she is, and that she's dying." He shakes his head side-to-side. "How the fuck do we get Rory in there to see the

woman, when we know for a damn fact they're watching the place?"

"Maybe we bring the mother to us," Fletch ponders. "Put her in an ambulance. Transfer her to another facility for palliative care. Bring her here instead."

"They're gonna follow her wherever she goes," Archer counters. I have nothing useful to add. I have no plan, and I don't know this city. So I leave the detectives to their own devices and instead, I follow the scent of lavender and bergamot through the house that smells of stale air otherwise.

The stark contrasts make it ridiculously easy, so much so, I intend to air this place out tonight and fill it with a myriad of scents so that, if at some point, these assholes come looking for Rory, they won't follow their nose right to the panic room she'll be stuffed inside.

"You sound so tired, Mom."

I step into the kitchen and glance around for Rory's sweet voice, and although I come up empty, I catch sight of her shoes just around the corner. I hear the groan and squeak of an old staircase.

She's sitting down.

So I stay where I am and press my back to the wall. To listen. Because I'm a nosy bastard, and Aurora Swanson is a woman guarded. She keeps herself all bottled up somewhere deep inside her soul so the woman I know is just a mere fraction of who she is underneath.

And the woman underneath somehow has the ability to make men bend to her demands. Not just me, but the hardened Malone, too. He's a dick, and he pushes her hard. But he's put her in his own family's home, instead of some shitty little shack in the backwoods of Montana. He worries for her, but he's still going to come up with a plan on how to make a trip to the hospital work.

He'll never be someone I consider a friend. And the jury is still out on whether he trades powder for money just like his

daddy did before him. But he cares, and for that alone, I know Aurora wields a magic so few others do.

“*You* sound tired,” the woman, Eleanor, counters without a shred of remorse. “Are you sleeping, baby?”

“Yeah.” Rory sniffs, forcing a lightness into her tone. “I have this massive paper due soon, and it’s sending me a tad insane. But I’ve got it under control. I was going to try to visit you today, Mom. But I—”

“It’s okay,” the woman cuts in before Rory can come up with an excuse. “Whatever it is, sweetheart, it’s okay. I promise.”

“I’m gonna get there, okay? These last few days have been nuts. Definitely not what I was expecting on Sunday when I was thinking about the week ahead.”

“Is Nolan giving you trouble again?”

Frowning, I make my way to the long, stone kitchen counter and lower onto a stool. I hold my breath and pray the chair doesn’t squeak in protest.

Who the fuck is Nolan?

“No.” Rory snorts in response. “I mean, he calls every few days and tells me how he’s got a fellowship at some hokey ass school I don’t care about. He and Mrs. Robinson got funding for some research thing they’re doing together about the Second World War. I dunno.” She sniffs again and shrugs; I catch the shadowed movement along the hall. “The war is dead, and so are my feelings for that idiot.”

Her mother giggles, soft and sweet, and completely at odds with the sickness ravaging her body. “I never did like him, you know?”

“You didn’t?” Surprised, I picture in my mind the way Rory shoots tall and straightens her spine. “You said he was sweet and going places.”

“I said what you wanted me to say, since my approval matters to you.”

“You lied to me?”

Eleanor sniggers. “I placated you, Aurora. It’s what moms do until they come up with a better plan. Nolan was harmless. Boring as a dead toad,” she adds playfully. “Less endearing than a dog turd on the bottom of my shoe.”

“Now you’re just being mean.”

“Nolan was never meant for you, sweetheart. He was a seat filler,” she concludes on a sigh. Which turns to a yawn and reminds all three of us, I think, that she’s not well. “He had manners, and absolutely no spine. Which made him a safe alternative to satisfy your need to explore your daddy issues.”

“Mom!” My smile shoots up at Rory’s indignation. “I don’t have daddy issues!”

“You do, honey. We all do. Some of us have wonderful fathers, in which case, our daddy issue is our search for another man just as wonderful. And some have deadbeat jerkoffs like yours, in which case you’ll probably search for that unconditional love you always deserved but never got from him.”

“Did you get a psych degree in the last couple of days?” Aurora grumbles. “Seriously, Mom? Where is this coming from?”

“My point,” Eleanor interjects, though her tone is playful “I’ve been terrified of that daddy issue rebellion you’re bound to someday experience. It’s gonna be messy and sexy and thrilling.”

“Please don’t say sexy ever again,” Rory groans. “Not in this context. I beg you.”

Eleanor laughs. “My point is that Nolan was never going to be the man to provide you with the excitement. I knew that. You knew that.”

“I did not.”

“But for as long as you were dating him, I knew you were safe and completely non-feral for a little while longer.”

“Feral?” Finally, Rory giggles too. “Mother.”

“All women eventually experience a moment of feral-ness, sweetheart. It’s the best part of us all. And someday, you’re going to meet the right someone who encourages that wild side. But he’ll contain it too. He’ll let you spread your wings and jump off buildings or whatever other crazy hair-brained scheme your mind conjures.”

“You *want* me to jump off a building?”

“I want you to feel comfortable jumping off a building, because the right person is waiting to catch you.”

“Right,” Rory drawls in response. “And is this right person my daddy issue, sexy, passionate guy? Or is he the guy who comes after? Ya know, so I can put all this in my planner and be ready for it.”

“You’re getting an attitude.” Eleanor’s tone hardens. But it’s all a façade. It’s mock rebuff at best. “And if you’re lucky, you’ll find all the right qualities in one man. The wild one,” she sighs, “but he’ll keep you safe. He’ll encourage your feral-ness, but he’ll—”

“Feral-ness isn’t a real word.”

“He’ll let you jump off a building,” she pushes on gently, “and he’ll catch you on the way down. He’ll be the unconditional acceptance and love you deserve, but he’ll call you out on your bullshit too, because anyone who loves someone, knows the one they love can’t *always* be right *all the time*.”

“Disagree. And I’m pretty comfortable in my ability to always be right.” Rory stretches her leg out, so I see more of it around the corner of the wall. Her right leg, not even the broken and repaired one, so when it’s completely straight, she releases a groan of pleasure that arrows straight for my gut. “I’m yet to be wrong about anything at all.”

The older woman snorts. “You were clearly wrong about Nolan, but okay. Keep going off, baby.” She lets out a yawn that is loud and damning. A warning she’s almost done with this conversation. “How’s that paper coming along?”

“Crap. Oh, and just out of curiosity, Mom...”

“Mmm?”

“Have you had any visitors other than me this week?”

I sit tall in my seat and angle in her direction. Twenty-feet still separates us, but I lean anyway and wish I could see her face. I wish she could see mine.

“What do you mean?” Eleanor yawns again and snuggles into her bed. “I get nurses and orderlies and doctors visiting me all day long. Is this about your father?” she grumbles. “Is he saying stuff? Because if he—”

“No. It’s nothing like that. I haven’t even talked to Dad yet this week.”

“So then, what do you mean about visitors?”

“Not him,” Rory sighs, probably wishing she hadn’t brought the subject up. “I was only asking if you’ve seen unfamiliar faces around. New nurses or whatever.”

“I mean...” Eleanor shrugs so the rustle of her sheets becomes audible. “I don’t know. There are a lot of nurses here, Ror. Lots of faces. And lots of medicine. So I...”

“It’s okay.” Aurora moves on the stairs again, so they creak and echo all the way through the house. “Forget I mentioned it, okay? Have you been awake a lot today?”

“No.” The woman yawns again, her energy quickly waning. “Just woke up. I was in a little pain this morning, so the doctors gave me this stuff to rest.”

“And you called me as soon as you woke?” Rory’s tone softens. Sweetens. “I was the first person you thought of?”

“You’re the first, last, and everyone in between.” She smacks her lips and mumbles, “always and forever, Aurora Eleanor. I love you, you know?”

“I love you, too, Mom. Are you in pain now?”

She’s losing her mother to sleep again. Chasing an enigma as consciousness slips away from the woman on the other end of the line.

“Mom?”

“Mm.”

“You said you were in pain this morning, and that the doctors gave you meds. Now you’re awake, which probably means you’re in pain again.”

“Mm...” she licks her lips. “Little bit.”

“You have to press the button to get the nurses to come back to you. Mom?”

“Yeah?”

“Press the button, silly! When you wake up and have all that energy, you call the nurses first. I’m texting Brenda, okay?” Maybe she types something, and I don’t know because it’s silent. Or maybe her promise to text someone named Brenda is just an idle threat. I don’t know, because I can’t see her. But I get to listen, firsthand, as the sick woman’s breathing evens out. How she slips away to sleep again and leaves her daughter hanging.

The ease with which a lively conversation turns to nothing makes me wonder how often this happens. How many times Rory has listened to her mother sleep, and how often the older Swanson has wanted to stay awake but simply couldn’t.

“Good night, Mom.” Rory’s words are merely a whisper. The gentlest wish not intended for her mother’s ears at all. But maybe for the angels watching over them both. Maybe for God, if she believes in that sort of thing, to hear and bring peace to her mother’s suffering. Ending her call and dialing someone else, I continue to listen as the ringing echoes through the kitchen. “I know you’re there, Detective Banks.”

My heart thuds painfully in my chest as the other two cops chatter and organize our newest safe space. But before I get a chance to speak, Rory starts again, “Hey, Brenda. It’s just me. Mom called.”

“Yeah.” Brenda’s an older woman. Softly spoken and seemingly someone who’s been around awhile. “Is she out again? I was gonna head in and check on her in a few minutes.”

“Yep. She lasted about five minutes, I guess. Sounded okay. Labored breathing at the end. She’s asleep again now, but she mentioned pain, so I figured I’d give you a heads up, since she’s playing the martyr.”

Brenda snickers and walks the halls of the hospital so her sneakers touching the smooth floor are audible. “I’ll head in there right now, honey. And listen...” She stops for a beat and sighs. “Things are getting a little quieter here, okay? You haven’t been around as much this week, so I don’t know if you’re just not coping.”

“No, it’s not that. It’s—”

“It’s not my place,” the older woman inserts. “It’s not appropriate. But we’re friends, right? You and me. We’re honest with each other.”

“Of course.” Rory’s voice crackles with an ache that makes my throat itch. “Honesty, always. Please.”

“She’s running out of time, Sweetpea. If you’re not coping and you need your space, then I support you. More than you know, I support you. But if you’re prioritizing school right now, or you think you have more time, I just need you to know it’s running out.”

“How...” She snuffles, heart-breakingly sad. “How long?”

“Days.” She says the word the way another might drop a guillotine. “Maybe a week. But soon, honey, she’ll be living on morphine only. Sleeping all day and night. And eventually, she simply won’t wake up.”

“Okay.” Rory’s voice cracks again, but she swallows it down and tries to be strong. That’s who she is, I suppose. The one who pretends, until she has a moment to crumble in privacy. “I’m doing my best to get there. I promise.”

“I believe you.” Brenda starts moving again, out of a hall bustling with people and noise, and into a room that *beep-beep-beeps* with machines that, I have a feeling, belong to Eleanor. “Whatever you do, Rory, know that everyone supports you. We’re proud of you. But no one is prouder than your mom.”

Shaking my head side-to-side, while Rory cries and pretends she's not, I push off my stool far noisier than when I sat down. The legs scrape against expensive mob-purchased tile, and my boots echo against the floor as I stalk out of the kitchen and into the main sitting area where Malone and Fletcher talk.

They discuss food, I think. Clothes. The collection of our things from the hotel. And most importantly to them, Marcos Buchanan's words today.

But when I pause in the doorway, they stop speaking and glance around to face me.

"She's going to the hospital to see her mother tomorrow. You pick the time. You pick the way. I don't give a fuck if it's at three in the morning and we move in the dark, or it's nine o'clock and we blend with the crowds. But we're going there tomorrow."

Turning on my heels again, I stride back into the kitchen and around the wall separating us, and coming to a stop at the bottom of the stairs, I find Rory huddled in on herself. Her phone fisted in her hand, and her arms wrapped around her knees. Tears silently track across her pink cheeks and break my heart more than I could have expected for a girl I don't even know.

She's a witness. A target. She's the job, first and foremost. But she has the will of a lion. The tenacity of a fox. She has strength so few others possess, and she carries it, and so much more, all on her own.

"Come on." I extend my hand and take hers when she doesn't reach back. Gently tugging her up and setting her on her feet, I catch her again when her legs tremble and her knees threaten to give out.

"Just let me sit," she murmurs pathetically. "Leave me alone."

"You can sit on the couch." I scoop her up and hold her weight off the ground, pleased when her arms swing around my neck and hold on for dear life. Then I turn and go in search

of somewhere to put her. Somewhere with a comfortable sofa, and not just a stuffy wingback chair for kingpins to conduct business in.

I stride through the shadowed home and walk through rays of sunlight sneaking through the gaps the curtains make. And when I find a living room toward the back of the house with a flat screen TV bolted to the wall, and a massive shape hidden beneath a dusty sheet, I stop at the end of it, release Rory's legs, but keep my arm wrapped around her torso to make sure she stays standing. Then I tug the sheet away to find a cream, L-shaped couch laden with cushions and inviting enough to draw a groan from the back of her throat.

"This is where you're staying for the next few hours." I pull the sheet off completely, careful not to disturb the dust and have it land all over the room. Then half-carrying Rory, I lower her down and press my hands to her shoulders to keep her there. "Stay. I'll find the TV remote. You'll watch something trashy while the detectives get your things from the hotel. We'll eat. You'll sleep. Then tomorrow, I'm taking you to your mom."

Her eyes light up, but that only makes the tears in them glitter brighter. "Really?"

"I promise." I tuck a thick lock of her hair back behind her ear and smile. "I'm gonna make sure it's safe, okay?"

Rory

THE THINGS HE DOES WHEN I'M NOT
WATCHING.

“Aurora?”

I dream of boring things. Studying. The campus library I know like the back of my hand. I dream of Nolan and the apartment I've already moved out of. But that's how I know I'm dreaming, because Nolan is no longer a part of my world, and neither is the apartment.

I dream of school. And the textbooks I've memorized over the last four years. I play through my mind the classrooms I've sat in and the chairs my ass has gone numb in. And though it's all quite bland and boring to me, I cling tight to the make-believe, because I know when I wake, the world will suck again.

Lorenzo Lombardo will still be dead, and Gregory Vallejo will still be looking for me. The police will still be watching every step I take, and Marcos Buchanan will still know everything there is to know about my life.

He knew who I was dating, and what classrooms I sat in. He knows that I'm studying, and when I sat the MCATS. He knows it all, which means there's nowhere for me to hide... except in my dreams.

“Aurora?”

The softest touch of fingertips brushes over my cheek, dragging me away from my apartment. They're like the flutter of a butterfly's wings. Like the kiss of the wind. But better, because that breeze also brings the scent of wood. And cologne. And maybe a spicy soap I don't recognize. “Can you wake up, Aurora?”

The mattress compresses, so I roll from my side and onto my back until my ribs touch something. Someone. But I cling to sleep and welcome the new scents. The new voice.

“It’s only five,” he mumbles, dangerously close to my ear. “I know it’s early, but we’ve gotta go, Little Bird.”

I squeeze my eyes shut and refuse to rejoin the real world. “Danger?” I mutter. “Is someone here to kill me?”

Drake laughs, confirming just how close he is when the soft flutter of his breath touches my cheek. “Not on my watch.”

“Then let me sleep.” I turn away again and set my hands beneath my cheek. “We can talk after the sun comes up.”

“You wanna go see your mom, don’t you, Little Bird?”

My eyes snap open, and though I see an old closet with chests on top to hold... hats? I jerk over in bed and meet Drake’s smiling eyes. “Really?”

“Right now.” He moves off the bed, but he rests his fists on the mattress beside my thigh and grins so I see him, even in the dark. “Get up. Get dressed. If you want a shower first, you can, but you get ten minutes, tops.”

“Shower.” I shove my blankets off and reveal my panties and shirt. But I don’t care. Everyone sees panties. Women wear less at the beach. So although Drake’s attention drops to my legs, I bound across the bed and hiss when my feet touch the floor and my legs smart from the movement. But just like the underwear, I don’t care. Because I’m going to see my mom.

I dash through the doorway and into the bathroom I used last night to brush my teeth. Flipping the shower on, but leaving the light off, I close the door and peel my clothes away, dropping them to the floor. “I’ll be two minutes,” I call out. And because I was too excited to go before stepping into the water, I turn the heat as high as I can tolerate and release my bladder. “And I’m definitely *not* peeing in the shower!”

“I feel like you’re lying to me, Aurora.” He opens the bathroom door and sends panic lancing through my blood.

I grab the fluffy loofah and use it to cover up. But when he remains outside, I lean a little to the left, searching. “C-can you see me?”

“Nope.” The click-click-click of what I think may be a gun being loaded echoes into the room. “But I wanted to hear you, so we don’t have to shout. I’m not looking. I promise.”

“Is that, like...” Wary, I pump soap into my hands and start washing. “Is that a *no I can’t see you* the same as my *no, I’m not peeing in the shower?*”

He chuckles, low and throaty and just warm enough to get my blood moving at this godawful hour. “I won’t lie to you. If I was looking, I’d do it so you knew. I’m a pervert,” he adds playfully. “But I’m not a creep.”

“Oh, well... I guess that makes everything better.” I bend and contort in every way possible, all so I can keep my hair dry, and once I’ve washed the important bits, I flip the shower off and step toward the glass door. “I’m coming out. So if you can see *anything*...”

“I’m facing away.” A dull thud hits the wall in the hall and brings my brows together in question. But I grab a towel anyway and make quick work of drying off.

“How am I doing on time?”

“I gave you ten,” he rumbles. “You still have eight. Feel better with an empty bladder now?”

“Yep. And shut up about it.” I wrap the towel around my body and cinch it in at my breasts, then bending, I grab my dirty laundry and bundle it in my arms. “We won’t speak of it again. I’m coming out.”

“I’m still facing away.”

I open the door all the way and make my way through, much slower now than I did on the way in. I wish for my cane but know I can make do without it. So I keep my steps measured and ignore the goosebumps that break across my skin when the cold air finally touches down.

I head into the bedroom I chose last night in my sleepy stupor, guilt lancing through my stomach when I realize I have no clue where Drake slept. I mean, there are a half-dozen more bedrooms in this house, so I'm confident he found somewhere. But the fact I didn't check, I didn't ask, and I didn't care enough to make sure he slept, makes me feel bad.

Heading to the bag sitting in the corner of my lavish, albeit, out of date, bedroom, I select a pair of jeans and a shirt. Then I search the pockets for fresh underwear. "Did you sleep last night?"

"Yeah," he answers from the hall. "I always catch a couple of hours somewhere. How are you feeling today?"

"Same as always." I step into black panties and slide a matching black bra on next. "My leg is stiff and sore in the mornings. But I'm young and fit and *yada yada yada*." If my hands weren't busy fastening my bra, I'd make the little gesture with my fingers to mock my surgeon. "I'll be good as new eventually. So I've just gotta put in the time and wait for everything to go back to normal."

"And your other leg?" His shadow stops by my door. But again, he doesn't come in. "I saw that bruise on your thigh, Aurora. When the car hit you?"

"Call me Rory." *For the love of god, call me Rory... or Little Bird. I like that.* "And that side hurts more this week. The bruising is fresher, and that car came outta nowhere."

"You're lucky you didn't die," he growls. "Do you often run into the street without looking?"

I step into a pair of jeans and fix the button with a snigger. "Only when people are shooting at me. I'm honestly hopeful that never happens again. In which case, it's unlikely I'll run into the street again." I slip my shirt on and snag a hoodie from my bag. Then scooping up a pair of socks and my sneakers, I grab my cane and head into the hall, smiling up at the man who waits with his back pressed to the wall and his foot lifted to sit beneath his butt. "Time?"

Grinning in the shadows, he looks down at his phone screen and nods his approval. “Took you seven minutes from start to finish.”

“Rocked it.” I lean on my stick and hug my shoes and hoodie to my chest, then walk the hall and make my way downstairs and into the kitchen. “Is that coffee I smell already?” I lift my nose into the air and inhale. “Really?”

“The only way I wake up.” Drake circles me, much faster on his feet, and grabs down a mug from a cupboard I’ve yet to inspect. Setting it on the counter and picking up a half-full pot, he pours. Though, his back is to me so my focus is on his shirt that stretches from shoulder to shoulder. The leather holster that strains tight and makes him appear all the broader. His hair is combed again, his chin, shaved down to a neat stubble.

He goes to bed after me and wakes before me. He manages to shower and shave and be wherever he needs to be to ensure I’m safe and alive, and he somehow does it all when I’m not looking.

“I’m gonna head to the station later today to talk to Buchanan.” Setting the pot back in its stand, Drake turns to me and offers the mug. No cream. No milk. No sugar. He sets it on the counter and slides it across until it stops just six-inches from my hand. “Detective Fletcher and Officer Clay will stay here with you.”

I pick up the mug and cup it between my hands. But my brows pull tight in curiosity. “First of all: why can’t I come with you?”

“Because you don’t need to be there. And the more you’re outside this house, the more vulnerable you become. There’s literally no reason to put you at risk like that. So...”

I scowl when he shrugs and leans forward to rest his elbows on the counter. “Second of all,” I continue. “Why are you leaving Detective Fletcher and Officer Clay with me, but not Detective Malone?”

“Because I believe in keeping one’s enemies close.”

I bring my coffee up and take a contemplative sip. This is how the ducks do it, right? Calm above the water, and complete heart-pounding chaos beneath the surface. “You think Detective Malone is our enemy?”

“I think he’s not my friend.” Again, he lifts his shoulders in a shrug. “And for as long as he’s not, I’m keeping him with me when I can’t be with you. I’ll be a couple of hours, probably. And I won’t be able to focus if he’s here with you and letting the wrong people through the gates.”

“But you trust Detective Fletcher to do the right thing?”

“I *hope* Detective Fletcher would do the right thing. He has a daughter to take care of, and he can’t afford to lose his job... or die.” Drake flashes a sadistic grin that warns me, *don’t fuck with Drake Banks*. “Officer Clay has no connections whatsoever to the Malone family or any of its subsidiaries. He’s just a beat cop who transferred across sometime last year. He’s not taking any money from Malone, and his father is a respected Copeland City representative. So as far as I can see, he keeps shit clean.”

“And how do you know that someone is, or is not, accepting money from someone else?”

“I have friends in high places.” He reaches across and nudges my coffee up. “Hurry. Fletcher and Malone are here already.”

“They are?” I turn in my seat and glance along the hall to find two pairs of eyes watching me in the darkness. I startle in my chair and squeak when coffee sloshes over the side of my cup and plops into my lap. “Jesus! You were there the whole friggin’ time?” Then panicked, I shoot a look at Drake. “You speak about them, *knowing* they’re there?”

“I shoot straight with everyone.” He pushes up to stand tall and grabs squares of paper towels from the back wall. He splits his stash in two, hands half to me, and uses the rest to clean up the spilled coffee on the counter. “I figure it’s only fair that everyone knows where I stand. Always. Malone knows what I think of him, and so does Fletcher. Clay isn’t here, but I figure my *‘he’s clean and I have no beef with him,’*

is kind enough to not count as gossiping.” He reaches across and takes my mug and paper towel. “Put your shoes on. Your ten minutes is officially up.”



“We’re approaching through the west wing entrance.”

Archer drives, and Detective Fletcher takes the passenger seat beside him. Drake sits on my left, in the back, and speaks for, well, everyone, I guess.

“Underground parking lot,” he continues. “Employee only elevator. Number one is cleared and waiting for our exclusive use.” He glances down at me, his eyes dropping when I realize my bottom lip is trapped between my teeth. “Your mother has been moved to the fifth floor.”

“She has?” I glance through the car windows as Detective Malone brings us into the underground garage as the artificial light flickers on. “Why was she moved?”

“For our visit. The first rule of not getting shot in the head, Little Bird, is to not be where the bad guys expect you to be. Your mother has relocated to the maternity ward temporarily, which is doubly secure and accessible only through passcodes. She has her own room, and security on the doors, and even if Vallejo has men inside the hospital, they won’t know where she is, and they won’t be able to access her even if they find out.”

“And the moms and babies?” I question, the car’s tires squeaking against the smooth concrete floor. “If Vallejo’s people come for me, and go through her? All those brand-new moms are at risk when they’re already unbelievably vulnerable.”

“They’re safe,” Archer cuts in. “No one knows she was moved. We have men on her old room door, and a dummy in her bed for anyone who wants to look through the windows. She was moved out during the night when *only* secure personnel were in house. The hospital security is on high alert, knowing her connection to you, and yours to Vallejo. The

entire city is on alert,” he adds. “The hospital is a high-risk area, and they’re not just gonna leave their patients in danger.”

“Protocol is being followed,” Drake continues. “We have uniforms on every entry and exit. Employees are screened and re-screened before every shift, and no one *new* is caring for your mother. Only the same faces that’ve been with her since she was admitted.”

“The reality,” Fletcher inserts as Archer brings our car to a stop, “is that you’re more at risk in transit than you are inside the hospital. The garage is secure too, but not nearly as secure as we’ll be once we’re inside.”

“So let’s go.” Drake opens his door and steps out, taking a gun from his shoulder holster; the silver glint sets my pulse racing. Then he blocks the entire door, leaving just enough room for me to slide out when I’m ready. The other detectives do the same, exiting the car and fanning out to make sure no one sneaks up on us. “Little Bird?”

I whip my head around, away from the windows I watch the other cops through, and up to find Drake’s penetrating stare beating against mine. He gifts me with a small, sweet smile and offers a hand. “You gotta get out of the car. This is the least safe we’ll be today, so although I wanna let you do you and take your time, I’d really prefer you didn’t die. So get the fuck,” his smile grows larger, and his fingers curl to draw my attention, “out of the car.”

I swallow down a massive lump of nerves and clear my throat before I risk death—choking on my own spit would be something Judy Jinx tosses my way for fun—then setting my hand in his so his callused palm tickles mine and his fingers wrap around my wrist, I allow him to tug me out and bring me to my feet.

Our bodies touch. His chest against mine and his thighs hugging my thighs. Our breath mingles in the early morning quiet before the city wakes, but he takes a step back, breaking the electrical current my imagination conjures purely for my own torment.

Maybe it's because I'm young. Maybe it's those dreaded daddy issues my mother promises me. Or maybe I'm just *that* stupid. I'm running from killers this week and preparing to bury my mother next week. Drake Banks is older than me by a long shot. His career makes him my caregiver, not my friend. And yet, my heart races just a little faster when our eyes meet.

So fucking stupid.

“Good girl,” he murmurs, reaching back into the car to grab my cane before setting one end on the ground and the other in my hand. “Stay with me.” He turns but wraps his hand around mine to lead me. “Look everywhere, Aurora. Stay behind me. If anyone opens fire, you drop and roll.”

For a moment in time, even when it felt dumb, I got to experience my heart fluttering for a man. But that moment was fleeting and now it's gone, and instead, replaced with a thundering pulse at the prospect of outrunning bullets... again.

“Approaching elevator one now,” Archer rumbles, darting forward to hit the button. “Uniforms ready on five?”

“Ready on five,” someone's voice crackles through a radio. “The hall is clear.”

Drake keeps me pinned close behind him, adrenaline rolling off his broad body the way waves roll in the sea. He walks ahead of me, his head swiveling around and his eyes everywhere at once, but as the bank of elevators—three in total—all open at the same time, he drags me to the second and forgoes *Number One*.

“Banks!” Archer stops outside the glistening silver doors and throws his hands up. “Number One is secure.”

“So you ride it.” He hits the buttons on the control panel and selects the fifth floor. “See you in a minute, Malone.”

“For fuck's sake.” Archer growls as the doors close and lock just the two of us in. And though we leave him and Detective Fletcher behind, I imagine them both in my mind, dashing to the other elevator and following us up.

“Why are you changing the plan?” I cross my arms, even with Drake's hand secured around mine, and drag my bottom

lip between my teeth. I'm *this* close to seeing my mom, and yet, she feels hundreds of miles away. "The other elevator was secure."

"Number one rule to not getting shot in the head, Little Bird."

Warmth colors my cheeks as the elevator comes to a stop and the doors slowly inch open. "Is to not be where the bad guys expect me to be."

"Exactly. Come on." He passes not only Officer Clay but three others, who wear uniforms crisper than the brand-new jeans I pulled on this morning. "If we have a leak within our unit, then Vallejo's soldiers will have known you were in One."

"If we have a leak," I counter, allowing him to lead me through quiet halls and around a corner, "then they're gonna know I'm on the fifth floor, too."

"True. But at least you're not in your mom's original room, with windows for walls and an entire city looking in." He stops in front of a door and swaps his gun for a badge the officers need to scan. "Detective Drake Banks. Let us through."

They read his badge and eye his weapons, and then the one on the right leans around and looks me up and down, too. He's young, like Clay, and seems entirely too new to be guarding my mother's life.

"How old are you, Officer?"

Curious, Drake peeks over his shoulder at me, his brows pinching tight, then he looks back to the officer and lifts his chin. "She asked you a question."

"Um..." He swallows, so his Adam's apple bobs and sways. "I'm twenty-four, ma'am."

Older than me, I acknowledge. *And yet*, "Would you step in front of a bullet to protect the woman whose room you're guarding?"

“Uh...” His hesitation is enough to tell me everything I need to know. His fear of dying, a promise of letting a gunman through if he had to choose between my mom or himself.

“Would you step in front of a bullet to save my life, Detective Banks?”

Drake passes the stammering cop and opens the door to let me in. “Yes. I would.”

“Even though we just met?” I press, glancing around the dark room to find my mother sound asleep in the bed in the middle of the room. I wonder if she even knows she’s been moved. “You’d risk death for someone you don’t even know?”

“I’d risk death for you,” he concludes, releasing my hand and taking up his position by the door. “You didn’t ask for this mess, Aurora. And you don’t deserve it.”

“And you do?” I come closer to my mom as he closes and secures the door, hoping my squeaking cane doesn’t drag her out of her slumber. “Did you ask for this, Detective Banks?”

He chuckles, so softly I would have had no chance of hearing it if it wasn’t five-thirty in the morning and the world wasn’t silent. “Seems that way,” he murmurs. “I keep coming back to these assholes, even when I wish they’d all rot.” Then he pauses as I come to a stop by Mom and take her hand. “You look like her.”

“She’s the most beautiful woman on the planet.” I take a visitor’s chair and quietly drag it closer. Then lowering onto the cushion, I set my cane aside and trade it for her hand. I place her palm against mine and study the side of her peaceful face. Her cheeks are gaunt, and her eyes are sunken. Her entire body is skin and bones. She can’t be more than ninety pounds, fully dressed and soaking wet. Even so, I see the woman beneath the sickness. I see the beautiful lady she’s always been.

She was the perfect trophy for my father in their earlier years. The body, the legs, the long hair, and the breasts that would someday kill her. She was the desired package for any

young professional wanting something pretty on his arm at all the important parties.

But she's so much more than that.

He wanted eye candy but got mad when she came with her own thoughts and feelings.

He wanted her to be seen and not heard, so when she spoke, he was furious.

"She wanted to be a surgeon." I stroke her fingers, but I share the most important person in my world with a cop I had no clue would be so closely linked with my life just days ago. "She never got there," I tell him. "But she had the intellect for it. She had the guts."

"What kind of surgeon?" He presses his back to the door and lifts his foot to rest beneath, and when I glance over my shoulder to confirm the image my mind had already conjured, he grins. "Ortho? General?"

"Neuro," I sigh, bringing my focus back around. "Why my father thought he could pluck someone like her out of med school and think she'd be a brainless sheep for him, I have no clue. But alas," I reach across with my free hand and stroke her gaunt cheek. "She looked good. She smiled exactly right. She was smart as hell and witty enough to make a man question whether she's insulting or complimenting him."

"Well hell," he murmurs, his smile visible to me, even without me turning to look. "I wondered where you got that sharp tongue from."

"He trapped her," I exhale. "Which is usually how it goes. She didn't want children yet, and she sure as hell didn't want to trade her career for trophy wife status. But she got pregnant anyway and gave everything up. She was never bitter though," I amend, before he can think she was. I cup her hand in mine and bring it closer so I can press a kiss to her knuckles. "She wasn't much older than I am now. She was in her first year of medical school, having already completed pre-med."

"Like you?" he asks. "You start med school soon, right?"

“In the fall,” I agree. “Yeah. She already knew what specialty she was going into. She was determined. And though she was willing to date and have her fun, too, she had a plan and fully intended to execute it.”

“She doesn’t regret having you, Aurora.” His voice is pain-filled and soft. Empathetic and kind enough to bring tears to my eyes. “No one could regret you.”

“No.” I bring our joined hands up and swipe beneath my eyes. “But she regrets meeting him. She regrets losing her plans to his, and later, having to give them all up because of him. But no,” I shake my head in certainty and roll my lips across her dry knuckles, “she doesn’t regret me. When it’s all said and done and she looks back on her life, I think she knows having me means more than having that career. It sucks she couldn’t have both,” I rasp. “She would have been an amazing surgeon.”

A knock at the door makes me jump in my seat and swing around to face Drake, who already has his gun in his hand and his back to me. “Who is it?” he demands, the authority rolling from his lips chilling me to my spine. “Name and badge number.”

“It’s Malone.” Archer skips reciting his badge number and opens the door anyway, poking his head through the gap and facing the barrel of Drake’s gun without a trace of fear in his expression. He looks to me for a beat, then back to Drake. “We’ve run a sweep of the building and have come up clear. No security breaches. Staff won’t change until eight, so I reckon we clear out by seven thirty.” He peers at me and softens his expression. “That’s two hours, Rory. It’s the best we can do.”

“Okay.” Swallowing, I nod and turn back to face my mother and savor every minute I get. Two hours isn’t a lot. And yet, it kind of is. It’s more than I’ve had in days and more than I took the last time I was here.

I hug her hand and bring it to my cheek, so she can hug me back, and while Drake and Detective Malone talk for a moment longer, I study the spots on Mom’s cheeks instead.

They're kisses from the sun that tell a story of life. Of a woman weeding her simple garden. Of a young lady who enjoyed picking daisies and spent most of her time in the yard on the phone with the daughter she selflessly gave everything up for.

Now I'm in medical school, too, though I'm not on the same track. In fact, I have no clue what specialty I'll move towards once I get there. I have no desire to become a surgeon, but luckily, I feel no pressure to be anyone except who I want to be. I'm studying for me. Living for me. And every time I hand in a paper, and when I got my MCAT results back, I cherish the knowledge she's proud of me.

She couldn't afford school anymore after the divorce. She couldn't afford to quit her job when she had a kid to feed and an ex who took pride in not supporting me except for the weekends I spent with him.

But I can do these things. I can achieve these goals for us both.

Drake closes the door with a snick and locks the rest of the world out of this room. Out of this memory I know, soon, I'll think back on and wish I could revisit.

"What's your favorite memory?" Like he can read my thoughts, not for the first time, Drake's question draws my eyes up. But not away from my mother. "Throughout your childhood," he adds. "What is something you think back on and smile about?"

"All of it." I press a kiss to Mom's palm and smile. "I don't ever remember feeling unsafe when she was around. Or unloved. I don't remember ever feeling judged." But now I laugh and remember our most recent phone call. "Well, except for last night when she told me what she really thought of my ex-boyfriend."

"Moms generally know," he chuckles, confirming what I already knew: he was listening to my conversation. "But he was safe. And for the time being, safe was good."

“He was such an ass,” I snicker. But then I scrunch my nose and feel a stab of disgust. “He was a lot like my father, I suppose. Proper. Perfect, on paper. He was a social climber who wanted something pretty on his arm.”

“Well...” Drake’s word comes out with a rasp that surprises me. “He got that.”

Glancing over my shoulder, I meet his gaze and frown. “You think so?”

“I know so.” His lips curl up, sending a shot of electricity to the bottom of my stomach, but his eyes soften, almost shyly. “It’s unprofessional of me to say so. But there it is anyway.”

“Why would you say something others would deem unprofessional?”

“Because I promised to be straight with you.” Pushing away from the door, he stuns me as he approaches, but instead of coming directly to me, he circles the bed and takes a seat in the other visitor’s chair. He cradles his weapon, refusing to put it away, but he sits back at ease and lifts one leg to rest it on the other. “So you don’t have to turn away from your mom,” he murmurs. “I’ll watch the door from here.”

He’s sweet. Thoughtful. He thinks of the small things most others take for granted, and while my mind is busy sprinting through everything happening this week, he’s mindful enough to ensure I maximize what little time I have left with the most important woman in my life.

“How old are you, Detective Banks?”

His chest bounces, the movement visible in my peripherals. “Old enough to know better. Young enough to make bad choices anyway.” When I glance up and study him from beneath my lashes, he smirks. “I’m thirty-seven-years-old.”

“Kinda young to be *former* DEA, no? To have... allegedly,” I add with a smile, “worked a case inside Detective Malone’s family.”

“Detective Malone is thirty-two-years-old, Aurora.” He brings his free hand up and rolls his lip between his thumb and

finger. “He was fifteen when I was inside his family’s mansion undercover.”

“So you were nineteen... in the DEA?”

“I was nineteen, with a father who holds a very prestigious and longstanding position inside the Drug Enforcement Agency. I was in the academy, and the DEA needed to send someone in. They probably had better agents. More experienced agents. But my father had recently done some big things in his career, busted some big players. He wanted to pull me in and continue the family business, I suppose, so they gave him what he wanted.”

“They gave him you,” I conclude. “They let him send his inexperienced, unqualified kid into a dangerous situation and hope to bring you out again alive.”

He chuckles. But he bounces his foot and nods. “That’s about the gist of it. I got a special title and rank out of it, he got to boast his only son was as badass as he was. Thirteen years after I became an agent, my partner and best friend was murdered. By Vallejo’s men,” he adds, quieter now. “I walked away and disappointed the man that *swears* everything he does, he does for me.”

“He’s disappointed in you?” Frowning, I bring my gaze back to my mother. “Really? That’s harsh.”

“He’s disappointed I gave it up,” he rumbles. I see him in my peripherals. I feel his eyes on me. But I focus on my mother and count the spots on her cheeks. “He thinks I’m lazy, like doing regular police work is *less* than what he does.”

“Why did you give it up?” I peek up and find him looking at the door. Watching my back. Protecting me, when I can’t protect myself. “You stayed in the police force anyway. Why give up the rank and your father’s approval, if you’d still be dealing with guns and bad people?”

“Well...” He exhales a deep breath and considers my question. “I guess it’s because I get to do the work during shift and hang it up at the end of my eight hours. Being an agent meant being whoever the agency wanted me to be. Around the

clock, and at their whim instead of my own, so I'm not even sure Drake Banks existed as a twenty-something-year-old. I skipped over that decade completely, and it all began on that Malone case when I wasn't even legally allowed to drink."

Thoughtful, he reaches up and strokes the short stubble on his jaw. "As a cop, I get to be with my friends. Make relationships. Make enemies." His lips curl higher. "I have family that isn't blood-related to me. People who care about me. I have former lovers who are happy now, and better yet, they still consider me a friend, and so do their husbands." He releases his chin and meets my eyes. "I can't have that when I'm working undercover all the time. I'm a social person, and it's lonely being someone else, having a fake persona inside the mob, so the only constant in my life was my father, who I don't like very much, and my best friend..."

"Who is now dead," I finish. *Got it.* Lowering my gaze, I slide the very tip of my finger along a vein that lines the length of my mom's arm. "I'm sorry you lost him."

"I'm sorry you got caught up in the same web," he counters. "I'm sorry you're gonna lose your mom." He glances toward my leg, though I know he can't see it through the bed. "I'm sorry your car got hit by someone else's and your whole life has been tossed on its head." But then he cracks a smile and looks me dead in the eye. "I'm *not* sorry your ex-boyfriend was a soft cock who messed up."

"Oh. Well..." Mortification makes my cheeks warm, but a soft snicker still manages to roll along my throat. "Thanks, I guess. I'm glad my heartache serves as amusement for you."

"Your heart wasn't broken, Little Bird. You never loved him. You hardly even tolerated him."

"You can't know that." He's right, of course. But that doesn't mean I have to give him that knowledge so easily. "Maybe I wanted to marry him."

"Nah." He lowers his foot and settles back, opening his jeaned legs wide. "You were never going to risk making the same mistakes your mother did. You weren't looking for a husband. I doubt you ever had sex without doubling or tripling

up on birth control. And when you finally do decide to settle in with a man, he won't be some corporate jackoff who bores the shit out of you and reminds you of your father."

"You're making assumptions." I lift my chin and look down my nose at him. "And to speak of my sex life is rude."

"I like him."

Stunned, I wrench my head down and find my mom's lips curled into a smile. Her eyes are still closed, but I see her. I see the delight in the way her cheeks color. "And that triple protection thing is a good idea."

"Mom!" Tears burst free of my eyes and soak my cheeks, though I have no friggin' clue why. My emotions sit too close to the surface these days. My humiliation a close second. I shove forward in my seat and set my forehead almost atop hers. "Don't listen in to my private conversations."

"Don't have private conversations six-inches from my ear and expect me not to listen," she taunts. Her voice is husky and pained, but her smile is so beautiful. So sweet, as I pull back and study her face. "Who is he? He sounds fun."

"Drake Banks." Drake introduces himself, of course, and offers a plastic cup filled with water. He passes it to me since he probably doesn't want to intrude, but as Mom inches just a little higher in her bed and I bring the straw to her lips, he settles his elbows on the railings and smirks when she finally opens her eyes and sees him. "You have *the* most beautiful eyes I've ever seen in my life, Ms. Swanson."

"Oh. Well..." Her cheeks warm, despite how unwell she is, then to buy herself time, she takes a sip of water and swallows it. Voices and noises hum outside our room. The world continues on. But in here, hearts swell. Friendships are made. Frayed emotions are smoothed over by a smoother man. "Thank you, Drake." If she had lashes, I think she'd flutter them. Slowly bringing her gaze my way, she raises a brow. Or, well, where her brow would be, if not for the chemotherapy causing it to fall out. "I see now why you've been too busy to visit me."

“Stop it.” I hug her hand and press her palm to my cheek. To hide my blush? Or simply to be close to her? Maybe both. *Probably both.* “Drake is my friend, Mom. Non-romantic.”

“I mean...” Drake flashes a grin so wide that the movement alone is enough to draw her eyes back his way. “It could be romantic, too. She sure is pretty. And last I heard, she broke up with that tool from school.”

I roll my eyes toward the sky and shake my head. “Real professional, Banks. And not at all confusing for my poor mother.”

“My body is failing,” she scolds. “Not my mind.” Then she grins and looks Drake up and down. “What do you do, Drake Banks? You’re not in college, are you?”

He laughs and stares into her eyes like she truly is the most beautiful woman he’s ever known. He has this way of making a girl feel like the *only* girl on the planet. “I’m a cop, actually. College was never for me.”

“A cop,” she ponders, surprise in her tone as her brows pinch just a fraction tighter together. “What kind of cop?”

“The kind who enjoys writing tickets and watching folks try to flirt their way out of them.” He takes back the plastic cup and sets it on the bedside table. “Rory here has been pretty naughty the last few days. Driving recklessly, stealing from stores. She even rolled a little, old granny in the street for her last pack of gum.”

I exhale a breath of exasperation. “Not true.”

“Sure it’s true,” he counters smugly. “Why else would I be here, if not to watch her shamelessly flirt her way out of trouble?”

Mom rolls her head my way, slowly, thoughtfully, and meets my eyes. “A granny, Aurora? Really?”

Drake barks out another laugh, the sound arrowing straight for my gut. “Skip over the reckless driving,” he teases. “I see how it is in this family of heathens.”

She's been awake for a mere minute, but already, her eyes gloss over with exhaustion. "He's a charmer. A man who flirts with your mom is either the perfect man or big trouble."

"He's the second," I murmur quietly. I match her waning energy and lower my voice. "He's definitely the second."

"There's no in-between," she yawns. "He's not the boring, middle-of-the-road, history major kind."

"I prefer to make history," Drake smarts. But he reads the room and gentles his tone. "Like to bring my friends along for the ride, too. It's way more fun that way."

Mom licks her dry lips and smiles. But her hand grows heavier in mine. Her palm caressing my cheek would fall away if not for mine holding hers up. "Making history is life's greatest honor, Aurora." She lets her eyes flicker closed, but she fortifies her hand, to let me know she's not ready to let me go. "Who is he really?"

"He's a cop." I whisper now, leaning in to rest my cheek on her chest. "He promises to protect me forever, Mom."

"Forever?" she sighs. A knock at the door brings Drake's back straight. But I focus on my mother. We have minutes left together before she's out again. Maybe only *one* minute. Singular. And I'm not willing to trade it for someone else.

Not even for a gunman who may or may not have found me.

"Forever," I repeat, as Drake stands and stalks across the room. "He's the most protective person I've ever met in my life."

"It's time to go." As Drake inches the door open, I recognize Archer Malone's voice. "There was a multi-car accident a couple blocks down that's gonna fill this hospital's ER in the next twenty minutes. Too many people, Banks. Too much noise. We can't protect her when this place fills."

"Alright." He breathes out a sigh that speaks of exhaustion. Maybe sadness. Then he adds, "Give us two."

He doesn't wait for an answer. Or permission. He merely closes the door with a gentle snick and comes to stand on my left. I guess I expected him to take his seat again. Or at the very least, to go to the other side of the bed. So when his hand cups the back of my neck and his fingers squeeze gently, I jump in place and sniffle when I realize tears blur my eyes.

"It's time to go, Little Bird." His voice is raspy and dry. Caring and so sweet. "I'm sorry we can't stay longer."

"Yeah." I sniff again and push up straight to take my weight off Mom's chest. I swipe my cheeks and clear away the mess, and though Drake's thumb strokes the side of my neck, softer than the brush of a baby bird's wings, I don't freak out at his touch. I don't push him away or lose my mind wondering how I make him stop.

Any other man, whether he was my boyfriend or merely a friend, I would flick his hand away and tell him to keep it to himself. *Or else*. But my soul doesn't reject Drake's gentle touch. My heart doesn't yearn for alone-ness. It's so odd to me, but then again, it's been this way since we met and he sat in my hospital room months ago.

While I slept, he kept watch.

While I laid awake, he kept watch.

And now, while I mourn my mother and hide from a gunman, he keeps watch.

"I'll come see you again, okay Mom?" I kiss her forehead and extricate my hand from hers. Her fingers tangle with mine and seek to hold on, but I work carefully and set her palm against her chest. Then swallowing the emotion lodged in my throat, I grieve Drake's hand when it drops away to leave me be. Though I spy a pen and paper on Mom's bedside table, so with a new idea, and a new thing to occupy my mind, I scoop both up and write a fast, "*I love you so much. Stop flirting with the cops. You're too beautiful for me to compete with. I'll call you later.*"

I set the paper down with a smile and blush a little warmer when Drake leans across to read it. I'm joking of course. The

purpose of my brief letter, I hope, is to remind her I was here when she wakes. To bring back a positive memory, and maybe spur her to call me to talk a little more.

Placing the pen on top and one last kiss on her brow, I stand tall again and turn to grab my cane. "I'm ready to go," I murmur. "Thank you for bringing me here."

"You're welcome." He looks me up and down, I guess to check I am, in fact, ready to move. Then he turns to the door and inches it open. "Coming out."

Archer repeats, "We're moving," to someone. Maybe into his radio. The latter is confirmed when voices crackle back. Some discuss "the package," which, I guess, is me. While others speak of the accident rolling into the emergency room downstairs. "Fletch?"

"I'm at the elevator," he responds. "It's secure and ready to go."

"Alright." Drake scoops his hand around my arm and leads me out of the room. Babies cry in the distance, reminding me we're in the maternity ward, and people line the walls. Some cops. Some nurses. Archer and Officer Clay stride ahead of us, while a second set of officers takes up our flanks. But it's Drake's presence I focus on the most. His firm hand, holding part of my weight to make my steps easier. My cane clapping against the floor with every step I take. Radios crackle, and though everyone in *my* world is focused on me and this procession along the hall, everyone else's worlds progress outside of us.

Moms are wheeled from delivery suites and into their rooms for recovery. New dads, nervous and a little shaky in their fresh reality, wander in shocked amazement. Phones trill, and perhaps, just maybe, one of the victims of the car accident in town is pregnant, because tensions grow a little thicker as the phones ring and attendants answer them.

"Elevator one," Archer murmurs. Not into the radio. Not for the whole team of officers to know. But just for us. "Two is in use. Three is unsecured."

“We’re taking three.” Drake drags me right just a beat before Archer and Clay step left. “Eyes open.” He tells them. “Fletcher, you’re driving. I don’t want any fuckery once we’re down.”

“Roger that.” He claps his hand over the sensors on Door Three to keep them open and follows us in as Drake pulls me to the back. Archer and Clay follow in next. Then hitting the *close door* button while the remaining two officers stay outside, Fletcher selects the underground parking lot and unholsters his gun like he knows something bad is coming.

“I want you behind me.” Drake manhandles me, but takes care not to let me fall or hurt my leg. “This place *coincidentally* swarming with bodies at the same time you’re here doesn’t work for me.”

“Accidents happen,” I murmur. “Car pile-ups especially happen during rush hour in a city this size.”

“And yet...” He makes damn sure his body shields mine as the doors open and reveal a parking lot... exactly how it was when we were last here. No gunman waiting to kill me. No vans filled with bad guys readying to hurt me. “It stinks, Malone.” He doesn’t move, despite the utter stillness of the area outside our elevator. “This whole thing stinks.”

“Yeah.” Archer inches forward and peeks into the garage to check our blind spots. Silence hangs heavy. Almost *too* heavy, but he slips out of the elevator with his gun drawn, Detective Fletcher just two steps behind him.

They’re here to protect me. Sure. But they’re going to protect each other first and foremost. And that brotherhood, that camaraderie, softens the wall I’ve built up around my heart where these two are concerned.

Maybe I don’t know them, which makes it hard to trust them. And maybe Drake doesn’t trust them—even though he *does* know them. This uncertainty means I look to Drake for answers long before I look to them. But as they fan out now, my view only what I catch around Drake’s broad shoulders, their protectiveness of each other makes them easier to trust.

They're loyal men. They're kind. And they're professional and competent.

"Bring her out." Archer's voice drips with doubt. With anger, though I'm not entirely sure where he's aiming it. "Change of plans, Officer Clay. Get the car."

"Yes, Detective."

The young officer darts out of the elevator while Drake brings me toward the lip, his foot in the way of the doors closing again. His breath is even. Strong. His gun-holding hand is steady, and the other, wrapped around my arm, is tight. Almost bruising.

I watch as Officer Clay approaches the car we arrived in, parked an easy thirty-feet from the elevators, and opens the door to slide in. This entrance isn't where emergency vehicles arrive. It's not even where patients and their visitors come. This is purely the parking lot for first responders to leave their cars while they're heading inside for a twenty-four-hour shift.

"Let's go." Drake's eyes swing everywhere at once, but he tugs me out of the elevator and onto concrete so smooth the soles of my sneakers squeak with every step I take. "You're sliding into the back seat," he coaches me. "Straight into the middle. Officer Clay is driving. I'm sitting in the back beside you. Detectives Malone and Fletcher can decide who rides shotgun and who's in the back with us. But you're in the middle, Aurora. Covered on all sides."

"I'll ride in the back." Archer strides closer as Clay brings the car to us and the wheels squeak against the floor. When it's at a stop, he opens the door at the same moment Clay opens his. "Get in," he commands me. "I'll walk around the other side."

"Ms. Swanson." Officer Clay holds the door for me with a sweet, boyish smile that might play in my mind for the rest of my life. His smooth-shaven skin, and his perfect teeth, except for one slightly off-center canine tooth. His eyes are friendly, and his demeanor matches. Unlike the detectives who surround me with constant vigilance. "Watch your head—"

The thunder of gunshots rings out and echoes off the walls like cannon blasts. Officer Clay's smile turns to a grimace that'll haunt me forever, and the heat of something painful passes by my arm. But it's his body, so young and strong, faltering, that my mind locks on to. "Oh shit!" I throw my hands up and cover my mouth. I don't know why. I don't know what it could possibly achieve. But it helps because Drake's heavy hand slams onto the back of my neck to shove me down. And if my mouth wasn't guarded when I hit the door, I might've lost teeth.

"Get down!" he booms as Clay collapses, shooting off a round in a direction I'll never see. Drake crushes me to the concrete floor despite my bad leg and pulls the trigger twice more. Three times.

"Officer down!" Fletcher shouts into his radio. He skids to a stop so his leg slams into mine and his cologne fills my lungs, then he flips Officer Clay to his back and presses his hands to the cop's shoulder.

To a gun wound.

"Oh god." Tears burn my eyes and my heart thunders. But I swallow the lump in my throat and push myself for calm. To slow my breathing and focus. "We need to pack his wound."

My hands shake, but I crawl closer and remember the clinics I've watched over the last few years at school. The classwork I've already completed. I've already got a lot of the theory down for what my future holds, so I yank my hoodie off despite the cold of the underground parking lot and press it over Detective Fletcher's crimson hands. "We need to stop the bleeding."

"You're a medical student, right?" He takes his hands from beneath mine and presses them on top to add pressure. "You can help him?"

"Yes. No!" I panic when he pushes to his knees and turns with his gun to shoot off a round. I don't know how many people shoot *at* us. I don't know how many guns point my way. But I do know that if I wasn't here, neither would they. "We need to leave so the doctors can come down and get him."

Drake!” I twist my head to find the man standing over me. His feet on either side of my body, so he stands directly above me. I hold the hoodie against Clay’s wound and focus on the fact it’s not bleeding through yet. He’s hurt, but he won’t die of blood loss.

Yet.

Grabbing Drake’s pants leg, I give it a tug, though I know it’s not safe for him to take his eyes off those who attack us. “We have to get him in the elevator and upstairs.”

“They’re coming.” He squeezes off another round, this time hitting his mark, as the dull thud of metal piercing skin makes my stomach jump. He grabs me by the arm and yanks me to my feet so my shoulder screams and threatens to detach. My hands leave Clay’s body. The hoodie lies listlessly on the man’s chest, and bright red stains my fingers. My palms. “Malone!” he shouts, slamming the back door shut on the car and pushing the driver’s door wider. “You and Fletcher need to get Clay inside. Pick the shooter up and toss him in, too.” Then he shoves me through the driver’s door so I land with a slam that makes the scream in my arm turn into the real thing.

Out loud and gurgled because it hurts so much.

My leg sings with a torment that makes me sick, and the steel bar in my thigh fights against a bone that wants to bend.

“Get in, Aurora!” Drake picks up my legs and pushes me across to the passenger seat, then he smacks his palm to the back of my head and shoves me down just as a bullet whizzes through the windshield and *fwop*’s through the headrest to blow out the other side. “Stay down.” He pulls his door shut and attempts to turn the engine over. Though it’s already going, so the car groans against its abuse and threatens to give out completely. “I’m taking her out,” he calls through the window to Fletcher. “Secure the shooter.” Slamming the gear stick into drive and stomping on the accelerator, Drake has the car’s wheels spinning on the smooth concrete for so long, that I worry we’ll never move.

But once the tires find traction, we take off like a shot. My body flings around, front and back, as he starts and slows.

Side-to-side as he brings us around tight corners and speeds through the artificial light toward freedom.

He drives with his weapon still in his hand and blood on his fingers, but he wrenches us around a corner and flings us up the ramp and onto the hospital driveway.

Nausea rolls in my belly and my head smarts when it raps against the dash. But the bullets stop. The roaring booms. The smashing glass, too. Drake speeds through Copeland streets and earns honking horns for his aggressive maneuvers, but when silence hangs except for the soft drone of the radio I had no clue was even on, he reaches across and touches the back of my neck.

Just like he did in my mom's hospital room.

And just like I did then, I startle now and turn my head with tears in my eyes. "Is he going to live?" I use my knees to rest my head and softly cry like an idiot.

It's so dumb that I want to graduate medical school and save people's lives. Yet, every time something bad happens, I cry and run and do nothing at all that could be considered helpful.

"Officer Clay," I clarify when he only studies me between glimpses of traffic. "I don't think it was a fatal wound," I rasp. "And he wasn't hemorrhaging. But I don't..." I swallow the lump in my throat before it turns to vomit. "I don't know."

"I don't know the answer to that." Carefully, so gently, he squeezes his fingers around my neck and pulls me up so I can cautiously peek through the windows at slow-moving, city traffic. Those who putter along around us would have no clue where we came from. None would have any idea they're so near people who were involved in a shoot-out a moment ago.

He continues to guide me up until my back is straight and my eyes sprint from him, to the car in front of us, to the car to my right. Panic slices through my veins and makes it hard to focus, but with another squeeze of his fingers, he brings me back to him. "I could lie," he murmurs, "and tell you Clay is young and strong and he's probably gonna be fine."

“But you’re always straight with me,” I rasp desperately. “Right? No matter what.”

“Right.” Finally, he releases my neck and picks up the police radio instead. “So instead of placating you with a lie, I’ll make a promise to find out what’s happening. And whatever it is, I promise to tell you.”

“He took the bullet that was meant for me.” Horrified, I bring my bloody hand up and cup my quivering lips. “He’s taller than me, and it passed through his shoulder. He wasn’t supposed to be there, but he popped up and took a bullet that probably would have hit my throat. Or my face.” Fresh, fat tears burst from my eyes and soak my cheeks. “It was meant for me, Drake. And now he might be dying.”

“This is Special Agen—” almost as horrified as me, Drake glances my way and swallows his words, “Um... Detective Banks. Requesting an update on the Copeland City Hospital incident.”

“Banks!” Archer Malone’s voice is distinctive to me now. Easily picked out of a crowd. “You’ve got Swanson?”

“I’ve got her. Update on Clay?”

“Heading up to emergency now. Trauma doc isn’t freaking out. Vic is conscious and talking. Fletch apprehended one of three shooters. He’s wounded too. On his way to the ER.”

“What about the other two?” I ask. I study the side of Drake’s face and swallow. “He said three shooters.”

But instead of hitting the button on the side of the radio and asking, he looks to me and studies my eyes. “They’re dead.”

“D-dead?” My voice cracks on that one word. “*Deceased* dead?”

“Deceased dead,” he confirms. “Malone took one, and I got the other.” Pressing the button, he speaks, “I don’t have to remind you to arrest the perp and have guards on him around the clock, do I, Malone?”

“Nah, I think we’re good,” he drawls. “Not my first day on the job. I’ll update on both men’s status as it changes. The witness?”

Drake looks at me again, narrowing his eyes the longer he stares. “Green around the edges. Lots of blood, but I’m not sure where hers ends and Clay’s starts. She’s conscious and alert. You and Fletch?”

“Unharmred. Keep us updated on the girl.”

“Yep.” He sets the radio back in its cradle and brings us around a corner. “We’re gonna drive for a bit,” he tells me. “And we’re gonna make sure no one is following us.” He takes another corner and watches the rear-view mirror. “Then we’re going back to the house and making sure you’re not hit.”

“I’m not.” I look down at my shaking, stained hands, and stammer, “I-I’m fine.” But then I look around the car and exhale an aching sigh. “Lost my cane again.”

“You go through those as often as I go through boxer shorts.” He rolls his eyes and watches the road. But his lips curl into a grin. He shot men today. Killed one and wounded another. He was being shot *at*. Saved my life. Met a dying woman. Forgot his title and potentially flew back five years in his life to the man he was before he was a regular detective and his best friend was still alive. And yet, his lips curl up now. “I’ll get Malone to find you another. Are you in pain?” He casts a glance along my body. “Anything from today?”

“No.” It’s only a small lie. An omission, really. My leg and the rod inside have nothing to do with today. It always hurts. So I shake my head and drop it back to rest against the seat.

I forgot about the bullet that passed through until the fraying on the headrest touches my scalp. But I close my eyes and ignore it. I can’t deal with that right now. Or with the reality I can’t seem to escape. The men who want me dead. The one murder I witnessed that now, I can’t get away from.

“I’m so friggin’ tired,” I sigh. But then I open my eyes and look at Drake. “My mom?”

“Has guards on her door. They’ll be there twenty-four-seven, and after today, she’ll probably remain in maternity, purely because it’s easier to keep her safe.” He checks the rear-view mirror again for just a beat before ducking into a tight alleyway and coming out the other side. “The hospital will be on lockdown right now, but the patients inside won’t have any clue about it. Staff are well-trained, and everywhere except the ER will be locked tighter than a super-max prison.” Setting his gun on his lap and reaching across, he taps my knee and smiles when I glance toward his face. “Let’s go home,” he murmurs. “I need to know that’s Clay’s blood and none is yours.”

Drake

I pull into the long driveway of Malone's family home and watch in the rearview mirror as the gates close and no one else slides in after us. We run the risk, of course, of having intruders help themselves in by climbing the fences. Or maybe they slipped in while we were away.

But the security systems already in place have to be enough to keep us alive, and the fact no one on the planet knows we're here except me, Rory, and two cops I don't entirely like or trust, means that if our safety is blown, I'll at least know who talked.

Then I'll kill them just as easily as I killed a man today for aiming a gun at Aurora Swanson.

Bringing the car to a stop and lamenting the broken windshield, I cut the engine and take the keys an officer now fighting for his life in surgery placed in the ignition.

"Let's go inside," I murmur, pocketing the keys and pushing out of my door. I hold my gun in one hand and keep my eyes searching. Surveying. Watching, to make sure Vallejo doesn't have access to sharpshooters, too. Stepping around to the passenger side, I open Rory's door and remember she lost her stick.

The blood on her hands and face makes my heart quiver. Like a fucking horror film. All my nightmares dressed up in a girl with a limp and a too-short shirt that shows off her navel. Casting one last glance around the massive compound that is Malone real estate, I lean in closer and scoop my free hand around her torso to anchor my palm at her opposite hip.

Hitching her up and biting down the guilt I feel when she hisses in pain, I gently pull her from the car and help her to her feet.

“Put your arm over my shoulder,” I mumble, unable to do it myself without letting go of either her or my weapon. I can’t release either, so I hold her close and take most of her weight. When she reaches across to hold on, I start through the second, smaller gate that shields the door. “I’m gonna put you in the shower, okay? I’ll grab you a chair so you can sit down, but then I need you to make sure you’re not hit.”

“Did you like my mom?”

I don’t know if she heard me or not. Or if she’s in shock, or simply that she wants to talk about something else, but I half-carry her through the gate and unlock the front door, then once in the foyer I kick the door shut until the locks snick. Finally, I holster my gun and simply scoop her into my arms. It’s easier to actually carry her than it is to carry her and pretend I’m not. The weight distribution is wrong the other way, and the fact we have to go up a flight of stairs has my patience running thin.

So I hold her tight and hate how she tucks her face into my neck. I hate how she cuddles in close and weeps as we move.

I fucking hate that she trusts me to carry her upstairs, and doesn’t make a single peep at my audacity.

“I like your mom a lot, Little Bird.” I don’t focus on her too-few pounds in my arms. Or the way her hips and backside are boney and not nearly as filled out as they should be. I ignore how she smells of lavender and honey and other sweet scents and focus instead on the tang of blood in her hair. The helplessness in which she clings to me.

She’s a witness. She’s in danger.

She’s twenty-one-fucking-years-old, and I... am not.

I hate most of all that she’s the most beautiful woman I’ve ever known in my entire life. That she’s smart and brave and witty. That she’s her worst critic, and so fucking hard on herself, I can’t stand to let anyone else pile on.

I hate that she's not for me. Not in this lifetime, and not in the next one either. And I hate that never, in the history of ever, have I not hit on a woman I considered beautiful before.

"Your mom's eyes are super unique." And *exactly* the same as yours. "Strong family genes?"

She releases a soft, pathetic whimper as I crest the top of the stairs and head into the bathroom in the hall.

We've been gone for hardly more than an hour. It felt like a lifetime, but really, just a speck of time in our day, proven by the warmth still here from her last shower. By the humidity still in the air.

Coming to a stop at the massive glass door and gently releasing her legs, I set her on her feet, but keep hold of her weight as I reach into the shower and flip the water on.

"Can you stand on your own for a sec?" I look down and find the top of her head. Her eyes avoiding mine as I pull back just far enough to see her. "Hey?" I touch her chin and bring her gaze up. "Can you stand while I grab a chair?"

She takes her weight from me, as though to prove what she can't say out loud, and when I step back, she turns to the shower anyway and hobbles in, fully dressed.

"Shit." I don't want to leave her. Don't want to risk her falling. But I sprint out of the bathroom anyway and into her bedroom to find an antique wooden high-back dining-ish chair settled in the corner by an equally old dresser. Snatching it up and taking perverse pleasure in the knowledge I'm about to destroy a priceless antique, I bring it back to the bathroom and set it under the steaming spray Aurora waits beneath.

The water plasters her dark hair to her face and cheeks, while the stream flows red from her sneakers and into the drain.

Too much blood.

Too close to death.

"Sit down." I unholster my gun and set it on the vanity opposite the shower, then kicking my boots off, I turn and step

in behind her, fully dressed and without a single fuck to give for the clothes I'll have to launder later. "Let me help you."

"Why do you call me Little Bird?" Curious, and potentially dancing with shock, she grabs the hem of her shirt and brings it up to expose her belly and chest.

I shoot my gaze to the ceiling, my heart thundering against the walls of my diaphragm and my fingers itching to help her. But my instincts scream, *don't fucking touch*.

"I'm wearing underwear, Detective." She drops her shirt, so it lands with a *splat*. "People expose more at the beach, so you can relax. Oh," her voice changes and lifts an octave or two. "Guess I got shot a little bit, huh?"

"What?" I wrench my head down and search frantically for whatever it is she sees. I follow her gaze, past her long lashes and down to the meaty part of her upper arm where a long gash slices right along the outside. "Jesus." I push her into the chair and kneel to get closer and inspect her wound.

The shower rains down over my back and soaks my shirt until it sticks to my skin. But even with the water running over her arm, Rory's wound barely bleeds. "Shit. You got shot today!"

She snickers, her soft breath feathering against my cheek, our faces insanely close as we inspect the same part of her body. "I got *scratched* by a bullet," she murmurs. "I think that's the more accurate term for what happened. Hardly even counts."

"It counts." I push her skin back together, though the wound isn't even deep enough, in my mind, to warrant sutures. "A couple inches to the left and it would have pierced your fucking heart."

"You mean like it pierced Officer Clay's?" She loses her smile and studies me with glistening eyes instead. "Like that?"

"Didn't get his heart. He's gonna be just fine." Looking down between us, I find her hands clasped together, her fingers interlaced and fidgety. Since I guess we're showering

together anyway, I reach up and pump a dollop of soap into my palm, then I take hers between mine and start washing.

I need to know the blood is Clay's and not hers. I need to know it washes away.

Soap bubbles lather between our hands, making my massaging fingers easier to glide. To clean. "I call you Little Bird, because... well..." I glance up from my work and look into her eyes. "I dunno. Because you're young." That one is easy. A quantifiable reason in my mind. "Because you're small. You're no shorter than the average woman. So it's not that. But you're small, anyway. Too thin, Aurora. You take up too little space in this world."

"It's called a college diet," she mutters. Almost whispers. "Gotta make the dollars stretch."

"You're afraid," I push on. "You have every reason to be. Bad things are happening to you, and your survival instincts are responding exactly the way they should."

"I'm a coward." She gently pulls her hands from mine and rinses the soap away under the spray. "I saw a man get killed, and I ran away instead of helping."

"If you'd stayed," I lean to the right when she'd rather study her hands instead of me. But when that doesn't work, I take her chin between my fingers and drag her back. "If you'd stayed for even a second longer than you did, you'd be dead. That's called survival instinct, not cowardice."

"Bullets were flying today, and again, I did nothing. I dropped to the ground and screamed about it."

"I *pushed* you down," I argue, fully prepared to counter every argument she can find. Because I know she's brave. I know she's so much more than she lets herself believe. "I literally shoved you down, Aurora. You did what I asked, and then you saved Officer Clay's life by packing his wound."

"I cried about it."

"So?" I look to the ceiling and shake my head in frustration. "Some people cry, Rory. Some swear. Some hit things." I bring my eyes down again and snatch back her

delicate hands. “We all have emotional responses to emotional situations. Just because the results look different doesn’t mean we aren’t all reacting in the same physiological way.”

“You react by shooting back and standing in front of me. I react by running away and crying like a baby.”

“And when someone is hurt,” I bite back, “I shoot. That makes it revenge. *You* help by packing wounds and keeping someone alive, which is so much fucking nobler than what I do.”

“You’re comparing apples and oranges,” she grumbles. “All to make me feel better about being a coward.”

“No, Rory. You’re comparing apples and oranges, all to make yourself feel like shit for being human.”

I release her hands and reach past her face to carefully tug the elastic from her hair. Long brown locks, already wet from the shower, make it difficult because I don’t want to pull or bring her pain. But she remains still anyway. Patient as I drag the elastic down and let it fall to the tiled floor. Pumping shampoo into my palm, I lather up and reach past her again to work it through her long locks. “I call you Little Bird because I feel like you’re gonna fly away,” I breathe. “Like we’re not supposed to catch wild birds and expect them to stay. I kinda feel that way about you.”

“Like I’m gonna fly away?” She closes her eyes as I edge closer and angle the shower spray to wash the shampoo out. Red runs with it, proving what I already suspected: blood in her hair. “You think I have that much freedom?”

Curious, my brows pinch in thought. “Do you not feel free? I mean,” I pull back just far enough to see her face. “Apart from this week with Vallejo’s men targeting you.”

She breathes out a soft laugh and flutters her lashes open. “I’m the least free person I know. Second only to my mother.”

“But you have the world at your feet.” I set my elbows on my thighs and study the droplets of water that sit in her lashes. The kaleidoscope effect the water has on her multi-colored eyes. “You’re twenty-one-years-old, Aurora. You’re about to

enter medical school. You have no boyfriend to hold you down. No kids to slow you down. No dead-end job trapping you in a cycle of survival. You can have the husband and kids and family life later,” I murmur, “whenever you want it. But for now,” I shake my head, trying, but failing to see what she sees, “I don’t understand how you’re stuck.”

“I’m in the middle of a six-figure degree,” she mumbles, “with student loans coming out of my ass, and just enough ramen in my home to see me through to the end of the week. And that doesn’t even factor in the men who were shot in my living room two nights ago. My mother is dying, and no matter what I say, or do, or how hard I wish for a different outcome, that’s not going away. My father’s love language is money and status, and he uses both to trap me. I have no one on this planet who cares about me.” Her eyes water now, but not from the shower. “No one. Once my mother is gone, that’s it for me. There’s no one left. And that’s not to say I want people to feel sorry for me.” Her voice shakes, tears falling from her lashes to join the droplets on her cheeks. “I’m not going to beg for a family, Drake. But that doesn’t mean the loneliness isn’t crippling all the same. Soon,” she presses, “really, really soon, I’m going to be the only Swanson woman left. I’m going to spend my life alone. Working. Helping people. Hopefully *not* being shot at. And that’s all okay, because I don’t mind my own company. But when I stop to think of it all, when I sit down and really take stock of my life, it’s difficult not to feel like one, teeny-tiny drop in the ocean. And sometimes, that knowledge makes me feel too small. Too insignificant.”

“You’re not insignificant.” I set my thumbs beneath her eyes and swipe the mess away to clear her cheeks. “You’re smart, Aurora. And compassionate. And brave. You see yourself as one, tiny drop. But I see you as the entire fucking ocean.”

Her eyes flicker to mine and stop. Red and swollen and so unbelievably sad, they make my heart ache.

“You’re right,” I continue, “the ocean is huge. And enveloping. It’s powerful, Aurora. It’s where men go to drown, and waves crash down and wipe out whatever is in its path.”

“I feel like life is the ocean,” she whispers. “And I’m always being dumped on.”

“Well...” I push strands of hair off her face and slide them behind her ear. *Walk away, Drake Banks. Get the fuck out of this shower and walk.*

But is that what I do?

“If you saw yourself the way I see you, you’d know you’re the whole ocean, Little Bird. And the sky you fly in. And the earth you control. You’re the wind I feel on my skin. And the sun that prickles on my arms when we step outside. You’re the air in my lungs,” I push on, knowing I’m breaking all the rules of protecting a witness by telling her this. “I swear to Christ, Rory, if Vallejo gets you and I don’t stop him, then you’re the death I won’t survive.”

“But why?” she whines, tears streaming from her eyes. “You don’t even know me. I’m a friggin’ nobody, Drake. A tiny speck in this universe no one cares to know. And soon, I’ll be a nobody with no family left.” She reaches up and wraps her hands around my wrists. “The smart thing for you to do would be to wonder what’s wrong with me. Why am I twenty-one and have no one in my life? That’s a million red flags if I ever saw them.”

“And yet,” I stroke her cheek and know, if Malone or anyone else saw me, they’d kick me off this case faster than I could take a breath and fill my lungs. “An entire firehouse checked in on you while you were in surgery last year because they cared about you. Lieutenant Matteo Ruiz, the firefighter who pulled you off that cliff, sat in your hospital room all day and half the night, just to watch over you. The chief of police texts me a dozen times a day now that I’m in Copeland, wanting to know that you’re okay. The hospital staff worked with Malone and Fletcher today to get you in to see your mom. They moved heaven and earth, and a sickly woman, just so you could have that time. They locked down an entire fucking hospital for you, Rory. Just because your dad is a piece of shit, and just because your pussy-ass ex-boyfriend is a piece of shit, doesn’t mean *you’re* a piece of shit.”

I slide my tongue forward to suckle the drops of water from my lips. I don't mean for it to be anything more than that. I definitely don't expect her to notice. But when her eyes drop to the movement and her lips roll between her teeth, my cock twitches in my jeans and begs for something I can't have.

I can never have.

But fuck if my body will tell me no.

"It says I'm a loser," she rasps, nibbling on her bottom lip like she knows the action tempts me. Like she knows it sends me wild with need. "It says I make poor choices."

"It says you take in strays," I tease, edging closer, though I know I shouldn't. Our faces rest six-inches apart. So close, and yet, an eternity apart. "It says you take in those who don't deserve you. And instead of placing blame where blame belongs in the laps of assholes, you internalize it."

"Drake..."

"Those are your daddy issues," I joke, smiling. Which only makes her eyes drop to the movement again. "He was always too stupid and too fucked up to love you the way you deserved. So now you have that 'love me' energy some girls get when they're deprived."

"Red flags," she rasps, tightening her hold on my wrists. "*Pick me girls* are the worst."

"Only the annoying, toxic kind. You, though..." *Walk away, Drake Banks! Run away before it's too late.* "You're not those kind, Little Bird. Not even close."

Fuck me. Fuck her. Fuck everything, dammit. Because her eyes flutter closed and her body inches closer to mine. She holds my wrists like she's afraid of falling, and when we're just an inch apart, she puckers her lips and makes the softest, sweetest, sexiest sound in the back of her throat. My cock strains painfully in my jeans, and my heart thunders in my chest.

My mind screams, *yes fucking please. Let me have you. Let me keep you.* But my training has me turning my face just as her lips make contact. Her eyes whip open in stunned

disbelief. Her vulnerability, making way for rage. And humiliation. And horror.

I close my eyes and drop my head. Because I know, I just made a huge mistake, and yet, kissing her would have been a mistake, too. Taking her in this shower, a mistake. Taking possession of this beautiful—defenseless—woman, a mistake. “I’m sorry.” I open my eyes and study the drain instead of meeting her gaze. “I can’t do that.”

“Oh my god.” She yanks back like I’ve punched her in the face. Her hands coming up to cover her mouth. Her eyes firing with a potent mix of mortification and *I’m gonna kill you* rage. “Oh my god.”

“Don’t—”

“I’m so fucking dumb.” She shoves up to stand and slaps the shower off so the water stops and an icy chill settles deep in my bones.

She still wears her jeans. Her shoes. Her socks and underwear.

Her long hair dangles to tickle her elbows, and her eyes burn as she looks down at me on my knees. She’s a fucking goddess, and I gladly bow down at her feet.

But not like this. Not when she’s scared and embarrassed.

“Forget this happened.” She shoves the shower door open and limps out on wet tile that threatens to send her sprawling. But she snatches up a dry towel and presses it to her face. Her shoulders bow, and a fiery blush colors her chest and neck. Just an iota beneath the surface of rage sits a girl mortified, but she clings to her anger and tears the towel from her face with jerky movements.

Sniffing, though that sound is angry too, she scrubs the towel over her hair to collect the dripping moisture before wrapping it around her torso and opening the bathroom door.

I sit back on my haunches and breathe. My cock settles once more, my hormones back under control. A million tiny paper cuts of regret sting all over my body as the woman I’m supposed to protect is now alone. In the hall. In her room.

She's safe, and we can both afford a minute of separation. But fuck, the fact we're apart now is exactly the reason I can't cross that line and be with her.

When emotions mix and I have to protect her from a man who wants her dead, shit gets messed up. Blind spots grow larger, and my ability to do what needs to be done for her becomes more difficult.

I need to focus, and obsessing over her tight frame, wrapped in loose jeans and oversized hoodies, is not how I do that.

But breaking her heart? Humiliating her?

"Fuck."

That's not the right thing to do, either.

Rory

Minutes feel like hours, and hours drag on into eternity.
We were awake and moving around the city before the sun had even come up, and now we're back at the Malone compound, but I don't leave my room for as long as the sun shines.

Sure, I'm pouting.

Yep, I'm mortified.

Absolutely, I got swept away in what I thought was romance and tried to kiss a man I had no business kissing.

Will I stay in my room until I die?

If I'm lucky.

But you know what? Maybe I'm the stupid one, and maybe my lack of experience in the big, bad world set me up to think something was happening when it really wasn't. But I swear he looked at me like there was more. He said things, and he meant others, and they were for me to read between the lines. I might be gaslighting myself, and shit, I'm so good at that anyway. It's a byproduct of my daddy issues, no doubt. But fuck that asshole, because I'm not so stupid as to make up an entire *thing* in my mind if there weren't seeds planted first.

Angry, I shove up on my bed and ignore the stabbing pain pulsing down through my part-steel leg. Setting my feet on the floor and coming up to stand, I fix my jeans so they sit on my hips without twisting, and tug my fresh, new hoodie down to make sure I'm covered properly. Then I turn with the intention to storm through this house with the rage of a spited twenty-

one-year-old. But the fact I have to limp-hobble means my storm is more of a gentle breeze.

Whatever gets my point across.

“Drake Banks!” I shout loud enough that even if he’s in the backyard, he’ll hear me. But when I stomp-shuffle my way to the door and into the hall, I come to a screeching stop and find the man sitting on the cold, hard tile. His ass, likely numb from the unforgiving floor. His knees up, and his elbows perched on top. He drops his head back lazily and looks up at me through infuriatingly pretty eyes.

He swallows in the newfound silence, his Adam’s apple bobbing in his throat, visible to me. But his eyes slide from the top of my unbrushed hair, down to the bottoms of socked feet. When I guess he’s decided I’m safe and in one piece, he brings his gaze back up and locks on to my eyes. “Yeah?”

“You’re an asshole.” *Great comeback, Gentle Breeze. You got this.*

Charging away to the sound of him scrambling to his feet, I continue along the hall in search of food and water. I’ve hidden long enough, and I’m done feeling like a fool. “You turned from me, Drake, and you did that so you could stand atop your pedestal and act like some kind of fucking martyr.” I press my hands to the walls to help carry my weight, then to the staircase banister as I start down. “You did that so you could feel good about yourself.”

He follows just two-feet behind me. “Trust me, I don’t feel good at all.”

“I’m not an idiot.” I stop and twist my neck to find him close enough that his breath touches my lips. His nose, almost touching mine. “I’m not that stupid, Drake. And I’m definitely not desperate for a man’s attention.”

He slides his tongue out and wets his bottom lip. *Damn me for following the movement with my eyes.* “I never said you were.”

“No, but your actions imply it.” I turn again and continue down. “You say all that shit about beautiful eyes. And how

smart I am. How brave. How utterly boring I am.” Shaking my head, I stomp down one stair at a time and use the pain in my movements to power my rage. “You said things about me, Drake Banks. And you stare a lot. And you step in front of bullets for me. And you promised my mom you’d protect me forever. And I swear,” I twirl at the bottom step, keeping hold of the banister or risking my ass slamming to the floor. “I know it’s your job. I know you’re paid to do this. But don’t you dare look into my eyes and tell me you act like this with every person you’ve been assigned.”

“No,” he rasps, still on the last step and towering over me. “I wasn’t assigned to you. My captain doesn’t even know where I am.”

“Exactly! This!” I snap. “The ‘*hey there, Little Bird,*’ and the ‘*I’m here for you*’ and ‘*I didn’t like being in the DEA because I never get to clock out, but here I am, sleeping in a house with you and not clocking out either.*’” I spin on my heels and move toward the kitchen. “I’m not some vapid idiot, Drake. I’m not clueless to the world. And I’m not *looking* for a man to pay attention to me. But I’ll be damned if I let you skate by and pretend this is *just* work.”

“What do you want from me, Aurora?” He stomps in my wake and follows me into the kitchen. “What?”

“I want you to admit whatever the hell is going on inside your head! It doesn’t mean I’ll jump your damn bones.” I grab a box of cereal from the pantry, then a carton of milk from the fridge, slamming them both down on the countertop. “I want you to be straight with me. Because you promised that, too. You’ll gleefully tell me when a man is coming to kill me, and you’ll call out Detective Malone for skirting the truth about things. But this one thing, where you get to play both sides of the line but pull back like that makes you a hero, is you not being straight with me.” I press my hands to the counter and glare into his eyes. “I am not a stupid little girl. And I am not a brainless twat who can’t read cues. You look at me like you want me, but when I call you out on it, you act like I’m crazy.”

“You want me to be straight with you?” His tone is glacial and cutting. Mean, and just dark enough to make me wonder if

I've made a grave mistake. "You want me to remind you that I'm thirty-seven-years-old, and you're twenty-one? That's *sixteen years*, Aurora. Sixteen! You want me to remind you that you're vulnerable right now? Being chased by killers, and holding your mom's hand while she withers away. And I'm the cop keeping you safe. That's not just an imbalance of power. That's two!"

"I am not a child!" I tear the box of Cheerios open and pour them into my bowl until it overflows. "You are not a fifty-year-old creep grooming a little girl."

"I'm old enough to date your mother!"

"So do it." I pour milk until it sloshes over the side of the bowl and toss a spoon in as well, making more of a mess. "You think she's beautiful. Do it."

"I think *you* are beautiful," he growls, stalking forward and placing his hands on the counter opposite where I stand. "I think you're the most beautiful woman I've ever known. I think you're smart. And silly. And resilient. I think your red flag isn't that you have no one, Aurora. But the fact you can laugh with a fire crew saving you, while your fucking femur is stabbed through your leg."

I clamp my lips shut and bring my eyes up to study his.

"I think the fact you stayed in that hospital longer than you needed, all so you could heal and show your mother a girl who could walk again, so she wouldn't worry, a red flag. I think your insistence on being the hardest done by in the room is your red flag."

"Fuck you." I turn and toss the milk back into the fridge, slamming the door shut again so bottles rattle inside. "I *am* hard done by! Every fucking minute of my life is a battle against a system set up to smack me down. I don't whine about it. I get on with things and get through."

"That's what I'm saying!" he booms. "Not that you complain about bad shit. But that you are the most hard done by, and still, you push on like you're the fucking Chosen One and the world would implode if you didn't."

“So you’re mad I *don’t* whine?” I grab a stool with jerky movements and tug it closer so I can sit down. “You *want* to spend time with a whiny little bitch?”

“I want you to acknowledge how fucking strong you are. I want you to not be targeted by a killer. I want you *not* to be the woman I need to protect. And when life is normal and we happen to meet in a bar, I want you to like me, too.” Frustrated, he reaches up and shoves a hand through his hair. “I want you, Aurora. I would do anything to get a fucking taste.”

My heart thunders in my chest, a staccato that stings and pushes blood faster through my veins. “Y-you do?”

“Don’t act stupid now, Little Bird.” He stalks around the counter and stops only when his thighs touch my knees and his hand grips the side of my face. “You already know. You see the way I watch you. You hear the shit my dumbass self can’t help but speak.” Bending, and stopping two-inches from my face, his cologne settles deep in my lungs and his eyes flicker between mine. “You *know*, Aurora. But for as long as guns are pointed your way, there ain’t shit either of us can do about it.”

“You could put me out of my misery,” I whisper, nerves thickening in my throat. “You could touch me, and I can touch you. You can have me. Because I’m right here, and I’m not crazy about the things I see.”

“You’re not crazy.” He inches closer, his breath fanning my lips. “You’re not wrong.” Another inch, so I can almost *feel* him. “But I won’t have you until this is over and you’re safe.”

“Banks?” The front door opens and shuts again, startling me in my seat until I knock my cereal bowl and send milk sloshing over the edge. “Everything under control here?”

“Yeah.” Drake releases me and steps away just as Detective Malone strides into the room and stops to study my face. No doubt, I look stunned. Perhaps like I’ve witnessed another shooting today. But that tracks just fine for him, because he has no clue Drake is an utter bastard, or that my stomach whooshes with nerves that have nothing to do with

Gregory Vallejo. “Took your time getting here,” Drake continues, completely unaffected by whatever it was we just experienced. He opens the fridge door and takes out a soda. “You here to watch her?”

My eyes shoot wide. “What?”

“Yeah.” Archer comes to settle on the opposite side of the counter and rests his arms on top. “You get two hours,” he continues. “Then I’ve got somewhere to be.”

“Your private life is none of my concern.” Shutting the fridge and flashing a tormenting smile, Drake sets his soda on the counter and checks his weapon instead. “Hospital or station?”

“Hospital, under police guard.” Like ping-pong balls being tossed back and forth between the men, Drake and Archer seem to pick up a conversation I’ve missed the first half of. “Officer Clay is out of surgery, by the way.” Archer gifts me with a small smile. “Bullet went straight through and missed all the important bits.”

“Yeah,” Drake drawls, “straight through and clipped Aurora.”

Archer’s eyes blow wide as he shoves up from his chair. “What?”

“Just scratched me,” I murmur, reaching across to touch the mark that’ll scar eventually and leave me with a memory. “I’m not even bleeding.”

He looks to Drake, as though he doesn’t accept my word for it. Which is both infuriating and, well... no. That about covers things. It’s infuriating.

“Just a scratch,” he agrees. “No stitches needed. Not bleeding.” He slips his gun back into his holster and nods down at my cereal. “Guess that’s your dinner?”

I narrow my eyes to dangerous slits. “Yes.”

“Great. I’ll be home later.” He looks to Archer in goodbye, then he stalks out the door and just... leaves me here. No discussion. No understanding. No nothing.

“Looks like you guys are getting along.” Like it’s all a game to him, Archer pops up from his chair as the front door slams and a car engine roars to life, then wandering around to the pantry, he peeks inside for something to eat. “He as much an asshole as I imagine he is?”

“You have no clue,” I growl. Picking up my spoon before my cereal goes soggy, I dip it into the milk and scowl. “He’s getting worse with time.”

“That’s what I thought.” He steps out of the pantry again with a bag of Doritos and a shit-eating grin. “Did you know his father is high-level DEA? He’s a fucking machine with accolades that just don’t seem possible enough for his age.”

“Did you know I don’t care?” I push up to stand and grab my bowl, and hobbling out of the room and into the one at the front of the house with high-back chairs and an unused fireplace, I settle in and wait.

And wonder.

Drake Banks is an asshole, and his assholeishness is making me an asshole.

Goodie.

Drake

IT'S STANDARD OPERATING PROCEDURE.

I stalk back into the hospital I sped away from earlier today, but without Rory beside me I move with ease. Without fear. Without the crippling worry that a bullet is gonna zing by and snuff the life right out of her stunning kaleidoscope eyes.

I exit the elevator and head along the hall. Pulling up to a nurse with a flash of my badge, I ask for directions to the room of the man who was shot in the parking garage today.

Not Clay. The brave, *age-appropriate* officer who turned his back on danger to smile at sweet Aurora. But the other fucker. The one who was shooting at her.

I killed his buddy, and now I'm taking a minute with him. But while I stalk the halls, making my way in his direction, I stop by a supply cart and hit pay dirt, finding two little white boxes with labeling that works just fine for what I want.

Slipping them into my pocket and showing a smile to the orderly who wanders by, I head toward the police-guarded door and flash my badge a second time. "Officer. Is Detective Fletcher here?"

"Yes, sir." He straightens his spine and stiffens his arms. "Detective Fletcher is inside this room."

"Anyone else in there?"

"Apart from the patient?" he asks. "No, Detective."

"Excellent. Stay here and don't let anyone in until I come back out again."

The cop loses a little bit of his composure, his brows pinching tighter. “Sir?”

“Not the nurses,” I press. “Not the doctors. Not other cops. I’ll only be a few minutes.” I step past him and wrap my palm around the door handle, but pausing again, I lean back and smile at the curious, barely-out-of-the-academy uniformed officer. “No matter what you hear...” I raise a brow to make sure he’s listening, “No you didn’t.”

“Y-yes, sir.” He clears his throat and looks anywhere but in my eyes.

“Great.” Opening the door, I stride in under Detective Fletcher’s careful study. He lounges back in the visitor’s chair and simply watches our perp, but as I slam the door shut so the walls rattle, he sits a little straighter and keeps a close eye on me. “Mr. Enders?” I come up to the bed opposite of Fletch and smack my palm to the asshole’s chest right over where my bullet entered some eight hours ago.

Enders wakes with a gasp, attempts to shoot up in bed, and frantically searches his new reality for whatever the fuck is going on.

“Oh good.” I flash a wicked grin and spy the IV pole at the head of his bed. “You’re awake.” I take my hand from his body, but I allow my slow gaze to track along every inch not hidden by blankets. His puffy face, and swollen eyes. His blood-stained hands, and the bandages that cover his surgeon’s work. “You pulled through surgery, huh? I’m happy for you.”

“Wh-who are you?” His eyes flicker from me to Fletch. Back to me. Then down to the weapons holstered to my chest. “I don’t know—”

“You don’t remember me, Tommy?” Faux-offended, I set my hands on my hips and scowl. “We met a while back. Inside a dark club owned by a man named Gregory Vallejo.”

“You...” He searches my eyes. Which is how I know the very moment he recognizes me. His cheeks turn a ghostly white and his hands clench in search of... well, a gun, probably. “No.”

“Yes. You were there that night my best friend was murdered. Didn’t think I’d recognize you?” Dipping my hands into my pockets and taking out one of the two boxes, I tear it open and reveal a little glass vial of promethazine—AKA: Phenergan. Tossing the cardboard down and giving the bottle a little shake, I reach up for the bag hanging from the IV pole, dripping fluids into this asshole’s veins. I don’t know if the doctors are giving him pain meds. Could be antibiotics. Hell, could just be water. But I tear the tubing from his arm and put a stop to that anyway. Instead, I flick the cap from the bottle, pick a needle from the pile of supplies on the far wall, and keep an eye on Fletch as he slowly rises from his chair.

“Now, I’m gonna ask you some questions, Tommy.” I draw the contents of the vial into the syringe, then I attach the syringe to the tubing and meet the man’s eyes with a smirk. “It’s gonna be best for us all that you answer me.”

He attempts to rip his arm away, but the cuffs attached to the bed rail keep him exactly where I need him to be. “This isn’t legal,” he bellows, his eyes watering already. His heart pounding in panic. “Nurse!” he shouts. “Help me!”

“You can step out if you want, Detective Fletcher. Or you can stay.”

He slowly straightens his back and eyes me closely. “You gonna kill him?”

“No. I’m merely going to convince him to talk to me.” Bringing my gaze back to Tommy’s, I start pushing the new liquid into the tubing. “Where is Gregory Vallejo?”

He screams in pain, much like I knew he would. Phenergan, when given intravenously too quickly, will sting like the dickens and burn his veins like the fucking STD he is.

“Where is Vallejo? Answer me, asshole.”

“I don’t know! Stop.” He kicks and bounces in the bed so it sways on its legs and threatens to topple over. “I don’t know!”

“Who sent you down here today to shoot at that girl?” I push more liquid through the tubing and slam my palm to his

chest to keep him down. “Who sent you?”

“I don’t know! I don’t—” He screams in pain and howls when I won’t let up. “A dude. Greene. He’s a friend I’ve known since forever. He heard about what happened on Monday, he knew there was a bounty on her head. So he pulled me in to make money.”

I stop with the syringe and look to Fletch. “Greene one of our bodies?”

He inclines his head, telling me everything I need to know.

So I look down to Tommy again and continue feeding promethazine into his vein. “Greene’s dead, buddy. So now it’s on you to figure this out.”

“Stop!” He sobs. “Please stop.”

“Why is there a bounty on her head?”

“What?” He kicks out again and makes the bed groan in protest. “She saw the thing. The one with Lombardo.”

“But Vallejo has a million bodies stacked up under his name.” I empty my syringe into his arm and stare into his eyes with venom. “Why does he care so much about not going away for this one?”

“I don’t know. I don’t!” he screams when I drop my hand into my pocket to take out the next box of pain. “I don’t know, man. I just know that Vallejo’s been underground for years, right? *Gone*. I haven’t seen hide nor hair for five fucking years. Then this happens this week, and suddenly everyone is freaking out.”

“Why is everyone freaking out?” I take the box from my pocket anyway and tear it open with my teeth. “Why did Vallejo come out of hiding for Lombardo? Why does he have a price on the girl’s head when she poses no real threat?”

“I don’t know!”

I flip the cap off the bottle and bring my needle to the stopper. “He’s wanted for more crimes than I can count, Tommy. He’s been dead for five years. Why’d he come back out this week?”

“I don’t know,” he sobs, his eyes glued to the bottle and our filling needle. “I swear, I don’t know. I was out. Ever since that night in the club, I’ve been out. Far as I knew, Vallejo was dead, too. I’ve been good, Banks.”

“And yet,” I draw every last drop up through the needle and raise a brow, “there you were today, shooting at me and a girl who can’t defend herself.” I lower my hands and stare into his eyes. “She didn’t hurt you, Tommy.”

“It’s just money,” he cries. “Times are tough, and the price was right. What the fuck you expect me to do?”

“Not shoot at a girl who can’t shoot back!” I reconnect the syringe and tubing and push half the contents through in the space of a single second. It hurts enough to have his body almost levitating. His screams, louder than any in the maternity wards. “Who do you report to now that Greene is dead?”

“No one.” He curls in as far as his cuffed wrists allow and cries like a child. “There is no one.”

“But what about the payday? How will you get your money?”

“I won’t,” he whimpers. “She’s alive, and I got caught.” He burrows into his pillows and weeps. “I won’t survive the week anyway. Not now that the cops are in here talking to me.”

“Vallejo’ll think you’re snitching?” I question smugly. “He’ll know you talked. Do you want my protection now, Tommy?”

His eyes flicker open and stop on mine.

“After shooting at me?” I chuckle. “You want me to take care of you when I have a fellow officer with a bullet in his shoulder, and a witness with a bullet hole in her arm?”

Fletcher’s eyes widen with surprise at that small revelation. But I shake my head and lean closer to the piece of shit I hold no pity for. “You brought an automatic weapon into a hospital parking lot today, Tommy. You opened fire in a safe space, and you almost killed the girl I’ll kill to protect.” I slam

the last of the promethazine into his veins and straighten out as he screams. “There must be honor in war, or else, what the fuck are we even doing here?”

I pull the syringe from his tubing and replace it with whatever was supposed to be dripping in the first place, then pocketing my paraphernalia, I wink at Fletch and set my hands on my hips like I wasn’t just torturing a man. “Good to see you, Detective Fletcher. You handle well under pressure.”

“Uh...” He casts a glance toward the still-closed door. “Thanks?”

“Head on over to the safe house and keep an eye on your partner.” I step away from the bed and take out my phone. “Let them know I won’t be home for another hour yet.”

Stalking through the door and past a white-faced uniform, I continue into the hall and away from my crime scene. But I scroll the contacts in my phone and tap when a name I haven’t dialed in years pops up.

That’s not to say he hasn’t called me. We’ve talked, of course. There’s still a loyalty he demands. But not once, in all that time, have I reached out to him.

Hitting dial and bringing the phone to my ear, I stroll along the hallway and into the elevator at the end.

“Drake?” My father’s concerned tone cuts through any small talk and needles its way into my consciousness. He could just be a dad worried about his kid. Maybe he’s curious about the fact I’ve called for the first time in years. But chances are, he’s got something else going instead.

“Yeah,” I murmur since I’m not sure what else to say. “It’s me. I wanted to talk to you about Gregory Vallejo.”

Silence hangs for a loaded beat and drags on long enough for the elevator doors to open again on the maternity ward. Stepping out, I start in the direction I walked this morning.

“Henry?”

“What about him?”

I flash my badge at the uniforms on Eleanor's door, before stepping through and finding the woman asleep in her bed, curled in and small, scarily similar to how Aurora sleeps.

"You know he's back?" I lower my voice, so I don't startle the sleeping woman, and pulling out the chair Rory sat in earlier, I lower down and simply watch. "You heard?" I clarify.

"I heard about the hit in Copeland City, and that his name has come up. How do you know about it?"

"Because I'm in Copeland City," I respond easily, predictably pulling his attention and his breath to a stop. "The hit was made. The primary detectives caught my name rolled up in all his files, so they called me to ask questions. A girl witnessed the murder, and I just so happened to know the girl."

"So you hopped a plane and went off to find him yourself," he bites out. "Didn't think to inform your team and brief them on the new intel?"

"Did you call and brief me?" I settle back in my chair and lift my ankle to rest it on the opposite knee. "You'd heard, Henry. You knew something was brewing. My phone didn't ring with your name on the screen."

"We haven't confirmed his involvement yet." He gives me the party line and treats me like a fucking street walking nobody. "You left, Drake. You chose to abandon the DEA."

"They abandoned me!" I snarl quietly. "I was inside that club, Henry. My partner was murdered. I was left to fucking rot, and when I said I wanted out, you stripped me of every clearance, rank, and accolade I'd ever earned. Don't talk to me about teamwork!"

"You don't get to leave the agency but take the perks with you. You know that, Drake."

"I wasn't looking to keep the fucking title and badge. But I'd like to have been kept updated on the Vallejo file. I'd have liked to be informed if the motherfucker I thought I'd killed, was actually alive."

“And like I already said,” he bites out, “we still have not confirmed such. We’re working on a five-year belief that Vallejo is dead. Nothing in those five years has indicated anything else.”

“Well now we have a witness who saw the shooting and heard his name.” Dropping my foot and leaning forward, I rest my elbows on my knees and scrub my free hand over my jaw. “It’s not like Vallejo to hyper-focus on someone like this, Henry. She doesn’t know anything we don’t already know. She didn’t see anything others haven’t already seen. So why her?” I grit out, pressing my thumb against my temple. “Why are they so intent on taking her out?”

“How intent?” His voice evens out, now that we’ve taken shots at each other. With that out of the way, he’s happy to talk business, but only if it’s me offering information. “What’s he doing?”

“She was chased through the streets on the night of the murder. Her home was raided a couple nights later. And she was hit this morning in the hospital parking lot.”

“She was hit?” He drills down on that one detail. I can see him in my mind sitting forward just like I am. “She’s in the hospital?”

“No. She’s in a safe house. Flesh wound.”

“What safe house?” he demands. “Where?”

I choke out a soft laugh and sit back again. “You’re dreaming if you think I’m gonna tell you. All you need to know is that she’s secure, and she’s safe.”

“Withholding this information is illegal, son. As your special agent in charge, I demand—”

“But you’re not my special agent in charge,” I drawl. “You’re actually not shit as far as my career goes. You don’t have the authority to demand answers. And even if you try to go through my captain,” I click my tongue, “well, he doesn’t know where I am, either. I’m on personal leave right now, and short of you walking your ass over here and cuffing us together, I doubt you’re gonna get this information.”

“Don’t tempt me,” he snarls. “I have reach far wider than you know.”

“Power is an illusion, Henry. You have a badge and a rank and a big shiny gun. But so do I. We each command respect on the streets, but it’s all a crock of shit when it comes down to it. The second someone stands up and says no, well...” I glance across as movement pulls my attention. Eleanor smacking her dry lips. Her eyelids, fluttering. But she remains asleep, and her heart rate monitors *beep-beep-beep*. “I guess what I’m saying,” I continue, quieter now, “is *make me*.”

“Drake!”

“What do you know about Vallejo? What of his movements over the last five years? What happened with Gord’s investigation? Give a little,” I add, when he sucks in a breath and preps to shout that he doesn’t answer questions, “and I’ll give a little.”

“Gordan Fuller’s death was filed as murder in the first,” he bites out. “In the line of duty. Vallejo and his men were pinned as suspects. Vallejo died that day, and Fuller’s shooter was apprehended. He’s currently five years into a thirty-to-life.”

“Still behind bars?” I demand. “Are you watching his comms?”

“Yes. He’s doing his time and sticking to himself. He pulled the trigger, Drake, but he was nothing more than a hired gun.”

“And Vallejo?”

Henry blows out a frustrated breath and groans. God forbid the bastard answer an underling’s questions. “Autopsied, buried. Bullets are in evidence, and the autopsy reports are stacked up and filed away. He’s in the ground, Drake.”

“Obviously fucking not,” I snarl. “Chances he staged it all and someone else was buried in his box?”

“Staged you shooting him in the belly?” he challenges. “Staged you sinking a knife into his throat?”

“I don’t know! But I know something stinks! Someone is in Copeland, shooting up streets and hunting this girl down. And Vallejo’s name is the only one that keeps popping up.”

“Well, what do the primary detectives say about it? Where are they at?”

“I don’t know!” I bite my lips closed as my raised voice startles Eleanor’s machines to beep more erratically. Scratching a hand through my hair and counting my breath, I calm shit down and focus. Figure it out. “I don’t know,” I repeat for the third time, quieter. “I’m not the primary, Henry, and I’ve essentially dropped my ass on their desks. They’re not likely to tell me what they’ve found.”

“So what exactly are you doing there? What are you doing to be helpful?”

“I’m keeping the girl alive. Even if it fucking kills me.” I scrub my hand over my eyes and take a moment to think. Process. Plan. Then I straighten out again and drop my hand. “I gotta go.”

“What?” Panicked, Henry startles on his end of the line. “No, I’m not done—”

“I have things to do. I’ll call you another day.” Bringing the phone from my ear and killing the call, I push up to stand and hit dial on Malone’s name. But just as I turn to walk away and leave this room, I skid to a stop and find Eleanor’s eyes open and burning the side of my face. “Fuck!” I lower my voice and take my hand from the handle of my gun. Old habits and all that. “Shit, Ms. Swanson. I’m so sorry I woke you.”

“Thank you for keeping her safe.” Her voice is a pained rasp, dry and torturous. “Thank you for putting her wellbeing above your own.” She pauses and swallows, her eyes glistening with emotion. “No one else does.”

“Of course.” I kill my call with Archer and come back to face Eleanor instead. “I’m not gonna let anything happen to her. I promise.”

“No one puts her first,” she repeats stubbornly. “Not even she does.”

I choke out a soft laugh and nod. “Yeah. I know.”

My phone trills, Archer’s name flashing on the screen and demanding I pick up. I study it for a moment, then glance back to the woman lying on her death bed.

“You can go,” she murmurs, allowing her eyes to flicker closed again. “If it means going back to my baby, please go.”

“Are you doing okay?” I decline his call and make him wait just a minute longer. “Want me to get you a nurse? Or water?” I flash a grin, though she’s not looking. “A well-endowed escort?”

She snickers so her entire body bounces and her cheeks burn a healthy, vibrant pink. “I wish I knew the last time I had sex, that it would be the last time.” She flicks her eyes open and pins me with the intensity in them. “I’d have made him work harder.”

“He wasn’t worthy.” I slide my thumb across the top of her hand and know her time is coming soon. She’s so close. And because of this Vallejo bullshit, Rory is missing out on the final moments with her mom. “Don’t tell her I was here, okay? She’s pretty mad at me right now, and she doesn’t need to know I got to visit when she couldn’t.”

“She’s mad at you?” Tired, Eleanor begins drifting toward unconsciousness. “Really? What did you do?”

I hurt her feelings. I didn’t take her in the shower while she was bleeding from a gunshot wound, running from a shooter, and half my fucking age.

Though, I don’t say all that out loud.

“She’s just overwhelmed with things right now, that’s all. I make an easy target for a cranky woman.”

Eleanor sleepily sniggers and cuddles into her pillows. “And you seem all cut up about it.” Yawning, so her mouth opens wide and a soft hiss escapes her throat when a dry crack of her lips splits open, she closes them again and sighs. “Keep her safe, okay?” She rests a hand beneath her cheek but opens her eyes and meets mine. “Even when she says she doesn’t

want it. Even when she says she can take care of things herself. I need you to—”

“I’ve got her.” I press my palm to her cheek and stroke the hollowed space beneath her eye. “I promise, for as long as I live, I’ve got her back.”

My phone rings again. But the sickly woman is already most of the way unconscious. So I carefully drag my palm from her cheek and slide my thumb across my screen instead. Then turning on my heels, I stride through the door and past her uniformed guards. “Malone?”

“Jesus!” he explodes with frustration. “I thought you were dead, asshole!”

“I was busy.” I stalk into the elevator and hit the button for the parking garage. “You know a good medical examiner, right?”

Instantly, his tone shifts from rage to cold, calculated fire. “Why?”

“You need to dig Vallejo up. According to the DEA, he was killed and buried five years ago. Autopsy supports that, and burial records will, too.”

“You think he buried someone else in his place?”

“I dunno, Malone. But something is going on, and until we figure it out, Rory’s life is in the crosshairs. Bring Vallejo up and see who’s inside. Then we can move on to the next step.”

“Fine.” He exhales a deep breath and groans in the back of his throat. “My M.E. probably won’t have jurisdiction to work someone else’s turf. But if she can’t, she’ll know who to talk to. When are you back?”

“On my way now. I’ll be thirty minutes or so, to make sure I’m not being followed. You gonna talk to your M.E. tonight?”

“Yep.” He starts walking, the *thud-thud-thud* of his boots on tile, audible through our call. “Just as soon as you’re back and I can go, I’ll get the next steps moving.”

“Great.” I step out of the elevator and stare directly at the place Officer Clay was shot today. The very place Rory would

have died if not for him standing in the way. Shaking that gloomy reality off and starting toward the car, I slide in and set my call on speaker so I can drive. “If Vallejo isn’t where he’s supposed to be, then I don’t know what the fuck we’re gonna do.”

“We find him,” he counters easily. “We eliminate the threat. We move on to the next case and do it again.”

Move on to the next case?

Fuck. But I’m not sure there is a next case for me.

Rory

TODAY'S AS GOOD AS ANY TO SHOOT A MAN WHO
DESERVES IT.

I hate that I overheard Detective Malone's worry last night.
His very real fear that Drake might be dead.

Because although the panic lasted only a minute, maybe two at the most, they were the longest two minutes of my fucking life.

Humiliation still burns in my veins. Rage still pumps directly after. I was rejected, and then I was taunted and promised I will *never* get to experience what we both want so badly.

It's easy to be angry. Vindicating, even. I have oodles of pent-up frustration sizzling just beneath my skin, so when that bastard thinks he can embarrass me, I cling gleefully to the anger and stomp-shuffle my way through our time in this prison we've found ourselves in.

But when I find out the prick is possibly dead?

Jesus. The nausea that washed through my belly while I sat on the stairs and watched Archer's panic, his pacing along the hall, dialing, and redialing, to speak to a man who we're both vested in keeping safe. The ache I felt in my stomach, and the fear that we'd already said goodbye without realizing it.

If I'd known earlier that it would be the last time we'd speak, then perhaps I'd have been nicer. Or more assertive. Or more understanding of his point of view.

If I'd known, I'd have acted differently.

But of course, he answered his phone and, soon after, arrived back at the house safe and sound. He watched me

while I worked through the emotions bubbling in my blood, and he kept vigilance when I went to bed and attempted to sleep off the ridiculous feelings circulating in my veins.

I like him. So friggin' what? I don't want him to die.

Now it's the next day, and though I'm still not ready to let go of the humiliation I feel, I keep close. Same section of the house. Within earshot always. Because as it turns out, I worry about him about as much as he worries about me.

Bastard.

"Come on." He strides into my room and tosses a fresh pair of shoes on my bed. Another pair of Nikes, like they're the official sponsor for my time in witness protection. The box corners dig into my mattress and threaten to hit my bad leg. But of course, Drake's aim is perfect and the package stops just inches shy of touching me.

Slowly, I bring my gaze from the box and look up at the man who is, once again, dressed in jeans, a button-up shirt, and a leather holster that holds two ridiculously scary guns close to his heart.

Is he not afraid of them going off by accident?

His hair is neatly combed, his jet-black locks a direct contrast to the playful shade of green in his eyes. He folds his arms, like he's impatient and I'm entirely too slow for his liking.

I push my laptop aside, and the notes I desperately attempt to process from the classes I've missed this week. Killers and dead people, and dying mothers aside, I still have a degree to finish and medical school waiting for me in the fall.

It all seems so unreal. So *surreal*, that I could still have such normal things to do between all the craziness.

"W-where are we going?" I stammer, no doubt not aiding my '*I'm not a helpless child*' argument from last night. "I have things to do, so—"

"And if I have to sit in that hall for a minute longer and listen to you talk to yourself about the bio data and kidney

disease of *something something*, I'm gonna put a fucking bullet in my brain." Flipping the shoebox open, he grabs a pair of black and white Air Maxes and tugs on the laces to undo the loops they created in the warehouse. "I have somewhere I want to go. I'm not leaving you here on your own. So get the fuck up and move."

A deep scowl forms on my face and leaves me a billion times more inclined to stay exactly where I am. "Excuse you? I don't sit, stay, or shake hands when you ask me to, Detective Banks. So what makes you think I'm a little doggy who'll move on your command?"

He grabs my leg and straightens it out, albeit gently, before shoving the shoe on and making me glad I was already wearing socks. "We're heading out for a couple of hours." He works the laces and does me up with fast, jerking movements. "We have somewhere to be. And at some point later today, Malone is gonna call and give me news that, either way, fucking sucks."

He grabs my other leg and repeats the process of straightening it out and shoving my shoe on.

"Why does the news suck?"

"Because if Vallejo is in the ground, then who the fuck is hunting you? And if he's not, then where is he and why does he have such a hard on for you?"

"Might be because I'm cute?" I flash a smile when his determined eyes shoot up to focus on mine. "Maybe this is the new chivalry, ya know? They used to sing about taking girls out and walking street side. Now rappers mention something about Becky's cum bucket and spanking her ass." I tug my leg from his stunned grasp and turn on the bed to set my feet on the floor. "This is kind of the same, right? Women want the obsessed hero now. The dark and dangerous gritty stalker vibes. It's in all the romance books."

"You... They..." He brings a hand up, as though to point, but I'm not sure he has anything worthwhile to say. "What?"

“Maybe this man, who may or may not be Gregory Vallejo, just wants a good old fashion game of stalk-her-fuck-her.” I push up to stand and fix my jeans so they settle on my hips comfortably. “It’s the two-thousand-and-twenties, Drake. Women don’t want flowers anymore. We want the skulls of our enemies.”

Grinning, I turn to face him and glance down at my outfit. Jeans, hoodie, shirt, and a brand-new pair of Air Maxes. “Can we eat when we get wherever we’re going?”



“You were talking shit, right?” In the car and heading down the hill that overlooks Copeland City, Drake glances across as we move from residential areas and into more dense commuter traffic. “The stalker and skulls thing?”

“Are you asking if I’d rather a man completely and stupidly obsessed with me, over a history nerd who returns my texts three-to-five business days after I send them?” I settle back against the headrest and scoff. “Of course. Chivalry isn’t dead, Detective Banks. It’s just evolved since your youth.”

Unimpressed, he casts a side-eye that would burn a lesser woman. “We’re taking potshots at my age now? Really?”

“You’re the one who brought it up.” I give him a dainty shrug and look out the window as we pass near, though not directly past, my mother’s house. I’m certain, if we were to look, garish yellow police tape would still surround the place. “In all the time we’ve spent together, not once did I bring your age up.”

“Right,” he sends his focus back to the traffic pottering around us. “But since you’re in a pissy mood, you figure you might take some shots now?”

“I’m not in a pissy mood.” I turn my head and give him a *fuck you* smile. Not the friendly kind. “What behaviors or actions have I exhibited that might make you think that?”

His eyes narrow. “Aurora...?”

“What? I woke up today, I smiled at you and said good morning. I made breakfast, you followed me. I offered you a bowl. I made a cheese sandwich for lunch. I smiled. You followed me into the kitchen again, so I offered to make you some too.”

His hands flex around the steering wheel, his knuckles turning white.

“I went to my room and tried to study. You followed me again. You haven’t heard a single complaint from me all day. And I have smiled a lot. So...” I raise my brows and smirk. “I’m confused by your insinuation.”

“You smile,” he growls, rankled and hating it, “but it isn’t nice. It’s mean and bitter and if you had a gas can and lighter, I feel you’d toss both at me.”

I choke down a laugh before it becomes a genuine smile and blows my efforts today. “I don’t know what you mean, Detective. But if you—”

“And that!” he bursts. “*Detective*. You say it like it tastes bad on your tongue.”

“Detective?” I soften my tone. And since he deserves my ire, I dumb my response down, too. “What do you mean? That’s literally your rank. You call Malone ‘Detective,’ and Malone calls you the same in return.”

“Yeah, but we’re allowed to call each other that. It’s our jobs.”

“But...” I bring my hand up and check my nails. “I can’t call you by your professional title you worked hard to achieve?”

“You can’t go from calling me Drake, with that sultry, school-girl tone you seem so fucking good at, and call me Detective instead, spitting it out like it tastes bitter.”

“So... you *want* me to be sultry?” I allow my brows to pinch tight in confusion. “You’re giving me mixed signals, Detective.”

“I’m fucking not!” He tears the car around a corner and forces my hands down to hold the door and seat, or risk falling to the side with the momentum of the vehicle. “You know exactly what I’m telling you, Aurora. I know you’re smart enough to understand the nuances of what’s going on here.”

“Well, I don’t know about that. What *is* going on here, Detective?”

“Rory...”

“I’m a woman,” I start easily, lifting my hands to tick my points off. “You’re a man. I’m in medical school, though I’m still not entirely sure where I’ll go with that. And you’re a cop who deals with trauma daily. My life is in danger, and there’s a chance I may not survive the day. And there’s you... some kind of dummy who has decided he’ll step between me and death, so at least, should I not survive the day, odds are, you’re dead, too.”

“Rory!”

“You find me attractive...” I wrinkle my nose and try to quash the embarrassment flooding my veins. “I think. I mean, that’s kind of what I’m picking up. And I clearly, against my better judgment, find you attractive, too.”

“Stop.”

“I offered myself to you last night.” Can’t be any more humiliated than I already was. “You said no and cited things about circumstances and age. Oh, that’s right.” I bring my focus across and look into his green stare. “Age. That’s what we were talking about.”

“Move on, Swanson.”

Pleasure rolls through my veins and out to touch the tips of my fingers. “*Swanson?* Not Aurora. Not Little Bird? Sheesh,” I shake my head. “You must really be mad. Wait,” I pinch my bottom lip between my fingers and smirk, “weren’t we talking about me being mad? Which, I feel I’ve proven, I am not.”

“Forget I mentioned anything.” He brings the car into a massive parking lot that dips beneath street level in an instant.

Our wheels squeak on smooth concrete, much like they did yesterday, but as I look around, I ascertain that we're *not* at the hospital. "Where are we?"

"Somewhere important." He slips the car into a parking slot and yanks the keys from the ignition, then shoving out, he stalks around to my door before I even have a chance to remove my seatbelt. "Let's go." He grabs my arm and pulls me up until my sneakers touch the floor. He's cranky at me. Frustrated. But he still shields my body, guarding me from anyone who might think to take a shot. "I don't want to talk in here," he murmurs, more serious now. "I don't want you to dawdle." He wraps his arm across my back and hooks his hand on the opposite hip to keep me up, since I don't have my cane—again. Then he starts toward the entrance, lit up and crawling with security cameras.

"What is this place?" I twist my body and rely on him to guide me toward the door. Then I sniff the air, noticing a tang I've come to recognize this week. "Drake?"

He drags me forward anyway, nodding when we pass a handful of uniformed cops standing guard. Their presence startles me, but not nearly as much as the shocking BOOM of a gunshot that has me wrenching back around. "What the—"

"Relax." He leads me toward a check-in desk of sorts and shows his badge, words unneeded as the man on the other side nods and turns away.

"Drake?" I fight his hold and try to slow our steps, but he continues along in spite of my bad leg and with no care for the way I jump when another shot goes off. "Drake!"

"Stand here." He releases me, but he places my hands on a counter and stares into my eyes almost as though to ask, "*You good?*" When I don't fall, and I don't run away, he turns on his heels and accepts a box of... things, from a man I don't know. There are dozens of people in here. Not just police in uniform, but other kinds, too. Some, I can tell are cops anyway, despite their plain clothes. And others, who may or may not be regular civilians, but they aim their weapons at a paper target and hit the right circles every single time.

“We’re shooting?” I push away from the tall counter and hobble forward a half-dozen steps to meet Drake in no man’s land. Exasperated, he carries the box in one arm and uses the other to take my weight.

Of course.

Chivalry, for him, isn’t holding doors or smacking my ass. It’s stopping my leg from collapsing out beneath my body and sending me sprawling to the floor.

“We’re practicing.” He starts us toward one of the... well, I guess a newb who has never stepped foot in a place like this would call it a bay. It’s a teeny-tiny space, with walls on both sides, and a long, long stretch of space in front of us.

Drake places my hands on the counter, like he did last time, then he sets the box on the floor and presses a button on the wall that has a machine whirring and a steel clip zooming our way.

He takes a long sheet of paper with the typical man-shape printed on the front, and securing it to the steel clip, he hits another button and sends it away again. “Have you ever shot a gun before, Aurora?”

“Oh, we’re back to my first name again.” I accept a pair of plastic glasses when he takes them from the box and shoves them in my hand. Opening the arms and spying the scratched plastic, I bring them up to slide them on my face. “And no,” I answer. “I have never shot a gun before.”

“Do you understand the different kinds?” He takes out a set of earmuffs, but he sets them on the counter, and not in my hands. “Revolvers, versus pistols. Automatic versus semi-automatic?”

“No.” I look down at the pair he constantly has strapped to his chest and chew on the inside of my lip. “I do not know the different kinds.”

“And if you found a gun, any gun, lying around?” he presses. “Bad guy’s coming for you. What do you do?”

“Besides hide behind you, or run away?”

When his eyes narrow, my smile grows larger. *Realer.*

“I dunno. I suppose you’re asking me to pick it up and shoot it, right? So I guess the answer is, I wrap my hands around the handle and pull the trigger?”

“A semi-automatic will shoot one bullet per pump of your finger.” He takes a pair of glasses for himself, before tugging the gun from the holster by his left ribs. “A fully automatic will keep shooting until you decompress the trigger, or until you run out of rounds.”

“A-and wh...” Swallowing, I look down at the pistol in his hands. “What kind is that?”

“This is a Smith and Wesson, semi-automatic. It’s gonna put a hole in someone big enough to do the job right.” He handles the weapon and has the magazine thingy popping out of the bottom, though I don’t know how he did it. What mechanism he touched. “Fifteen rounds per magazine,” he continues. “Count them, because you don’t wanna get caught short.”

“How many have you used?” I push up to my toes, as though to peek over his hands and watch him. “You shot yesterday, right? Did you count them so you know how many you have left for today?”

“I have a fresh magazine in here.” He turns his hand over and shows me the steel nestled in his palm. “As a cop, I’m supposed to keep count and justify every shot I’ve taken.”

“*Supposed* to?” I lift a brow and bring my gaze up to his. “That sounds almost like you’re hinting at something else.”

“I’m not here on official business,” he murmurs, “and I don’t much care if I have a job to go home to when this is all over. Add in Malone’s involvement, my position in the DEA prior to this, and I have ways around the bureaucracy.”

“You’re saying... you exist in the Wild West?”

He slaps the magazine back inside the gun’s handle until it clicks, meeting my shaky smile with one of his own. But harder. Surer. “I’m saying I have friends in high places, and I only shoot when it’s really important.” He grabs my wrist and

slaps the weapon into my palm. “Feel it, Aurora. Feel how heavy it is. How solid it is.”

My pulse thunders in my veins and leaves my breath racing. Panting. Nervous as hell.

“When you shoot it, it’s gonna have a bit of a recoil. Not a lot for an experienced shooter. But for someone like you...” he takes my hips and turns me to face the little paper target he already sent away. “Someone scared and unsure,” he murmurs, stepping up behind me so I feel his chest on my back, his heart beating against mine, “chances are it’s gonna scare you, hurt your dainty little wrists, and make you wanna drop it and cry.”

I bring my free hand up and roll my wrist. “You think so?”

He chuckles, his breath tickling the back of my ear and sending strands of hair fluttering in the breeze. “I think I’d feel better if you knew how to use it, just in case. I need you to have a way of protecting yourself when I’m not around to do it for you. Now focus.”

Irritated, I set the gun on the counter and turn in the tiny space he leaves available to me. “But if you’re not around, I won’t have access to your guns, anyway. Which makes this lesson obsolete and an abuse on my ears for no reason.”

He grabs the earmuffs and plops them on my head so the ear bits slap the sides of my face. Then he turns me again and pins me between the counter and his body. “Learn, Aurora. Bad guy comes for you, he’s gonna carry a gun like this. So if I teach you the basics, hopefully you can use your smart surgeon brain and figure out the rest.”

“I’m not a surgeon.” My bottom lip pops forward, but my mind focuses on the goosebumps sprinting along my skin as Drake reaches around me and picks up his gun. “I’m not even done with pre-med yet.”

“You’re everything you need to be, Little Bird. And on your way to being so much more.”

Silence hangs for a moment where I swear, he nestles his nose by my ear and inhales the scent of my shampoo. But he doesn’t linger. Instead, he pops the magazine out of his gun

again and sets it on the counter. “You get fifteen shots,” he repeats. “This is a double action weapon, which means after you cock it the first time you won’t have to cock it again each time you pull the trigger. When you go to pull the trigger you want one, smooth motion. The first half of your pull will feel much longer than the second because it is easier to pull. You have a safety on the side.” He grabs my hand and slaps the pistol against my palm. “Safety,” he presses. “Right here. If you forget to disengage and try to shoot, chances are, you’re dead. Because by the time it took you to remember, someone else already tagged you.”

I swallow the nerves in my throat and try, with everything in me, not to notice Drake’s firm body pressed to my back. He wants platonic. He wants safety. He’s setting me on a shelf and saying no. So I close my eyes and hum in the back of my throat like the action somehow brings me calm.

Then opening them again, I study the target sitting about twenty-feet away. “Alright. I’m ready.”

“Good.” He releases my hands, but places his on my hips to stay close. “Grab your magazine and slide it up into place.” His entire body hugs mine. His thighs on my backside, and his chest against my shoulder blades. “You’ll want to get a feel for it, because when you’re under fire, you don’t get a chance to look or study. You need muscle memory and for your hands to get that fucking magazine into place quickly.”

“You say fuck a lot when you’re tense.” I grab the steel magazine and test its weight for a moment, before placing it in the gap at the bottom of the handle and pushing it up. It clicks into place, drawing a relieved sigh from the back of my throat. “It’s in.”

“Yeah.” His voice is a whisper. Barely. But I feel his breath on my neck. His hand, inching around to my belly. “Now cock it. Pull the top slide back. I want you to know how it feels to shoot. Follow the steps, Aurora. Safety off. Pull. Fire. Pull. Fire.”

“You say you don’t want me,” I rasp, embarrassingly breathless despite the fact I haven’t moved in minutes. “You

say no. But you talk about cocking, pulling, and fire and make even the most mundane thing sound erotic.”

“That’s on you.” But damn him for splaying his fingers wide on my stomach and holding me close. “I can’t make you feel or hear something through a lens in which I don’t control. I’m trying to teach you. You’re hearing sex. Sounds like a you problem.”

“You think so?” I lean back far enough to peek outside our small room. “I don’t see anyone else teaching like this.”

He chuckles, so his breath flutters against my hair. “No one else in here is a civilian with no experience.” He takes his hand from my stomach and moves back a step. “But if you think you got things under control...”

“I don’t.” I grab his wrist and yank him closer. Because I’m a glutton for punishment, and self-aware enough to know wanting this man is wrong... but wrong feels good enough to hold on to for a little while yet. “Safety off, cock it,” I murmur, focusing, because I have a real-life gun with a real-life magazine inside it. And now the safety is disengaged. “Trigger pull in one smooth motion,” I repeat his instructions and slowly, grudgingly start drawing the trigger closer. It’s looser than I expected. Easier than I would have thought. Then I guess I reach the right spot, because I have to squeeze a little harder, and the gun explodes.

The only reason it doesn’t hit the floor is because Drake reaches out with lightning-fast hands and wraps them around mine.

“It’s hard to explain the recoil with words,” he murmurs by my ear. “I can’t describe it properly. So you needed to feel it.”

My throat is dry.

My tongue.

My lips.

But not my panties.

“Now you’re on that second shot, Little Bird. It’s gonna be much easier to shoot, because you know what to expect, but

the kick will be the same. If you're not paying attention, you're gonna hurt yourself."

"I got it." I blow out a bated breath and squeeze the trigger. But this time, I firm my arms and allow the vibration to roll down through my body and into my shoes. The power behind this gun surprises me. The violence rocks my soul. But the thrill it gives is something else entirely.

"Empty all fifteen if you want." Now he *definitely* buries his nose in my hair, and lowering his hands to my belly, he inhales. "You got this. It's all yours, okay? Be strong. Be ready. You have thirteen more."

Fuckkkkkkkk yes.

Adrenaline surges in my veins and leaves me a panting mess on the inside. But we're in a shooting range with other professionals who aren't here for shenanigans, so I bite down on the blush filling my cheeks and focus instead on the paper target twenty-feet away—that is yet to be pierced.

The tips of my fingers tingle, and the blood pulsing through my veins strengthens my stance. Like the added flow helps heal my leg and bring new stability, where my crutches were serving such purpose any other time. Or maybe it's Drake today. Holding me up. Supporting my weight.

I squeeze the trigger and catch the weight of the weapon when it tries to flip back at me, and then I squeeze a second time, grinning when the bullet tags the bottom corner of my paper target.

Metal shells ping out of the gun with every shot I take and hit the wall before rolling to the floor.

"I hit it." My entire body quivers with pleasure. Excitement. Though I can't be sure if it's because I hit the thing I was aiming for—sort of—or because the tip of Drake's nose touches the shell of my ear. "Eleven more."

"Use 'em all." He draws patterns on my stomach with the tips of his fingers. "We have all day, a bad mood to work through, and as many rounds as your heart desires."

“I’m not in a bad mood.” But I scowl and shoot again anyway. *Because maybe I am.* “I was merely perturbed at your apparent penchant for hypocrisy.”

“Big words. Big mood.” He groans when I shoot again. Call me crazy, but I feel him against my back. I *feel* him. Against my back. “Let me know when you’ve worked through your temper. Then we can go back to being friendly.”

“Friendly?” I shoot another round. “Like your penis touching my back right now?”

His hips jut backwards, though his chest and hands remain exactly where they were. “Don’t say penis. It’s not appropriate.”

“Oh, I’m sorry.” Another round. “I’m sorry if talking about your penis,” *bang*, “makes you uncomfortable. It’s just that,” *bang*, “as a medical school student, I’ve become used to referring to such body parts by their proper, anatomical names.” *Bang*. “So unless you prefer schlong, Johnson, or Richard,” *bang*, “I take offense to your attempt to censor my language.” *Bang. Bang.* I glance over my shoulder and find his face mere inches from mine. “Penis.”

Instead of the gun going back to its normal position, the top thingy doesn’t slide back on the frame thingy, which prompts me to check the magazine thingy. “I think we’re out.”

“Yeah.” Gruffly, he snatches his gun back and releases the magazine. “All done. And you’ve put me in a bad mood.”

“Well shucks.” I sidle back and grin when I find him full and wanting, and completely and utterly defenseless. “Welcome to my world, Detective. It sucks wanting something and not being able to have it.”

Drake

Under the cover of darkness and in an unmarked vehicle, I bring our car into the underground parking lot situated below a building known as the George Stanley. It's the morgue. But calling it a fancy name, named after some dead dude I don't know, sounds fancier than *'Frozen Bodies R Us'*.

"No one besides us, Malone, Fletcher, and Doctor Mayet knows we're here," I murmur. "There's no reason for anyone to suspect we're here. So this is as safe as we can be outside of the house."

"What do you know about Doctor Mayet?" Rory is often too brave for her own good. Too curious. Too smart. But she looks at me now with all the trust in the world for a man she didn't even know all that long ago. "Will she tell anyone we're here?"

"She's Malone's wife." I bring the car to a stop, the sound of me pulling on the brake falls in sync with Rory's shocked intake of air. "I'd say she's known about us every step of this investigation. As Chief Medical Examiner in Charge of Lombardo and wife to the primary detective, I doubt she's been excluded from any information since this began."

"So we trust by association?" Nervous, Rory unsnaps her seatbelt and looks around the dark parking lot. "She hasn't messed up yet. So we just..." Stress makes her brows wrinkle. "We trust."

"We trust." I push my door open and feel my weapons, strapped to my chest where they always are. They're an

extension of my body now. A third and fourth hand.

Damn Rory for making today feel like we fucked.

She squeezed the trigger and used a weapon I've never shared with anyone else in my life. I got the frustration and wanting, but walked away without the satisfaction of completion.

"Come on." I open her door and place my hand beneath her arm, and though she had the option to bring her crutches tonight, she chose not to. Which is good, I suppose. Means she's healing. She's stronger. I bring her to her feet and look down into her kaleidoscope eyes, her lips too plump for her own good, and the complete and utter faith she has in me to keep her alive, bad for us both. "You need to watch your surroundings more, Aurora." Closing her door, I hold her up with an arm wrapped around her torso and anchored around her hips. "You keep looking at me, and not at the guns that could be pointed at you."

"That's because *you're* always looking," she mumbles. *Like I said, complete and utter faith.* "You're gonna keep me safe. I can relax."

I choke out a laugh that is neither fun nor relaxed. "And when I'm not around?" I demand, stepping to the side and bringing her with me so we start toward the elevator. "When I'm not looking?"

"You're always gonna be around." Her certainty makes my stomach jump. Her conviction, nerve-wracking. "I mean," she continues, "where will you go?"

"I could be shot and killed." As soon as we're close enough, I hit the call button for the elevator and watch as the numbers move from the ninth floor and head down. "I could be arrested, considering I've walked onto a case I have no jurisdiction over." When the elevator stops on our level and opens to reveal a small woman with blonde hair, pink highlights, and a wide smile, I draw my gun and stare into her arctic blue eyes.

She doesn't even lift her hands. "I'm Doctor Emeri." She scoots to the left and welcomes us in. "I don't know your names, I don't see your faces. I do, however, understand the gravity and need for privacy. So consider me the guy in the Titanic's elevator."

I raise a brow in question and bring Rory in, making damn sure she stands on my other side and nowhere near the bubbly doctor in sparkling high tops and a crisp white coat. "The Titanic?"

"Ya know: he doesn't speak or have independent thoughts." She hits the button for the doors to close, then the number nine to take us back to where she came from. "He just controls the big, silver cube and escorts those who ride in it."

"Were you not afraid of being shot?" Rory leans around me to the woman who was probably in the same graduating year as she. "Your statement about not seeing me or knowing my name says you know exactly who I am. Which means you know the danger surrounding me. What if gunmen had followed us into the parking lot and you were caught up in all that?"

Casually, she drops her hands in her pockets and bounces on her heels. "I guess I could simply say that certain men work hard to keep me safe, too. You may not see those who surround this building tonight. But I know they're there."

"Cops?" Rory looks at me in question, then back to Emeri. "Police guards?"

"Worse." Her smile grows larger, but before she can elaborate, the doors slide open and reveal Detectives Malone, Fletcher, and another woman in a white coat. The fact she stands with Malone and their little fingers hook together where they think I don't notice, says all I need to know about her.

"Chief Mayet." I bring Rory out and look the other woman up and down. She's thirty. *Maybe*, at a stretch. Smooth skin, cat-like eyes, dark hair, and a dimple dug into her cheek. She has Egyptian roots, I think, and a brain on her shoulders considering the building she controls. "Thanks for staying after hours for this."

Her lips curl into a small smile as she takes a step forward, leaving Malone behind, and offers her hand to me. “I don’t keep regular hours. I’ve had my entire building emptied of live bodies tonight except those you see in this room.” Shaking my hand, she drops it and moves to Rory next. “I have something to show you both, and I wanted to do it in person. Thank you for coming down.”

“Y-you’re welcome.” Rory stammers when she’s nervous, and being surrounded by successful women doctors is, I think, where she’s most nervous of all. “I’m Rory.”

“I’m Minka.” She drops Rory’s hand and nods over our shoulders. “That’s Aubree. I really appreciate you not shooting her.”

Stunned, I look down at the gun I still hold, quickly holstering it when I remember it’s not polite to have it out inside this building. Or, well, any building, really.

“She’s always a little loud,” Mayet continues, “and rarely takes a solid warning serious. She’s comfortable knowing she’s protected. So she takes risks she shouldn’t and expects other folks to clean up the mess.”

I look down at Rory and pin her with a glare. “I feel like I know someone with a similar personality trait. Lacks self-preservation,” I bring my gaze up again, “because she knows someone else has her back.”

“Yeah, that’s our Aubs.” Minka extends a hand and gestures toward an office surrounded by glass. “Will you come in? We don’t have long before the city notices our lockdown. If someone becomes suspicious, it wouldn’t take a man long to connect the dots and wonder if you’re here.”

She turns on her heels and strides toward her office, white coat billowing from the stream of air her speed creates. She stalks inside and holds the door until Archer takes over. He waits for the rest of us to pass, while Mayet circles her desk and takes a chair.

“I did not exhume Gregory Vallejo’s body today,” she starts, steepling her fingers as I pull out the single visitor’s

chair and lower Rory into it. “It’s not my city, not my case, not my jurisdiction. However,” she adds when my eyes narrow. “I had a friend do it for me. I expressed our concerns that the man buried in Vallejo’s grave may not be Vallejo himself, so I spoke to the mayor, who secured me a warrant through contacts of his own relatively quickly. My colleague exhumed the body this afternoon and ran diagnostics immediately.”

“Is it Vallejo?” I skip over the fancy talk and demand the bottom line. “Is he alive?”

She looks to Archer, as though requesting permission to tell me. So when he inclines his head and gives her the go ahead, she brings her eyes back to me and firms her lips. “The body we exhumed today was not Gregory Vallejo.”

“Fuck!” I shove away from Rory’s chair and stalk toward the floor-to-ceiling glass windows overlooking a dark city. “He’s not dead. Fuck.”

“The body that was exhumed belonged to a man, approximately thirty-five to forty-five-years-old. Vallejo was sixty at his alleged death, which makes this an impossible match. We estimate *this* man’s height to be around five-feet, ten-inches, and six-feet, one-inch. I’m not sure I can accurately guess his weight, but bone density suggests he was on the heavier side. Dental records so far haven’t come back with a match, and the lab has pulled DNA, but again, that takes time. And the question you asked isn’t *who is he?* But rather, is he Vallejo?”

I bring my hands up and shove them through my hair. “It’s not him.”

“Reports say you sliced a blade through his neck and put a bullet in his belly,” Fletcher finally chimes in. “So if he walked away that night, he was in a world of trouble anyway. He’d have needed emergency surgery. Lifesaving treatments.”

“Why wasn’t the building secured?” I stare out into the ether. And at the same time, catch my own reflection in the glass. “Why didn’t they rush the club and seize everyone?”

“Don’t know,” Archer mumbles. “We weren’t there.”

“I was shot.” Closing my eyes, I try to think back. To remember. “Jumped out the two-story window with bullets in my body and a few missing brain cells.” I bring my hand up and rub my forehead. “They swept me up from the ground and took me away. I didn’t...” I open my eyes and turn from the window to find Rory’s pale-faced stare shining right back at me. “I wasn’t debriefed on the operation, and I quit right after we put my partner in the ground.” Finally, I bring my focus to Malone. “I buried my partner and held his wife while she sobbed. I’m godfather to his little girl, and I knew she deserved so much more. So I carried his casket. Barely,” I add on a humorless chuckle, looking at Rory again, “couldn’t walk properly on my own. But I wasn’t going to sit my ass down and let others carry him without me. I lowered him into the ground and said my goodbyes. And knowing—or believing,” I add bitterly, “that Vallejo was dead, I walked away and didn’t ask questions again.”

“Well...” Archer wanders to Mayet’s desk and sits on the edge. “Seems Vallejo pulled a switcheroo and lived to see another day. Now he’s got his sights set on Rory.”

“But we still don’t know *why*,” I press. “Why her?”

Fletch already heard all this yesterday in the hospital, but Archer’s brows furrow now. “Why?”

“Vallejo has a massive body count, Malone. Maybe even more than your father.” I look to Aubree when Archer’s face hardens and her eyes widen. “Was that classified?” I taunt. “She not in the know yet?”

“I know,” Aubree murmurs. “No one in this room keeps secrets from each other.”

I open my mouth to continue, but something in the way Mayet’s eyes flash has me stopping again. I study her. I ponder what has triggered that look. But she’s skilled at what she does and locks it down just as quickly as it began.

“Finish your thought,” Malone snarls. “You took your shot. You still don’t trust me. Cry me a fucking river, but finish your thought before you drown yourself.”

“My point,” I drag my eyes from Mayet and stop on him. “Vallejo’s already a wanted man. So why does he care that this one chick might’ve seen him in the shadows?”

“I hardly saw him at all,” Rory murmurs. “Like, just his eyes, basically.” She reaches out and pinches her cheek bone. “Maybe a tiny bit of his upper cheeks.”

“She’s calling Vallejo out by name,” Fletch says. “After five years on the down low, she’s blown his cover.”

“But she didn’t,” I press. “*You* called *me*, Detectives. You didn’t know who your eyewitness was, but you were aware Vallejo was involved, because a different witness overheard his name being said.” I raise my hands and look around, “I don’t see that guy in witness protection. He’s not dead. His home isn’t being shot up.”

“Because he didn’t *see* the perp,” Archer inserts. “He was along the street and heard the commotion. Rory is the only one who *saw* him.”

“Yeah. She saw something,” I agree, looking at her and trying to understand exactly what that thing is. “She saw something maybe not even she realizes. And whatever that thing is, is worth killing for.”

“So what did you see?” Archer folds his arms and stares at the side of her face till she turns. “Go back to the start, and tell us exactly what happened.”

“I mean...” Rory swallows, her throat bobbing as the lump of nerves moves down. “I don’t know. I was walking toward the bus stop after leaving the hospital.” She glances straight past me, since the street below is almost exactly where she stood that night. “I was walking that way,” she points. “I could see the neon lights from the bar up ahead. I even considered stopping in,” she murmurs, “since I was cold and hungry. My car was destroyed last year, and I haven’t been able to replace it yet, so I’ve been riding the city buses.”

“Where was Lombardo?” Fletch ponders. “Where was Vallejo?”

“On the other side of the street.” She closes her eyes, as though to picture it in her mind. “I was on this side, and as I was walking along, I caught voices across the street. Angry men. There were a handful of them all standing in a group.”

“How many?” Archer bites out. “How many men?”

“I don’t know. Three. Or four.”

“Well?” He lowers his arms and sets his hands on the desk beside his thighs. “Three or four?”

“I don’t—”

“Three or four, Aurora? Use your brain and think about it. How many?”

“Watch yourself, Malone.” I speak quietly. In warning. And startle Rory’s eyes open again as she swings around to study me. But I meet the cop’s stare and repeat, “Watch it. Don’t be a dick, or I’ll remove your witness and send you up the fucking river.”

“She needs to remember!” he barks out. “If she’s gonna testify, she needs to know what she saw. If she doesn’t know what she saw, then why the fuck are we even here?”

“There were four men,” she inserts. Timid and gentle. “Four. Plus Lombardo. The one in front, the one whose eyes I saw, he was asking about payment or something. And Lorenzo called him Vallejo and was panicking. He was sobbing and promising he would deliver.”

“Deliver what?” Archer demands. “Money? Drugs?”

“I don’t know. Money, I think. I guess I got the impression he was a dealer and owed Vallejo the money.”

“What happened next?” Fletcher asks, gentler than his partner. “Who said what?”

“Um...” Rory nibbles on her pinky fingernail and shakes her head. “Lorenzo said he would deliver soon, I think. One of the other men started hitting.”

“Which other man?” Archer questions. “Which one was hitting?”

“The one from the other day. Marcos.”

“What did you do?” Mayet joins the fray and startles Rory with her question. “Marcos was hitting Lorenzo, and Lorenzo was terrified of Vallejo. What did you do?”

“Well...” Her cheeks warm as she glances across at me. “At first, I was just stopped there. Watching.”

Of course she was.

“I’m a curious person by nature. I didn’t even realize I was staring. But then they were really laying into him. Punching him really hard.”

“And?” Aubree perks up. “You were rubber necking. Then what?”

“Well... I called out. I said, ‘hey,’ to make them stop.” Her eyes fill with tears as she relives what she saw. “They shot him. It all kind of happened at the same time. So before I was done speaking, they shot him. He fell to the ground. The one in the front, the one called Vallejo, turned around. That’s when he saw me. And I saw him. Then all hell broke loose, and I started running. Because they were shooting at me and stuff.”

“*And stuff.*” I drop my head back to look at the ceiling. *And stuff* means *trying to kill her*. “You’re fucking lucky you ran, Aurora. They weren’t playing around.”

“Really?” She sweetens her tone and smiles when I bring my eyes down. “I had no clue they were really, *actually* mad at me, Detective Banks. In fact, I was considering inviting them over for dinner tonight. Ya know, since we’re all friends and such.”

She stares defiantly into my eyes and dares me to bite back. I could. It would be so easy to fight with her and ignore the rest of the world. But I peer at Malone instead and block her anger out. “What have you pulled on their whereabouts this week? Have you got CCTV of where these men went after they chased her?”

“We followed them for as long as cameras were picking them up. They left Lombardo’s body and ran in pursuit of the witness.” He spares a short glance for Rory before coming

back to me. “Three men ran out of that alleyway, two of which have now been identified as Marcos Buchanan and Gavin Stevens. Tommy Enders came to play after the bounty was placed on the witness’s head, and is in police custody inside the hospital and apparently pretty skittish whenever anyone stops by his room. So, two of the three are in police custody and the third person from the alleyway is in the wind.”

“What about the fourth one?” Rory asks. “There was that last guy in the alleyway. I saw him.”

“We have *no* CCTV footage of a fourth man,” Malone responds. “He didn’t exit the alleyway on either end that we were able to pick up on security, and no other witnesses have come forward to mention him.”

“There was a fourth man!” she blurts out, twisting in her seat to plead her case. “There was. I saw him.”

“We believe you,” Fletcher murmurs. “The fact the three others are in custody or missing, and still, men hunt you, proves to us there are more involved. And whoever the fourth is, he’s really invested in you not identifying him.”

“But I already did...” she murmurs shakily. “I already said, Lorenzo called him Vallejo.”

“Well...” Archer reaches up and carefully plays with the chain hung around his neck. It’s a passive action. Thoughtless, really. “Until today, Vallejo was officially dead, Rory. He was buried and in a box. Now,” he adds, twisting his lips, “I guess he’s alive again. And the fact he is, is causing us all a little trouble.”

“Start with the morgue,” I command, drawing the eyes of not only the cops, but the women who surround them. “It’s not standard practice to bury a man and attribute it to the wrong name. That means someone along the food chain was either too stupid to know he was autopsying the wrong body, or he was paid off. Find out who signed the checks and connect the dots that way.”

“We also have to figure out who the body is,” Mayet inserts. “Whatever else happens, we have an unidentified dead

man. Figuring out who he is might help.”

“Let’s follow that up.” Archer stands, but looks down at Rory and softens his expression. “You’re doing good, Ms. Swanson. This is a high-pressure situation, and you’re holding your own just fine.”

“I learned how to shoot a gun today.” Slowly, oblivious to the look Archer sends my way, she pushes off her chair and takes a moment to stabilize herself. “I shot a bunch of times, and even hit the target once or twice.”

“You did?” Fletcher steps up on her right and grabs her arm the way I’m so used to doing. He helps her, completely and utterly platonic. But my eyes still narrow as he helps her out from between the chair and the desk. “You hit the targets? That’s pretty badass for a first time.”

“Well, I hit the paper,” she clarifies. “Not, like, on the printout of the body. So in real life, we’d call them all a miss.” Then she grins and extricates her arm from his grip. “I hit the bullseye on the guy next to me’s target though.”

Groaning, I drag my hand along my face and breathe through this entire clusterfuck of a week. “Men do not take kindly to that shit,” I tell them. “Hit a man’s target by accident, and you’ve got beef.”

Fletcher chokes out a soft laugh and watches Rory as she shuffles closer to me. But he doesn’t touch her. He doesn’t try to grab her when she sways and almost loses her footing. She reaches for me out of habit. Comfort. And the cops at her back narrow their eyes when I take her hands and steady her.

“The fact you got experience is good,” Fletcher murmurs, curious as I help her turn. “Next time, you’ll do even better.” Then he looks down at his wrist and checks the time on his watch. “Looks like burger-o’clock to me, huh?” He drops his hand and smiles at us. “Too bad you’re a protected species right now, Rory. The bar does a mean grilled patty and fries.”

“We’ll get drive-thru.” I grip her arm and start toward the door. “Follow the autopsy down the line and see what you pull,” I order them, though we all know I don’t have the

authority to give orders. “Find the medical examiner who signed off on his body, then work it from there.” Stopping at the heavy glass door, I yank it open and let Rory through, but I glance back at our crowd and look each one of them up and down. “I want to know what’s happening. Don’t leave me out at the house, trying to keep your witness alive, and wearing blinders.”

“I have a name,” Rory grumbles, waiting as I follow her through the door and toward the elevator. “A personality. A life outside of this identity of *witness* I can’t seem to shed.”

“You have a target on your forehead,” I tell her, hitting the button for the elevator and stepping in when the doors open. “And a stubborn streak a mile wide. I need to retain objectivity to be able to keep you alive. So if I wanna call you ‘*the witness*’, then that’s what I’m gonna do.”

She considers my words for a moment, and waves for those who watch us as the doors shut. Then she looks up at me and smiles. “I guess I can understand it now. Having sex with someone makes it difficult to be objective.”

My stomach drops, just as quickly as my head. “Aurora...”

“So weird though,” she ponders. “I was so sure I felt your *penis* on my back today.”

For fuck’s sake.

Drake

I cross the Malone mafia mansion kitchen two days after our visit to the George Stanley facility, with a plate in each hand, and a pastrami sandwich slapped on top of each. I intend to walk them upstairs and deliver one to Rory for a late lunch, since she hasn't been down for hours. But she bursts into the room anyway, scaring the shit out of me when the door flings wide and bounces off the wall.

“We need to go.” She’s getting faster on her feet. Or maybe, she’s just that determined today, because she crosses the kitchen in a handful of short strides and snatches the plates from my hands, tossing them onto the counter so they slide and come to a stop just inches before the sink. “It’s time to go.”

“Go where?” I grab a gun and wrap my witness up in my left arm, sweeping her behind my back as I search the room. “What’s the problem?”

“The hospital called.” She shakes my grip away and steps around until I’m caught in her red and swollen gaze. “They called, Drake!”

“They called about wh—” But of course, the answer comes to me. My heart shudders with pain for the girl whose mother is dying. Or maybe she’s already dead. Maybe we missed it, and Rory will never get to say goodbye. “Is she...” I swallow the dread in my throat and holster my gun. Then I grab her arms to keep her still. To keep her with me. “Is she gone?”

“No. But it’s time.” Big, fat tears escape her eyes and roll onto her cheeks. “Brenda called and said to go there right now. So let’s go.” She grabs my hand and pulls, growling when I don’t move. “Drake! We have to go to her. Now.”

“We can’t.” I bring her back and wrap her in my arms. It’s not a hug. It’s containment. Black and white, god’s honest truth, it’s restraint. “Rory, it takes manpower. And time. And planning.” I lock my arms when she realizes I’m a straightjacket and *not* comfort. But I rest my chin on her head and close my eyes.

I wish it could be different. I wish I could give her what she needs. “I can talk to Malone,” I murmur. “I could try to get a team together so we can head over there. But that takes time.”

“We don’t have time!” She squirms in my hold and jams her fists in my ribs. “Drake! We don’t have time.”

“We can’t just walk out these doors.” I crush her close before she does exactly that, taking off when it’s not safe and getting herself killed. “We can’t just go, Rory.”

“My mother is dying!” She slams her fist into my ribs again and knocks the breath from my lungs. “This is it!” She cries out in frustration, fighting me when I won’t let her go. “It’s time to go before it’s too late.”

“Babe.” I palm her cheeks and force her to still, lifting her gently to her toes so she has less traction on the floor to turn and run. “We can’t go there right now. They know who she is. They know where she is. They know she’s dying, and they know, when it’s time, you’re gonna come running.”

“Of course I’m gonna run to her!” Tears stream down her cheeks, wetting my palm as they wriggle into the miniscule space between our touch. “What do you expect me to do, Drake? Sit here and say, ‘fuck it?’ Let her die alone like she doesn’t matter?”

“What do you think *she’d* want?” I pull her higher until she’s on the tips of her toes. “Does she want you to sit with her in these final moments, or does she want you to be safe?” I

shake her when she tries to peel my hands away. “Is she selfish like that, Aurora? Or do you think she’d choose your safety?”

“Why does it have to be one or the other?” she bawls. “Why does she have to die alone, just so I can live?”

“She doesn’t have to be alone.” I lean in and press a dry, close-mouthed kiss to the very middle of her lips, startling her when she’d rather argue. She inhales a deep breath, almost sucking air from the depths of my soul and breaking it along the way. Her sadness, an ache I’m not sure I can bear. “Give me time,” I plead. “Give me an hour to talk to Malone and figure something out.”

“I don’t have an hour,” she sobs. “I don’t have a minute. I’m not stupid, Drake. That phone call already means it’s probably too late.”

“Give me twenty minutes,” I beg. “I promise, I’m gonna make something happen for you. But you just have to be patient.”

“Fuck you!” She slams her hands to my chest, surprising me with her strength, and shoving me back, then she spins on her heels and stalks away. “You’re stalling for time,” she shouts, bursting through the door she came through on an angry step-shuffle I know hurts her leg. “You knew this was coming. You knew we were on the clock, and not once did you plan ahead?”

“Don’t leave this house, Aurora! Fuck.” I snatch my phone from my pocket and hit dial on the run, striding through the door and preparing to chase her outside if that’s the way she goes. But when she turns and heads up the stairs in the same breath Malone answers, I spin on my heels and head into the formal sitting room.

“Yeah?”

“Her mother is dying,” I bite out. “Like, right now. It’s happening. What plans have you got in place to get her there?”

“Banks! None,” he booms. “I’m not on Rory duty, you are! I’m busy searching for the guy hunting her down.”

“Her mother has minutes to live! We’re at the end. No way is it going down this way.”

“That hospital is overflowing with the carnage of some shit that happened this morning,” he argues. “A commuter accident or something. They have press on the front doors, and traffic is backed up so no one is driving from one end of this street to the other today. No one is moving unless you walk.”

“Another accident?” I growl. “Orchestrated by Vallejo’s men?”

“I don’t know, Banks. Maybe! Chances are they know the woman is on her last legs. If they want to be where the girl is, and they want things to be noisy so she gets popped during the mess, then yeah. Probably was them. It’s what I’d do.”

“Yeah,” I snarl, “color me surprised, Mafia Boy. So what the fuck is the plan? What do I do for this girl whose mother is on her deathbed?”

“I don’t know! It sucks, okay? I get it, I really do. But if she goes down there today, it’s not likely she’ll live to talk about it tomorrow. Now, I’m gonna move past the ‘Mafia Boy’ dig and allow you that grace, because you’re a little stressed right now, and you’re dealing with some big shit. We all are. But you’re wasting your time, and you’re wasting mine, by taking shots at me. Keep her at the fucking house. Keep her alive. If she needs to be angry at someone, tell her it’s on me. Make me her villain. You’ve already set me up to be the bad guy anyway, and I don’t give a fuck if she likes me or not. I just care that you keep her safe.”

“Malone! We can’t take this moment from her.”

“We don’t get a choice,” he snarls.

“And if it was your mother?” I demand. “Or mine. You’d just let her rot?”

“My mother is already dead,” he bites back. “She died alone. Probably in a shallow grave. I didn’t get to say goodbye either. But ya know what? I survived it. And right now, that’s all I need for Rory. To survive.”

Just like that, he kills our call and leaves me speechless for a beat. Reeling. Hurting for the girl upstairs. And for the mafioso kid who, if I take his word for it, never really wanted to be mafia in the first place.

“Fuccckkkk...” I crush my phone in one hand and push the other through my hair. Then I glance toward the ceiling as it creaks and moves beneath Aurora’s weight. Exhaling and dropping my head, I scroll my phone screen and hit dial on a different number.

A different person.

A back-up plan, because despite the words Rory spat at me, I did think ahead. I just hoped it wouldn’t come to this.

Bringing the phone to my ear, I wait only a moment for the other end to connect and hear a woman’s saddened voice. “This is Brenda.”

“Hey, Brenda. This is Detective Banks.”

She sighs, heartbroken but accepting. “She can’t come down here, can she?”

“No,” I exhale. “She can’t. It’s not safe. How is Eleanor? I want it straight.”

“We’re at the end.” She takes on her nurse voice, and not that of the sweet, caring friend who wants to make this easier on a dying woman’s daughter. “Minutes,” she explains. “Perhaps an hour. I can’t say for sure at this point. But she’s already out.”

“Unconscious?” I question. “She won’t come back to say goodbye?”

“Unlikely. She’s floating on morphine, Detective. Now we wait for her heart to give out.”

“For fuck’s sake.” I draw a deep breath until my chest expands and my lungs ache, then I exhale again and start up the stairs. Slow. One torturously deliberate step at a time. “Let’s set the video up so she can see her mom and lie with her till it’s done. Turn the machines off so she doesn’t have to listen to them. She hates the sound of the *beep-beep-beep*.”

“Yeah.” She’s already in the room. Already prepping things, just like we’d discussed. “I’ve removed Eleanor’s catheter and positioned her so she’s comfortable. Blankets are pulled up, and her gown is neat.” She pulls the phone from her ear and fusses with the screen so I hear the rustle and movement.

It takes her a moment, but she has the screen moving automatically from black to a video, so I get a blurry view of the hospital room I’ve already studied. The machines surrounding her. The IV pole with a bag hanging from it. “It’s time,” Brenda murmurs, setting the phone down on the bedside table, presenting me with a view of the frail and tiny woman. Eleanor’s skin is already a sickly gray. Her scalp, too shiny and bare. Her collarbones, too noticeable.

There’s nothing left but a beating heart.

But it’s that heart that has loved and carried Rory throughout her life. It’s that heart that fed her baby while she grew, and the same one that raised a little girl all on her own.

Her heart is what created the beautiful, strong, amazing woman that is Aurora Swanson. So for as long as it beats, that’s all that matters.

“I’m bringing the phone to Rory,” I tell the woman softly. “Fifteen seconds away. So I want you to give them privacy now.”

“I’ll be out of view,” she assures me, switching off the machine that audibly *beep-beep-beeps*. “I won’t speak.”

“Good.” I close my lips and trudge to the top of the staircase, then casting one last glance over the woman in the hospital bed, I firm my jaw and say my silent goodbyes. My thanks for being Rory’s mom. My appreciation for the woman she raised. And my promise to take over from here.

Then I lower the phone and head to Rory’s door to find her packing a bag. She’s slow-going, fueled by anger and tears as they continue to stream along her face.

“Rory...”

“I’m gonna go to her.” She continues to pack, tossing jeans into the bag and refusing to look at me. “If I go alone, with new clothes and maybe a hat or something, there’s no reason anyone will even notice me.”

“Rory—”

“There’s no reason for anyone to look at me!” She slams a hoodie into her bag and chokes on a devastating sob. “I’m just a person,” she cries. “Just a woman. I’m average height. Average weight. I won’t speak or make eye contact with anyone. I’ll catch a cab, so there’s no connection to you guys, and because I’m going alone, I won’t have an entourage, so that makes it all less conspicuous.”

“Aurora. Look at me.”

“I’m sorry I told you to fuck yourself,” she blurts out. “I’m sorry I took my emotional baggage out on you. I swear, I’m not mad at you. But I have to go.” She grabs her laptop and shoves it into her bag before tearing the zipper around to secure it. Finally, she looks up and crushes my heart into my chest when fresh tears stream over her cheeks. “I’m sorry for being horrible to you today. And I’m sorry that you’ll always know me as that manipulative cow, all because I didn’t get my way on something.”

I set the phone on the bed and wrap her in my arms, holding her when she breaks against my chest and clutches to my shirt.

“I’m sorry, Drake.”

“You have no reason to be sorry.” I press a kiss to the top of her hair and hold her up when she wants to sink to the floor. “You’re perfect exactly how you are, Little Bird.”

“I can’t leave her there alone,” she sobs. “I can’t. So I’m gonna go, but I promise to be careful. I do,” she adds when my arms tighten. “I swear, no one will even know I’ve been there.”

“They’re watching her room,” I croon. “They know what’s happening.”

“No, they—”

“They’ve clogged the entire street, Rory. They’ve made it impossible for cars to get anywhere near the hospital. Which will mean you have to walk.”

“So I’ll walk!” she explodes tearfully. “Even better. I’m just a woman walking in the street.”

“You’ll be a sitting duck.” I unravel one arm from around her, but I reach out for my phone and bring it up to show her. To help her understand. “You have a pronounced limp that’ll give you away from a thousand feet. You won’t even make it inside.”

Her entire body jolts with her sorrow. “Drake...”

“But you can be with her here.” I place the phone in her hand and wrap my palm around the side of her neck. To keep her with me. To keep her up. “Lie down with me, Little Bird. Be with her.”

“Oh god.” She chokes on her tears and turns to the bed, staring at the phone. Yearning. Longing for the one person on this planet who loved her unconditionally. Crawling onto the massive bed and dragging the phone with her, she lies on her side and perches the device on its side against a pillow. “Mommy?”

My eyes sting, and my stomach trembles. I kick my boots off and climb onto the bed behind her, then carefully inching closer, I cup her body with mine and bury my nose in the back of her hair. She doesn’t need me to see what she sees. She doesn’t need me to watch her mother die.

Maybe she doesn’t need me to hold her either. But that’s what I do. I wrap my arm over her body and tuck her in tight until I’m not sure where she ends and I begin.

“I’m sorry I’m not there with you,” she whimpers softly. “I’m sorry you’re sick. I’m sorry life was so awful to you.”

I close my eyes and listen. I feel her heart thunder to the same staccato as a hummingbird’s wings. I caress her stomach and hitch my legs up to cup hers. And I don’t cry. Fuck, I want to. But I lock it down and refuse to cry.

“I’m sorry you never got to experience the real kind of love,” she sobs, rocking the bed with the ferocity of her grief. “The kind where you *know* a man will do anything to keep you safe. Where you’re accepted even when you’re in a bad mood.” She sniffles back her tears and trembles. “The kind where you know you’re his most important priority.” She links her fingers with mine and squeezes, taking the heart from my chest and crushing it until I’m no longer the same man I once was.

I could take back the pieces of who I used to be and try to put them all together again.

But no matter how hard I try, I’ll never be able to recreate the image it used to be. I can’t be Drake Banks, pre-Rory, ever again.

“I’m sorry you wasted your time on my father. I’m sorry you never got to be loved the way you loved me.”

I crush my eyes shut and ride her sorrow, somehow made worse when she begins humming a song. A lullaby I don’t know, but one that seems to only make her cry harder. I feel her pain. Her heartache. I feel her devastation. And when she sobs, I pull her closer and hold her together when she can’t do it on her own.

“You can let go, Mom.” She trembles under my touch and curls in on herself, sobbing as the woman passes and her heart comes to a stop. “I’m gonna be okay. I promise.”

Rory

I don't know how long we lie on my bed. It could be minutes.

Or hours.

Or days.

It could be a lifetime, and I'm not sure even then I'd be ready to get up and leave this space.

But I know a life ended. I know my mother's organs shut down and her heart stopped beating. I know the cancer won, again, and an angel was removed from this earth before it was time. I know she heard me promise that I'll be okay, and most of all, I know she's in a better place now.

The most concerning part is, I wish I was there, in that better place, with her.

"How do you feel?" Drake plays with my fingers, tracing them with his and memorizing every dip and curve. But when I say nothing, he clears his throat and tries again, "Rory?"

"Lonely." I sniffle back the mess that desperately tries to mark my pillow, and stare at what is now a black screen on a lifeless phone. She's gone. The phone is dead. The call has ended. But maybe, just maybe, she heard me with her. She didn't open her eyes, but surely, she heard our song. And that's almost the same as if I was there with her in the room. "I feel like this world is really big," I tell him honestly, "and now I'm just me. The only one of me. Floating around on my own with no tether to keep me close. And I feel selfish," I add, "because I wish she was here. Even though *here* hurt for her."

“She’s not in pain anymore.” He presses a gentle kiss to the ball of my shoulder. So soft. So sweet. “She’s got her wings now too, Little Bird.”

I bury the side of my face in my pillow and try desperately to stifle my tears. My anguish. “She was always too good for this earth.”

“She was here to bring you to life,” he murmurs, his lips buzzing on my shoulder. “To raise you. To make you who you are. Now her work is done,” he presses another kiss down, “you’re perfect, Aurora. Which meant she could finally rest. She could go wherever we go next.”

“It’s better, right?” My voice catches and breaks. But I sniffle again and swallow it down. “When she was here, life was meant to her. But wherever she is now...”

“It’s better,” he croons. “It’s softer. Prettier.” He reaffirms his grip around my torso and snuggles in, his body touching mine all over. His face against my neck, and his knees against the backs of my legs. “Wherever she went, it’s so much better. Because she’s not sick anymore. And she no longer has to worry. She gets to watch over you and cheer you on. But without worrying about taxes or a mortgage.”

I choke out a pathetic laugh that embarrassingly involves boogers and honking sounds. “Stop it.”

“She’s no longer in pain,” he presses seriously, sliding his hand beneath my hoodie and caressing my belly. It’s not seduction. It’s not a *come on*. It’s his skin touching mine. A connection. Nothing less, and nothing more. “She’s happy now. And you’re not alone.”

Curious, I turn over so his hand slides to my hip and my back presses to the mattress. Then I look up into his haunted green eyes and wonder where he gets his certainty from. “There are no more Swansons left. I’m all alone. It’s just me.”

“No, Little Bird.” He lowers his head and rests his forehead on mine. I taste his breath on my tongue, and feel the tip of his nose on the tip of mine. “It’s me and you. I’m not the guy who’s gonna walk streetside for you, Aurora.” He licks his

lips. *Not mine.* But somehow, it almost feels that way. “But I’ll bring you the skulls of your enemies.”

“You will?” I feel *all cried out*. I have nothing left to give. And yet, my eyes prickle and itch. “Obsession?”

“Like my number one priority,” he confirms. “I promise, it won’t be a wasted life.” Pulling back, his absence sending a million tiny goosebumps sprinting along my skin, he looks down into my eyes with compassion burning in his. “I’m so sorry for your loss, Little Bird.”

I look away, unable to hold his stare as fresh tears spill onto my cheeks. “It doesn’t seem real yet.”

“Well...” He draws a deep breath, the movement shifting the bed. “I’m gonna be with you until it does. And then when you’re ready, I’m gonna stay with you while you process it. And after that,” he grabs my chin and drags me back to meet his eyes, “I’m gonna stick around then, too. So you’re not alone.”

“I hate that I have a crush on you.” I choke out a pathetic laugh and turn again. But instead of him pulling me back, he buries his nose against the side of my face and breathes. Like that simple act of existing in my space brings him contentment. “I hate that you’re gonna step in front of a bullet for me. And that you’re here to protect me for work. Not because you’re helplessly, permanently obsessed with me.”

“Aren’t I?” he challenges, spiking my heart into a fluttering frenzy. “I thought I mentioned skulls?”

“Banks?” The front door slams open downstairs and makes us both jump. Drake wrenches his head around to look toward the bedroom door in a panic, not because we’re under attack. But potentially because he’s lying in bed with the woman he’s supposed to protect. “Detective Banks?!”

“Shit!” He bounds up from the mattress and slams his feet into his boots, almost like we’ve been busted having sex. He strides across my room and grabs my door handle, closing it most of the way, but he shouts through the gap. “I’m upstairs. Down in a sec.” Shooting a look back my way, he studies me

lying on the bed. Splotchy-faced, red-eyed, and completely not okay after watching my mother take her last breaths. Malone might wonder, for just a second, if we've been doing things we shouldn't.

But just one look into my eyes, and I know he'll know better.

Still...

"If Malone knows I care about you, Rory..." He swallows, his Adam's apple shifting in his throat. "If he knows, I'm gonna be removed from this case so fucking fast, our heads will spin."

"So stop caring." I push up to sit and reach across to the bedside table where a box of tissues taunt me. Almost prophetic, knowing this moment would come as I snatch a couple and blow my nose. "Do your job," I murmur. "Don't let it be your skull they deliver to me."

"I'll take care of me. And I'll take care of you, too. Clean up," he adds, opening the door to step out. "Come down when you're ready to rejoin society."

"Yeah." I exhale a gentle breath as he strides through the door and into the hall outside, but when he's gone and the door shuts at his back, I lie down again and weep. I turn to my side and draw my legs up, hugging them to my chest and stifling my cries so no one comes looking for me.

So I can have this moment alone.

Just me and my mom.

And now that she's gone... it's just me.



I make my way downstairs a little later. I don't know how long I stayed in my room, but my thigh aches as I traverse the stairs, and my heart feels heavy.

Heavier than I've ever felt it.

“Paine was the medical examiner,” Archer murmurs from somewhere else in the house. Maybe the kitchen, as I amble my way closer. “He was a thirty-year veteran,” he continues, unaware of the extra ears listening in. “He bounced around throughout his career, lasting no more than a handful of years at any one place. Two years here, three years somewhere else. He was sitting around eighteen months at his facility back when Vallejo was taken out. Seems Paine wasn’t opposed to a little financial remuneration for favors.”

“So he fudged the papers?” Drake’s hard tone is dangerous. Dark. A voice I’d forgotten he possessed over the last few days. “Took a little cash in the left hand, and signed dodgy papers with the right?”

“Seems that way,” Archer agrees. “His reputation amongst his colleagues over the years says he was a creep. A lazy fucker. And not one doing the job for the sake of the patient.”

“So he held a well-respected job and a position of power,” Drake concludes. “And if his reputation preceded him, then men like Vallejo knew he could be bought.” He exhales a frustrated sigh and scratches his hair. I don’t have to be in the room to know he does that. I see it perfectly in my mind. “He was a gun for hire just as much as the Malones are.”

Archer releases a growl from somewhere deep in his chest. “You’re gonna stop inserting my family name into this fucking investigation, Banks. I’m not them, and I’ve never fucked with you.”

“You’re the son of a don,” Drake laughs. Though the sound lacks any trace of humor. “Your older brother is *currently* running the empire. This isn’t a *used to be* situation, Malone. Felix was on the news just a week ago for some shit he claims he didn’t do.”

“Felix and I share a father. We don’t share a bed, a bank account, or secrets.” Archer’s chair scrapes along the tile floor, confirming they’re in the kitchen. So I tiptoe closer and slow when the *suck* of the fridge seal becomes audible. “I disliked my father as much as you dislike yours. So unless we’re *both* gonna play the ‘*we’re guilty for our father’s sins*’ game, then

I'm telling you to shut the fuck up on the Malone shit and move on."

"And if I don't?" Drake taunts. "If I wanna dig in nice and deep and make sure the entire world knows exactly who you are?"

I peek around the corner, and though I remain hidden by the wall, I still manage an unobstructed view of Archer's smug grin as he turns from the fridge. "Then Felix Malone would love to drop in and say 'hey'. You've met, right?" He slams the fridge shut and sets a soda on the counter. "You were even friends once."

My heart stutters in my chest, not because Archer threatens Drake's life, but because Drake finally finds that humor we've been missing and barks out a laugh *despite* the threat. "*I'm not them,*" he parrots. "*They're not me. But if you don't stop picking on me, I'm gonna call my big brother and have him whack you.*"

Archer pulls out his stool and slides back down, though his smile is friendly. "Just laying it out for you, Detective. Nothing is ever black and white, and no one born into the mob life is ever truly *all* the way out."

"So you admit it?" Drake leans across and steals the other cop's drink, popping the seal and taking a swig. "You admit you're still mafia?"

"No. But family is family, and no matter how far I go to escape the life, they'll still safeguard the name. So if you wanna take a run at Malone, then I guess that's your prerogative. I won't cry at your funeral. Shit," he laughs, setting his elbows on the counter and looking across at Drake. "I probably won't even go to the funeral." Sobering, like the reminder smacks him almost as hard as it hits me, he lowers his voice and leans a little closer to Drake. "How's she doing?"

"Her mother is dead." He says it so callously. So matter of fact. "She didn't get to be with her in person. She missed the last week of her mother's life, and had to say goodbye on the phone." He takes another sip, before setting the can down

again. “She watched her mother die on a video call, Malone. So how the fuck do you think she is?”

I don’t want them to talk about me. I don’t want them to talk about my mom. So I push away from the wall and make my steps audible—step, shuffle, limp—as I trudge into the kitchen and pretend I don’t notice the way Archer straightens in surprise, while Drake makes no move at all.

He’s not shocked I’m here the way Archer is.

“Ms. Swanson.” Archer brushes his shirt down, fussing almost like my appearance makes him nervous. “Did we bother you with our talking?”

“No.” I make my way past Drake and keep several feet away, almost like if we’re within touching range, Archer will somehow know about my feelings for the man tasked with keeping me alive. Or maybe he’ll know about Drake’s feelings for me. “Do we know anything new about Vallejo since we last talked?”

He turns on his stool and follows me with his eyes as I step into the massive pantry and take out a box of mini chocolate chip cookies. I need an emotional support snack, and I need these men to stop staring at me. “We know that the medical examiner who supposedly ran Vallejo’s body five years ago was often on the take.”

“On the take?” I already know, but I play my part of mildly interested and exit the pantry with my stash. Closing the door and using it to lean against, I place most of my weight on my better leg and dig my hand into the package. “Like, money?”

“Yeah.” He sets his elbows on the counter and nods. “Dude’s name was Paine, and he had a rep for being dirty. It’s not surprising to us that Vallejo had some kind of connection there and covered up his own death.”

“Was?”

I keep my eyes on Archer only, despite the burning stare I feel on the side of my face from Drake. But I guess my question was too vague, because Archer responds with, “Was?”

“You said his name *was* Paine. That implies death, name change, or he’s living in the Cayman Islands and enjoying his money.”

“Oh, yeah.” He inclines his chin and tries with all his might not to stare at my face. My splotchy skin. My swollen eyes. I look terrible, I’m sure. But I’ve officially run out of fucks to give.

“He’s dead,” he clarifies. “About two years back, he was caught up in a B&E gone bad.” He casts a quick glance to Drake. But I don’t follow his lead. I can’t. Because once I start, I’m not sure I’ll be able to stop. “He was home alone,” he continues, bringing his focus back to me. “Recently divorced... for the third time. His kids are in their thirties and forties now. Grown up and uninterested in visiting their dad. He was enjoying a snifter of whiskey, according to *his* M.E., and had steak and potatoes for dinner before that. Home intruder came in through a bedroom window to lift some shiny things. Paine heard a noise, went upstairs to investigate, and earned himself a dozen knife wounds to the chest. Died within minutes. Intruder booked it out of there and was never found again. The case remains unsolved.”

I take a tiny cookie from the box and nibble a bit off the edge. “How do you know it was an intended burglary?”

“Because his daughter and ex-wife were able to identify missing pieces of jewelry. A Rolex, and some gold chains he’d collected over the years. Cash was gone, and a few other bits and bobs were, too.”

“Is no one considering the possibility that this was Vallejo and his men taking care of a loose end?” Finally, I give in and look at Drake. “I can’t be the most suspicious person in this room. And yet, no one is wondering if Paine was dealt with so Vallejo’s big secret was safe?”

“It’s where we’re leaning now that we know Vallejo isn’t in the ground,” Drake murmurs seriously. “But at this point, it doesn’t much matter. Solving Paine’s case doesn’t help us with our current case.”

“And the current case,” I clarify, “is me? Trying not to get killed.”

“Pretty much,” Archer cuts in. “Until this week, we believed Vallejo was dead. Then you happen across an execution, and you’re hearing that name. It’s opening shit up for us. We know who we’re looking for Ms. Swanson, but—”

“Rory,” I remind him. My mother was Ms. Swanson, and now that she’s gone... “Please call me Rory.”

He flattens his lips and inclines his chin. “Rory. We know who we’re looking for. And we know a lot of his former haunts and soldiers. But he’s had five years to live invisible. We’re playing catch up now. He’ll have new names, new IDs, new houses, new accounts. It’s like trying to find a needle in a haystack, but we’re blind, and the haystack is on fire.”

Drake’s lips curl into a gentle smile that arrows straight for my stomach and leaves me almost winded. But I continue to nibble on my cookie and pretend his stare doesn’t set *me* on fire. “We don’t know how to find him, Rory. The only certainty we have right now is that he has an uncanny ability to find you. And motive,” he adds as an afterthought. Frowning. “I can’t figure out his motive yet.”

“I was a witness...” I crunch on the cookie and wish for a glass of milk to swallow it down with. “Witnesses get—” I raise a hand and make a slashing motion across my neck. “It’s the mob.”

He shakes his head, more serious than I want to be right now. “We already knew his name, remember? We already have witnesses, and we already have CCTV footage of his stooges in the street. It’s something about *you*,” he presses, peering deep into my eyes. “You specifically. What about Aurora Swanson has him so fuckin’ obsessed?”

I reach up and scratch the shell of my ear, and though on the inside, my mind and heart and grief all battle a war of sadness and heartache, on the outside, I present the detectives with a smile. “We come back to the fact that he thinks I’m cute.”

“Ha-ha.” Archer actually chuckles. I swear he does. But he lets his head droop and his brain work hard. “Maybe you saw someone there you shouldn’t have,” he ponders. “Maybe you passed someone in the street who, in your conscious mind, isn’t connected. But perhaps they’re the key to blow this all open.”

“The key is in my... subconscious mind?”

“Maybe!” He lifts his head again and looks me up and down. “No one else from that night has a target on their head, Rory. No one else is being hunted down. We’ve made a public plea for information, and we’ve named our witnesses on the news, purely to see if it gets Vallejo hunting them, too.”

I grab another cookie and frown. “That wasn’t very nice of you, Detective. Being shot at sucks.”

He chokes out a soft laugh and reaches up to massage an invisible ache in his shoulder. “I know what being shot at feels like, Ms—” he stops and swallows. “Rory. We were careful with what we shared, and we protected those we named. You and Detective Banks are not our only hidden duo right now.”

“We’re not?” I look at Drake and raise a single brow. “I wonder if they’re having as much fun as we are?”

Archer thankfully takes my words for sarcasm, because he drops his gaze and grins. “We’re doing what we can to draw Vallejo out, but so far, he has not been seen once since this all began.”

“So...” Nerves slam into my stomach as Drake pushes up to stand and wanders to the fridge. He takes out the carton of milk, then a tall drinking glass, his aftershave lingering long after his body passes me by. “Y-you need something to draw him out? You need a target for him to shoot at.”

Drake presses the now-full glass to my hand and shakes his head before the words finish leaving my mouth. “We’re not putting you on a platter and hoping he’ll show his face.”

“Why not?” I sip my drink and scowl. I want to say, *‘My mom is dead, which means I no longer have to worry about stressing her out.’* But I don’t think the detectives will accept

that gracefully, so instead, I say, “Protect me. Put me somewhere that’ll achieve what we need, while keeping me safe.”

“There is nowhere,” Drake bites out. “Either you’re exposed and dead, or you’re hidden and safe. Vallejo’s reach goes too far, Rory. He’s too powerful. So you either stay here, or you’re dead. There’s no in between.”

“What about my mom’s funeral?”

“What about—” Archer’s eyes narrow. “What?”

“My mother’s funeral!” I push away from the pantry door and set my milk on the counter. “I’m sure you caught the memo, Detective. She died alone. There’s no way in hell she’s being buried without me there.”

“So you want me to put you at the cemetery, in broad daylight, wide open for a sharpshooter to take his shot, and use your mom’s funeral as a way to draw him out?”

“No.” I slam the box of cookies to the counter next. “I’m no longer discussing Vallejo and a *‘present Rory on a platter’* plan. It’s occurred to me during the course of our conversation that my mom will need to be buried. *This week*. I’m telling you that I’m not letting her go through that alone. I couldn’t hold her when she died, and I couldn’t hold her this week while she battled with cancer on her own. But I assure you, I *will* be there so she’s not alone when they lower her into the ground.” I look at Drake and stare deep into his eyes. “*This week*.”

“He’ll know she’s gone,” Archer argues. Though his voice cracks with empathy. We’re not discussing the elephant in the room. And yet, yes we are. “He obviously has contacts within the hospital, Rory. He’ll expect you to be there today. He’ll expect you to come running, and he’ll damn well expect you at the funeral.”

“So then I guess you better find him within the next couple of days.” I drag my eyes from Drake’s and meet the other detective’s. “I’m not staying away.” I pick up my glass of milk and the box of cookies, before looking to Drake one last time.

“I’m not looking to make things difficult for you both. And I definitely don’t want to make things more dangerous for you. But I’m not missing her funeral.” Turning on my heels, I clutch my things close and start toward the back of the house.

I’ll go sit by the pool and eat my emotional support meal. And when I can no longer cling to my self-righteous attitude about the funeral, I know I’ll descend back into grief.

The first is easier. It hurts less.

Having a mission keeps my brain busy and my sorrow at bay.

I shuffle toward the back door and away from the men who’ve sworn to take a bullet for me, tears already biting the backs of my eyes. They sting and itch, and before I’ve made my way through the door and onto the patio outside, they fall.

“Aurora Swanson.” A man’s deep, dark voice brings my head up with a snap, and the box of cookies sprawling to the floor so they explode from the package and spread everywhere.

I could lament the few that roll into the pool or the milk that sloshes onto my shaking hand. But my focus is trained purely on the man standing against a patio pillar holding the roof up. He wears a suit and exhales a plume of smoke that I can smell, all the way on the other side of the space. “Don’t scream.” He grins. “It’ll make the cops angry.”

“Wh— who...” I swallow the lump of nerves in my throat and mentally flip through my memories from the other night. Which guy is this? Which gun did he hold and point my way? And how the hell did he sneak onto protected property? “Um...” Shakily, I bend and set my milk on the stone floor, like it matters that I don’t spill it. “W—who are you?”

“I’m not Vallejo,” he smirks, playful in his expression. His eyes seem familiar to me. His face, bearing a resemblance I can’t quite place. “And I’m not gonna hurt you.” He nods, as though to indicate over my head. “Detective Malone in there?”

“Um...” I glance back, which is probably dumb of me. To take my eyes off the proverbial wolf. “Y-yes.” I bring my

focus back around, half expecting him to be a dozen steps closer. But he remains exactly where he started. His ankles crossed, smoke o's forming as he exhales another plume. "Did you want to speak with him?" I take a step back. "Because I could get him for you."

"No need, doll. Archer Malone!" he booms, reaching into his pocket and taking out a switchblade that makes my bowels liquify and my stomach jump. He flicks it open. Flicks it closed. Open. Closed. "Come out. I wanna talk to you."

Footsteps skid inside the house, panic and rage coalescing until I can feel it in the air. Drake is the first through the door, wrapping his arm around my body and swinging me in a circle until he's where I was, I'm hidden behind his back, and his arm is outstretched with a gun pointing at our newcomer.

But Archer isn't nearly as rushed. His anger, not quite the same as Drake's. He carries his gun, but he strolls through the door and looks across at the man like he bores him.

"What the fuck are you doing here, Felix?"

Drake

Felix Malone is the second-oldest of the five Malone brothers. Archer is the second-youngest, which means one exists between them.

The oldest Malone, Timothy the Third, is alive and kicking and completely competent enough to take over where their father left off. But word on the street is he doesn't want it. He's happy to run his bar and live a life of semi-normalcy. Which leaves Felix as the newest leader of the fucking mob.

And he reclines in a tall wingback chair like he knows he rules the world.

"So you're running a case," the mafia fucking don taunts, playful toward his little brother despite the tension sitting thick in the air. "Your case is wrapped up in Gregory Vallejo. *The Gregory Vallejo*," he adds for emphasis. "And you didn't think to let me know?"

"Vallejo's been dead five years," Archer argues. *I guess he talks about active cases with the mob now.* "He's been gone, Lix. He's not relevant anymore."

"In theory," Felix counters. "But Vallejo has pies all over the country. Some of those pies are now *my* pies, so if he's suddenly alive again and comes looking to collect them, I'd say that makes him relevant to me."

"You said you're out." I pace the room and keep Rory pinned in my peripherals. She's not walking away, and she won't be shuffled into another room for safety. She demands to be here, just as vehemently as I am to witness this discussion. "You said you're not them, Malone. But the second

most powerful mafioso on the eastern seaboard is now sitting in this room, having a chat about *my* witness.”

“Well, first of all,” Felix grins, sipping at a snifter of whiskey and making himself at home. Which, I guess, is accurate. He owns this motherfucker, too. “I would take offense to the ‘*second most powerful*’ thing, if not for the fact Cordoza is number one, and he’s good to me.” Bringing his leg up, he settles his ankle on the opposite knee and smirks. “Second of all, we’re discussing Vallejo. Not the girl. Who...” He leans in his chair and looks past me to Rory, sitting by a massive grand piano like she knows how to play it. “Is pretty brave, if the intel I’m getting is true. You called them out, little one?” He takes another sip and chuckles when her cheeks flame red. “Saw a man’s execution, but instead of running away, you walked forward and told them to cut the shit?”

“Stop speaking to her.” I place myself between his eyes and her body, cutting him off. “Where are you getting your intel?” Then I look to Archer and snarl, “Call me a cynic, but I’m starting to think you’re a fucking liar, Malone.”

“I didn’t lie.” He rolls his eyes to the ceiling and reclines back in his chair. “Lix is my brother. You already knew that. I don’t, however, feed him intel. Wherever he heard that about her has come from the street. Not from me.”

“Indeed.” Felix bounces his foot and draws my attention back his way. “I have ears all over this city. I heard Vallejo has made his return, and the illustrious Archer Malone caught the case. That same cop won’t return a man’s phone calls, by the way.” He casts a side eye at his brother. “Doctor Delicious told me she’s not discussing it.”

“Delicious?” I look to Archer. “Who is Delicious?”

“No one y—”

“Oh, my bad,” Felix laughs. “Doctor *Mayet*. My sister-in-law. Who is too stubborn to change her name now that she’s married.” He raises a taunting brow for his brother. “How embarrassing.”

Archer sits forward in his chair and presses the pads of his thumbs against his eyes. “Shut the fuck up, Lix. Swear to god.”

“So here I am,” Felix continues anyway, “I own most of this city, and a large chunk of New York, too. And Vallejo just wanders back in and sprays blood on my streets? On the very street *three* of my brothers regularly sleep?” He settles back with a shake of his head and swirls his whiskey. “That sounds like a direct threat to me. So yeah, I’m interested. I’m listening. And I’m looking.”

“Not everything has to be about you, Felix.” Dropping his hands, Archer waits for his vision to clear. “This is a case that connects to someone we *used to* have beef with.”

“And the DEA too.” Felix looks straight at me and burns me with his stare. “Welcome back, Special Agent Drake Banks. No longer using the name Daniel, I see? I’m offended,” he presses a hand to his chest and chuckles, “I thought we were friends.”

“I was doing the job.” I stare right back and *know* I’m sitting in the fuckin lion’s den. Fifteen years ago, if I was with these men and using my real name, I’d be a dead man. “You think Vallejo is here for you?”

He wrinkles his nose and shakes his head fast, side-to-side. “Probably not. I’ve yet to see proof he’s alive. All we have is his name being thrown around. Now my baby brother is running a case and no doubt intends to stop a bullet with his body before it hits the girl. I care that he lives, that’s all. Vallejo popping a man on the same street Archer lives on is interesting to me. That’s as far as I’m involved thus far.”

“So why are you here?” Rory leans in her seat so the old timber creaks with the shift of her weight. Slowly, three men turn to face her, which results in her cheeks flaming. “I mean... specifically. Why are you here? What do you intend to do?”

Felix swirls his whiskey and studies her like she’s a tasty little snack he intends to sample soon. “I don’t like being left out. What are *you* doing to make this issue go away?”

“I d— I don’t know.” She places her hands on the piano’s keys so sounds tinkle and emanate from the massive instrument. “I’ve been a little lost since this all began, to be honest. Men were chasing me, they came to my home, and now I’m here. Living in—”

“My house,” Felix smirks. “I trust you’re enjoying the accommodations.”

“A Malone house,” Archer bites out. “Family property.”

“I am the fuckin’ family,” Felix counters smugly. “You can stay here as long as you like, sweet Aurora. You make the place look prettier.”

I swing around and catch his eyes, cracking my neck to the side and fingering the handle of my gun. I could start a war today. If I don’t die, I’ll go to prison for life. Since killing a man is still killing a man, even if that man is a wanted criminal.

“How many active warrants are there in your name, Felix?” I turn my body and face him front on. Shielding Rory and preparing to fall in the line of duty. “I haven’t looked into your family much lately. But I’m pretty sure I saw a few actives just last week as your name was floated through my precinct.”

Felix is an arrogant man. Unbothered by menial threats such as prison time. “My name is Oliver right now.” He tips his whiskey back and empties the glass with an audible *ahhhh*. “Surname: Twist.”

“Fingerprints might say otherwise,” I snarl. “Wanna come down to the station and give it a spin?”

“Touchy...” He lowers his glass and chuckles. “Interesting.” Then he leans in his chair to look around me. “What are you gonna do to regain your independence, Aurora? You’re stuck inside this very large, wealthy man’s mansion until your threat is neutralized. So...?” Setting his feet on the floor and leaning forward, he places his glass on a small table a few feet from his chair. “What are you gonna do about it?”

“She’s gonna stay inside this house,” I bite out before Rory can, “and stay alive while Malone and Fletcher work the case. *They* will neutralize the threat. And when they’ve done their job, she gets her independence back.”

“Sounds kinda passive to me.” He flashes a seductive grin and winks when Rory blushes. “Personally, I’m a walk inside that fucker’s house and put a bullet in his temple while he’s busy pulling his own dick kinda guy.”

“Good plan,” Archer drawls, “except we’ve yet to locate Vallejo, and none of his contacts are squealing. They’re all following the ‘*Vallejo is dead*’ party line, which makes it kinda difficult to pin him down.”

“And you’re sure he’s not actually dead?” Felix questions. He looks at me and tilts his head, “Word on the street is that Special Agent Drake Banks was the gun that took him down. Now he’s head of your security team and feeling a tad protective of the pretty witness? Seems like a conflict of interest to me.”

“Right,” I snarl in response. “And your interest is far superior. Can’t have anyone wanting a slice of your pie.”

He chokes out a laugh. “At least I own my intentions. I’m honest. Well...” he sits back in his chair and reaches into his jacket to pull out a pack of cigarettes. “Not about the Oliver Twist bit.” He lowers his voice and mock-whispers, “That’s not really my name.”

“You’re pissing me off,” Archer inserts before I can unholster my weapon. “Banks is here because I called him. And we had Vallejo’s casket exhumed already. The body inside does not belong to a sixty-something-year-old gangster.”

“Alright. Well...” Felix selects a cigarette and closes the cardboard packaging with slow, deliberate movements. “So the dude faked his death five years ago. He’s been underground ever since, until this week.” He looks to Rory, as though for confirmation. “Right?”

“Seems that way. And please don’t smoke in here.”

Stunned, Felix looks down at his unlit cigarette, then back up to the woman who would dare challenge him. “What?”

“My mother died of cancer about...” She leans in her seat to check the clock on the far wall. “I don’t know. A few hours ago. The cancer she had was not caused by tobacco. However, call me overly cautious.” She flashes a savage smile that is a hundred percent a warning. “I do not wish to witness that kind of death ever again. Put the cigarettes away, or I’ll leave this room. Your choice, Mr. Malone.”

“Mr. Malone.” He looks to Archer and smirks. “She called me Mr. Malone.”

“Great.” He pushes up from his chair, stalks toward his brother, and snatches the offending smokes away, crushing the lot in his fist. “Use your contacts, Lix. Find us Vallejo. Then we can make a move and neutralize the guns pointing toward the girl.”



“Have you heard anything yet?” Violet Fuller cries on the other end of the line, her tears enough to make my gut ache, and the hitching of her breath makes my heart stutter. The longer this case goes on and the more leaks we have in our investigation, the messier this all gets. “Gord’s face is all over the news now, Drake. His old service records. His funeral.” She sobs, albeit, quietly. “They’re like vultures and want to revisit everything I’ve worked really hard to shield Tilly from the past five years.”

“I’m working on it.” I stalk through Malone’s mansion and check everything is locked. Every window is secure. Every door is impenetrable. Every single entry and exit point is covered. “I swear, Vi, I’m working really hard to put this one away.”

“Have you figured out what’s going on?” she sniffles. “How could this have happened after five years of peace?”

“I don’t know.” I start upstairs but slow to glance through the window at the second-story landing. The window

overlooks the front of the house and reveals the grounds filled with lush gardens and thick trees, non-coincidentally shielding the home from anyone who might arrive unannounced. The Malones know what it is to have enemies, just as they're aware of a man's desire to protect their private space. The gardens look pretty, but it would be foolish to think of them only as something beautiful to look at.

A bit like Aurora, I think.

"Drake?" Violet continues to cry. "Anything?"

"The detectives are working to find him." Turning away from the window and starting along the hall, I lower my voice. "They're pulling strings on all their contacts," *like the fucking mafia*, "and hope to smoke him out soon. He's just a man, Vi. A human being as vulnerable as the rest of us. He's hiding right now, and he *had* the upper hand for as long as we thought him dead. That gave him the benefit of setting up a box to hide in, but that's all ending soon. There are too many of us looking now. Too many with connections in a world he can no longer hide in."

"What about the cops who ran the case before?" she croaks. "You can't just say a man is dead, and sign paperwork and have it be a lie. What happens to them?"

"I was the cop who ran it before," I murmur. "And others on my team. It wasn't us who were dirty on this one, Vi. The medical examiner was bought off, which is how another man's body was placed in Vallejo's box."

"So what happens to *him*?" she demands impatiently. "Will he get in trouble?"

"He's already dead," I sigh, slowing as I come closer to Rory's room. I don't want her to hear me. I don't want her to know I'm close yet. So I turn again and head back to the top of the stairs. "He was murdered in his home a couple of years ago. Another loose end tied up."

"I just..." She breaks down as I cut her off at every angle. "I don't understand why he faked his death, killed anyone who

knew differently, lived five years in peace, and now he's back and noisy as hell. He's on the hourly news, Drake!"

"I don't know either." Taking a seat at the top of the stairs, I scrub my free hand across my face and give myself a one-minute limit. That's it, before I'm hanging up and going to Rory. "We're doing our best to figure it out, okay? Violet?" I press when she doesn't respond. "I promise."

Her breath hitches with anguish. "Okay."

"Keep Tilly close, alright?" I slide my hand up through my hair. "I doubt you're in danger. You're not a loose end, and he's had five years to hunt you down in secret if he wanted to. But maybe you could pack up anyway and head to your sister's for a bit until we tie this up?"

"You want us to leave our home?" she rasps. "The one safe and consistent place my daughter has ever known. You want me to uproot her for god knows how long and wait for you to close a case we thought was over half a decade ago?"

I exhale a frustrated breath and drop my elbows to my knees. I let my head dangle and my eyes close. "Just tell her you're going on vacation to Aunty Gene's. Tilly doesn't have to know any different."

"He's on the news!" she barks viciously. "We can't turn around without seeing Vallejo on our screens. And when it's not his face they're showing, it's Gord's. Or other men who died fighting that war. It's prime time news now, Drake. And it's sending me insane."

"So maybe go to the lake house."

I jump in fright when gentle hands touch my shoulders, and spin with my fist cocked when I feel breath on the side of my face. But I stop and stare into Rory's kaleidoscope eyes. The blue, and gold, and brown, and green, all sparkling in the low light as the day ends and night fights to swallow us up.

Her long, brown hair dangles over her shoulders and onto mine, and though she should be afraid—of the men hunting her, and of the fist I so easily could have slammed against her

face—she brings a hand up instead and wraps her palm around it.

She defuses the threat, pressing a gentle kiss to my knuckles instead.

“Fuck.” I lean her way and press my forehead against her body while she crouches to be on my level. Her knees support my chest, and her chest supports my head. But when she slips her fingers into my hair and gently scratches, she completely undoes me.

So pure.

So sweet.

So perfect.

And in so much fucking danger, it makes me sick to think of a world without her in it.

“Drake?” Violet’s voice softens, like she somehow knows I need the reprieve. “You there?”

“Yeah.” I inhale all things Rory and feel guilty, knowing her crouched position no doubt burns her thigh and the steel rod buried deep inside. “I’m here.” Pulling back and earning a look of confusion, I push up to stand and bring the woman up beside me. Starting us forward, so I can put her to bed and an end to this fucking day, I speak to Violet and bring our call to an end. “Head to the lake house if you want.”

“Yours?” she questions. “The one where you and Gord would always go fishing?”

“Yeah, that one. There’s no internet out there. No TV. There’s barely a flushing toilet. Take Tilly and let her swim in the lake. Call it a vacation and try to relax.”

“Relax,” she laughs. “Yeah, right.”

“I’m doing everything I can to solve this, Vi.” I lead Rory into her room and swallow when she continues forward and peels her hoodie off to reveal her bare back and shoulders. I wait by the door, rooted to the spot and unable to leave. But unable to follow her in. I’m in purgatory and don’t know

which way to go. “Give Tilly my love, okay? Tell her Uncle Drake will call again soon.”

“Sure,” she sighs. “I’ll tell her.”

“Great. I’ve gotta go for now.” I pull the phone from my ear and kill our call, no fucking clue if the woman was still talking or ready for me to go. But Rory tosses her hoodie and unbuttons her jeans, pushing them down to reveal matching black underwear and a monster fucking bruise on her side, somehow shaped like the hood of a Cadillac. “Jesus Christ.”

“Will you stay with me tonight?” Her eyes are still red and puffy from an emotional day. Glassy from exhaustion. Haunted from the video call she had to endure today. “Please?” she adds shakily. “I won’t hit on you or anything.” She sits on the edge of her bed and pulls her jeans the rest of the way off, revealing a scar the length of my foot from her surgery. “No touching or anything.” Her eyes well up with sadness. “I just don’t want to be alone.”

“I’ll stay.” I move away from the door and bend as I walk to unfasten the laces of my boots. I won’t take my jeans off. I won’t remove my shirt. But I’ll be damned if I let her feel alone on the night of her mother’s death. “I’ll have to get up again later,” I tell her, kicking my shoes off, dragging the holster from my shoulders, and setting the leather and guns on her bedside table. “I can’t sleep all night,” I continue, sliding her blankets back and making space for her to crawl in.

She probably expects me to slide in after her, but I wait for her to get comfortable, then I pull the blankets back up and create a wall for us. An impenetrable stopper to keep my hands to myself and my world from imploding. Lying on top of the covers and drawing her closer, I brush her hair back and press a kiss to her forehead.

“You don’t want to get in?” she mumbles, her voice already dragging with fatigue. “It’s cold out of the blankets.”

“I’m okay.” I stroke her bare shoulder and deem it *all* I get. That’s all the skin I allow myself to touch. Then I pull her closer, so she can set her cheek on my chest and her arm across my torso. “I can’t get too comfortable.” And yet, I

snuggle in and wrap her close, so the scent of her sweet shampoo fills my lungs and the warmth of her trim body is enough to penetrate even the blankets. “I have to get up in a bit and check the house.”

“Will you stay until I fall asleep?” She releases a long, drawn-out yawn that almost has me doing the same. “I’m so friggin’ tired.”

“Yeah, Little Bird.” I press a kiss to the top of her hair and close my eyes. “I’ll stay till you’re asleep.”

“What do you think will happen tomorrow?” she mumbles, already edging toward sleep. “What did you and Detective Malone talk about when I wasn’t in the room?”

“Not a lot.” I lower my hand and rest it on her hip. And though I’m above the blankets and she’s below, it still feels almost as good as the real thing. To feel her shape so close. To have her breath over my heart. To be held by her, just as securely as she’s held by me. “We’re gonna try to figure out a way to get you over to see your mom.”

Her breath comes to a stop, like I knew it would.

“It’s not fair what happened today, Rory. No one should have to go through what you did. So I’m gonna try to bend some regs and make something happen.”

“You promise?” she asks hopefully. “I get to see her tomorrow?”

“I promise to try my best,” I hedge quietly. “I promise to always put your needs first. And right now, you need to see her. But go to sleep,” I mumble, my heart stuttering when she hums something soft and sweet in the back of her throat. Her lullaby. Her coping mechanism. “I’ll protect you. Forever,” I promise on a whisper. “Even when I kill Vallejo for a second time.”

Drake

“We have a window,” Archer Malone’s voice bounces through my phone speaker and fills the car. White-faced and a little sweaty, Rory glances across and trusts me to have her back. To keep her alive, especially when we’re driving the streets of Copeland City. “Bring her along West and Thirty-Third,” he murmurs. “Then you’ll be close. Be careful,” he adds seriously. “The press are on the front steps of the George Stanley building, and they’re hungry for an exclusive.”

“Me arriving to see my mom would be kinda exclusive.” Rory nervously spins a ring on her thumb and looks in every direction as we pass houses and cars. Her jeans, like every day, are a little too big, to make room for her leg, and her hoodie is oversized.

She wears her hair up high in a ponytail, so the ends flick against her shoulders and fan down over her chest. Worst of all, she hums with fear. Not the song she uses for comfort, but actual pants-pissing fear, perhaps for the first time since this all began.

I was starting to wonder if she possessed any self-preservation skills at all.

“Sharpshooters are on standby,” Archer continues. “We have eyes all over the building, so no one is coming in without us seeing them first.”

“This seems like a lot of fuss for one person,” Rory rasps. “Like, there are a dozen people watching right now, and they’re all here with the sole purpose of making sure I don’t

die.” Terrified, she looks across at me. “Surely they have other things to do today.”

I cough out a soft laugh and reach for her, since no one else is in the car to see us, and place my hand on her thigh. “This is their mission today, Aurora. This is literally their job.”

“Some are even here voluntarily,” Archer drawls. “They simply wanted a chance to use their long-range skills again and took dibs to be the one who pulls the trigger.”

“Comforting.” Rory’s skin greens as she looks out the side window. “How long until we get there?”

“About three minutes,” I answer, lifting my hand from her leg and placing it back on the steering wheel. Soon, we’ll be in range of the sharpshooters. If they see my hand where it shouldn’t be, they might shoot me, too. “Doctor Mayet has made an agreement with the hospital,” I explain for every man on this op and listening in to our call. “Your mom has been moved to her facility for the day under a different name, since moving her under her own would tip Vallejo off to where you are. She doesn’t require an autopsy, Rory.” I soften my voice and wait for her to bring her gaze back around to me. “No one will cut her up. But this was the only way I could get you in to see her in relative safety.”

“I know.” Her eyes glisten with unshed tears. “I appreciate it.” Looking away again, she continues to spin her ring and exhale nervous energy into the air so even I feel it. My heart thunders with nerves, and my stomach whooshes, knowing shit is about to get dicey. We’re about to walk into a building without adequate cover, and we’re gonna hope that no one who knows Vallejo has become privy to this information.

“Eyes open,” Archer barks, so even my spine snaps straighter. “You’re in range, Banks. I see you.”

I pull onto the street that houses the morgue. The hospital. The police station. They’re all here, within blocks of each other. Which is convenient, I guess, for the folks who are injured and need help. Staring down the strip of this street and pattering along with city traffic, I look toward the skies and search rooftops for our sharpshooter.

He's there. Somewhere, hidden in plain sight.

"Approaching the George Stanley building. Fucking hell," I groan, forced to slow because of all the bodies already standing out front and blocking the underground parking lot. "Get down." I press a hand to the back of Rory's head and shove her down, while also keeping watch so I don't run a nosey reporter over and end up on the news for the wrong reasons. "This is a lot of bodies, Malone. You know what you're doing?"

"Working with what I've got," he rumbles. "No way Vallejo will guess we're bringing the witness in while it's so busy today. He'll be expecting middle of the night fly-bys, not middle of the day, packed street, and a million eyes."

"It's a fucking risk," I snarl, nudging the car forward and pissing some folks off when they don't want to move. "She's a sitting duck if we don't get this car under cover."

"So be more aggressive with your driving," Archer growls. "They're people. Flash your badge and have them move."

"My hoodie is itching my chest," Rory mumbles, her voice muffled because of her position. "It's hot and making me sweat."

"This is one of those times you're gonna have to suck it up, Swanson." I lay on the horn and force a pack of reporters to move their asses and allow me past. "Sweating is better than dead." The second we're undercover and daylight is replaced by artificial lights, I release her head and allow her to sit up again. "Sweating means alive," I press on, moving deeper into the parking lot and absorbing the squeak of tires against smooth concrete. "Alive means alive, kiddo."

Her eyes narrow to dangerous slits, just like I knew they would, only to turn more severe as my smile grows larger.

"Don't call me kiddo, Detective Banks. It pisses me off." She unsnaps her seatbelt as I pull the car into a parking bay just by the elevator doors. As I cut the engine and glance across to her with a smile, she slams the side of her fist,

hammer style, against my thigh and comes dangerously close to my junk.

Shots fired. Threat received.

“Not unless you wanna talk about it in more depth.” She opens her door and pushes out. But I know she watches every corner of the parking lot like a hawk. She’d really rather not die today. “If we’re touching on age,” she adds, though her voice isn’t as sure as it was in the car, “then I guess we could talk about how you’re old enough to be my dad.”

“Ugh.” I grab my phone and slide out of my side of the car, my face and nose wrinkled in distaste. “Can we not?”

“Can we focus?” Archer snarls, still on speaker. “The garage is secure. Eyes on the roof across the street. No one has followed you down there, and no one has come or gone in the last six hours. That means you’re clear to exit the car and head to the elevator.”

“Well, no,” Rory inserts, allowing me to place my hand beneath her arm and start us forward. “It means if someone was patient enough to wait six hours for my arrival, then they could easily be down here and ready to lop my head off.”

“Potentially,” Archer concedes. “But we have infrared technology that says you’re the only warm bodies down there. Elevator is empty,” he adds as I bring her forward and press the call button. “Come to the second floor. It’s more secure than the ninth.”

“Coming to the second.” As soon as the doors open and reveal no one—as promised—I lead Rory in and hover my thumb against my phone screen in preparation. “We’re in the elevator,” I confirm. “Heading to second floor. Ending our call.”

“Roger that. See you in a sec. I’ll be waiting for you.”

“Yep.” I kill the call and watch through the elevator doors as they slowly—so fucking slowly—slide closed and seal us in. Finally, I slip the phone into my pocket and turn to the woman who literally quivers where she stands. “This is a big deal, okay?”

“Being out in the open?” Her jaw bounces with nerves. “Yeah. Feels like a big deal. I think I’ve developed some kind of PTSD, actually. Will I ever walk the street again and not look over my shoulder?”

“No,” I sigh, taking a step closer until our toes almost touch and she’s forced to look up at me. “Seeing your mom, Little Bird. This is going to hurt you. And maybe it’ll bring you closure too. Maybe it’ll make everything worse. Or maybe you’ll feel nothing, which will also hurt you, since you’ll expect to feel something else.”

“So what you’re saying is that I’m gonna be a mess either way?” Her eyes glisten with sorrow that beats at the bottom of my stomach and leaves behind an ache I’m not sure will ever go away. “You’re saying today will suck no matter what? And that doesn’t even include the potential for getting shot.”

“I’m saying I’m here for you.” I have ten more seconds, at best, before I have to turn away and become her guard again. So I pinch her trembling jaw between my fingers and lean in to press a closed-mouth kiss to her plump lips. “I’m saying I’m gonna get you through this. Lean on me when you need me, and I swear to christ, I’ll catch you when you need that too.”

I don’t want to let go. And I sure as fuck don’t want to stop touching. But Malone is the one who’ll be watching us closest, so I release her chin and turn to face the doors with just a second to spare. “I’m saying this is gonna suck,” I confirm, meeting Archer’s eyes when the doors slide open and reveal not only him but four other men I wasn’t expecting to see today.

“We have the building secure,” he growls, reaching in past me and wrapping his hand around Rory’s arm to help her out. “You have twenty minutes with your mom.” He softens his voice, at least, but he’s not gentle with her the way she needs. He doesn’t carry her weight to take it off her bad leg the way he should.

Knowing her thigh aches, I start forward and knock his hand away to replace it with mine.

He watches me with narrowed eyes. His head tilted to one side. His curiosity piqued. But I move to *former* Special Agent Kane Bishop first and look the tattooed thug up and down. “Bish. There a reason you’re inside this building today, or is it purely coincidence?”

“Detective Sluts-A-Lot.” He flashes a smug grin and knocks my shoulder with his fist. “Trust you to get yourself caught up in mobster shit.” He lifts his hand, a silent signal for his men, and turns with me so we start toward the massive fridges Doctor Mayet will have Rory’s mom stored inside. “We caught wind you needed a sharpshooter and some extra cover.”

“So you came?” I loop my arm around Rory’s and lead her while three other men—former Special Agent in Charge Eric DeWhit, and the equally as huge duo seven-foot tall monster muscles Spencer Serrano and Troy Rosa—follow up behind us. They’re Bishop’s soldiers. His protection. And for some reason today, he’s brought his guns across the country to escort a girl in to see her mother. “I fail to see the connect.”

“Malone knows people,” Kane rumbles, his shoulders brushing mine as we walk. “You know people. And Rory has a few friends back in town amongst the first responder ranks. So when Malone mentioned this to Ace, and Ace decided she wanted to get involved...”

“That’s why you’re here,” I acknowledge on a chuckle. “Where is Ace?”

He only shrugs. “Around.”

“And Jay?”

Kane flashes a broad smile and opens the frosted glass door that makes a sucking sound as the air pressure releases. “His eye is glued to a scope and his finger is on the trigger. He’s waiting for the go.”

“Oh god.” Rory audibly gulps as we step into the chilled room and are presented with the two doctors we’ve already met. Stark white coats with perfectly ironed creases, and solemn expressions, reminding me exactly why we’re here.

To visit a dead woman.

To give her daughter a moment to say goodbye.

To find closure.

“Hi, Rory.” Doctor Emeri, the one with pink streaks in her hair and sky-blue eyes, steps away from her boss and the long table already pulled from the wall of fridges. She wrings her hands together, and though she smiles, it’s soft and sweet.

Gentle. And nothing like Kane’s.

“We’ve got the entire floor to ourselves,” she murmurs kindly. “No one is allowed access until we open it up again.”

“I have twenty minutes?” Rory shudders under my touch, her legs growing weaker as Doctor Mayet slowly unzips the shiny black bag fifteen-feet from where we stand. “Twenty, and then it’s time to go?”

“You can have as long as you want,” Aubree responds, pacing closer. “Nothing is as important as a girl and her mom right now. Nothing takes precedence over what you need to do here. So whatever you need,” she comes to a stop right in front of us. “However long you need, we’ll make it happen.”

“Is she...” Rory’s voice breaks with uncertainty, her body leaning toward her mother’s, though her feet remain still. “Is she...”

“She looks like she’s sleeping,” Mayet answers from across the room. She removes her gloved hands from Eleanor’s bag and folds them in front of her stomach. Then she takes a step back, as though to invite Rory closer. “She looks peaceful. And beautiful.”

“Would you like to walk with me?” Aubree offers her arm.

But Rory’s hand only grows tighter around mine.

I accept my fate and incline my head. “I’ll stay with you.” Starting forward, I help her close the gap between where she stands, and where she’s too scared to go. “It’s okay to cry,” I whisper. “It’s okay to feel whatever you’re gonna feel. Even if what you feel is numb.”

“That’s right.” Listening in, Aubree moves with us and offers a small, gentle smile. “There are no right or wrong answers when it comes to the death of those we love. There’s just you and whatever you want the moment to be.”

“Some people cry,” Mayet inserts. “Others smile.”

“Some try to crack jokes,” Aubree adds. “And some can’t come into this room at all.”

“You’re experiencing a brand-new trauma right now,” Mayet concludes. “Whether you want to admit it to yourself or not, this is a distressing moment you’ll never truly forget. Losing your mom. Seeing her in death.” She pauses as we come to a stop by the table and look down at the woman who eternally sleeps. Beautiful. Youthful. Forever paused in this stage of her life. “You’re allowed to respond however you want to respond. And there’s no one on this planet who can tell you you’re wrong for it.”

Rory licks her lips and takes her arm from my hold, choosing to set her left hand on the steel table instead to support her weight. Bringing her right hand forward, and working hard to still the tremors visible to every man and woman in this room, she swallows and chokes out a silent sob as fresh tears stream onto her cheeks and a single one drops to her mother’s chest.

It lands with a splat, marking the blue and white gown her mother has been dressed in.

“Does it feel traumatic to you?” she asks, clarifying who she’s speaking to when she glances up and looks to Mayet. “When you see people like this every single day. Is it a trauma for you?”

“Uh...” Mayet looks to me, questioning, I think, whether she should answer. Before dropping her gaze again and shaking her head. “No. This is my job. I’ve trained to work with those who’ve passed. Usually, it’s to find justice for them. That’s where I focus my energies.”

“Do you dream of them?” Silently crying, Rory reaches into the opened bag and takes her mother’s hand in hers.

Eleanor's is too thin. Too bony. There's nothing left on her body that could be considered fat or muscle. The cancer took everything. Which is why she could no longer fight. "If it's not a trauma, then maybe they visit you in your sleep?"

"Yes. Sometimes." Mayet reaches behind herself to a small steel table she, or someone she works with, already prepared for today. Taking out a handful of tissues, she offers the lot to Rory and sets her hands in her pockets when Rory accepts. "I dream of the children, mostly. They haunt me."

"Is that what drives you to find justice?" Rory brings her mother's hand up to cup her own cheek. "When someone ends up here when they shouldn't. When it's not fair."

"Yes." Mayet inclines her chin. "That drives me. I can't stand the unfairness that results when one person harms another for no reason except personal gain."

"How do you find justice when the bad guy is cancer?" Rory chokes out a sob and closes her eyes, her shoulders bouncing and her chest heaving in its search for air. "How do you let it go, when there's no clear villain? There's no one to punish?"

"I don't know." Out of her depth, Mayet's soulful brown eyes search mine for help. A reprieve. An SOS. "I don't typically deal with patients like your mom, Rory. So I don't have a lot of experience with—"

"I think it's a matter of finding peace within yourself." Aubree steps forward to save her boss. "It's about accepting what has happened and acknowledging the unfairness of it. There's no one to fight," she adds softly. "There's no law to cite. No court room to find hope in. There's just..." She takes Eleanor's other hand and strokes her fingers. "There's just an empty seat where someone special once sat."

"But that's not fair," Rory cries. "The seat is still there. And the table. The house. The bed. And the little girl who has no one left anymore."

"Aurora." I want to pull her in and wrap her up tight. Crush her against my chest and hold her together when she

can't quite seem to manage on her own.

But I can't. Because this is her moment. This is her last chance with her mom. This can't be about me, or my driving need to make the world prettier for her. Less painful. Less mean.

"Um..." Aubree clears her throat and drops a hand into her coat pocket, drawing our eyes to hers in curiosity. "I didn't know your mom." She swallows, so the movement of her throat is noticeable and the mystery inside her pocket grows more demanding. "I didn't get to meet her. But I know Brenda Williams."

Rory's eyes shimmer with heartbreaking tears. "B-Brenda?" she stammers. "You knew my mom's nurse?"

"It's a small world when you work in the industry we do." Slowly drawing her hand from her pocket, she takes out a glistening gold chain that intrigues Rory enough to slow her tears. "My brother... Eli," she starts. "He's a jeweler. He has his own store across town, and though he rarely accepts commissions, and never on such short notice, he doesn't tell me no." Sweetly, her lips curl into a small smile. "He's a sucker for anything I ask for."

"That must be nice," Rory rasps. "To have a brother who cares so deeply for you."

"I have four brothers," Aubree counters. "And three sisters. We love hard. And we keep each other on our toes. But Eli..." she plays with the chain in her hand before finally, extending her arm across the table and offering it. "Well, he can't help but emotionally involve himself in other people's relationships."

"I don't..." Rory cups the chain in her palm and studies each glittering link. "I don't understand."

"Well, see, he made anklets for me and my best friend. A while ago. It was, like, the middle of the night, and I had to have them *then and there*. No other jeweler would do, and no other day would be acceptable. I needed them that night, and I needed them soldered on, so neither of us could take them off.

Then he went and made necklaces for my same friend. She was getting married, but she held a job that didn't work out so well with wearing a wedding band. Her husband, too. His job made it difficult to wear a ring. So Eli made them chains and bands. Because he loves love, and he knew their request was important."

"So..." Gently, Rory sets her mom's hand down to rest on her stomach, before bringing hers up again and turning the charm on the bracelet over. She takes only a moment to scan the charm, then bursts out in noisy tears. "You made this for us?"

"Brenda," finally, Aubree brings her story around and smiles, "she told me about you and your mom. How you talked all the time, and how you loved each other so much. She said that you're working hard in medical school, and how you'll be a surgeon someday. Or a nurse. Or maybe even like me and Doctor Mayet. Most of all," she slips her hand into her pocket again and comes out with a second chain, "she said that you and your mom were better than mother and daughter. You were *best* friends."

"So you had best friend bracelets made up?" Rory cries. "You did this for us?"

"Eli did." A soft blush fills Aubree's cheeks and humanizes a woman who could so easily remain completely detached from this case. But like me, and Malone, and everyone else Rory meets, we care. We get sucked in until we're climbing off the edge of a cliff to bring her back to safety or sitting by her hospital bed just to watch her sleep after surgery.

Fuck, but maybe this is the only reason Vallejo is coming after her the way he is.

Maybe it's just who she is in her soul. A magnet. And we're the guys on the outside, completely and utterly unable to not get dragged closer.

"With your permission," Aubree murmurs softly, looking down at Eleanor's arm. "I thought maybe you could keep one. And she could keep the other. And although I know it won't be

the same as keeping the woman herself, I thought it might be a small consolation, and a connection you might not otherwise have.”

“You made your brother work on these overnight, just so we could bury one?” Rory closes her hand and presses her fist to her cheek. “You’ll literally throw money away like that for someone you don’t know?”

“It’s not throwing money away.” Carefully, so fucking carefully, Aubree opens the bracelet catch and threads the chain around Eleanor’s wrist. “It’s love,” she reasons. “It’s connection. And when you’re feeling all alone in a really big world and missing your mom,” she fastens the clip and fusses with the charm until it sits flush against the woman’s flesh. “Maybe you could look down and see her message for you.”

“It says ‘*not alone*’,” Rory whimpers. “She knew.”

“It won’t be the same as having her in the flesh and blood,” Aubree admits sadly. “Not nearly as good as the real thing. But I thought maybe—”

“It’s good,” Rory nods, fresh tears squeezing from her eyes. “It’s a connection. Thank you so much.”



“Do you need a minute?” While the doctors put Eleanor’s body away, and Kane’s men fan out to make sure the building has remained secure in the hour we’ve been inside, I lead Rory closer to the elevator doors. But I don’t press the button. And I don’t let anyone else see her. I don’t allow Malone to witness her puffy eyes. Or the pure and complete devastation in her expression. I don’t let Detective Fletcher angle closer and listen to our words. And if Jay Bishop sits atop the building opposite ours, his hands wrapped around a rifle, and his eye pressed to a scope, then I stand between him and her, too. “Do you need the bathroom?” I murmur. “Or time alone? We can get you into an office here for a bit. Or down into the parking garage?” I fold my arms, purely to stop myself from reaching

across and holding her. “I’ll take you anywhere you’ve gotta go. You’ve just gotta tell me what you want.”

“I want to go on to the next step.” Sniffling, and so fucking brave, she abandons her ring and fusses with her new bracelet instead. Standing tall and broadening her shoulders, she looks up at me with wet eyes, but steely determination. “I want this all to stop. I want Vallejo to go away and leave me alone.”

I study her splotchy cheeks, and quivering jaw. The bags beneath her eyes from too little sleep and far too much stress, and the line already formed between her brows.

Twenty-one-years-old, and already, she’s given herself a tension line that’ll never go away. But she’s steady and sure. Her stare, certain and unshaking.

“Alright.” I close my eyes for just a moment and drop my head back to face the ceiling. Because I’m at the end of my rope. I’m done with this mess and ready to put it behind us, too. But for as long as Vallejo is alive, Rory’s in danger.

Her life will always be under threat. Her wellbeing, not promised.

“Okay.” Swallowing, I flicker my eyes open and bring my focus down until I look into her stunning mixture of green and blue and gold. I never stood a chance of meeting this woman and just walking away again.

I saw her on a hill in a town thousands of miles from here, and already, I knew she was special.

I followed her ambulance all the way to the hospital, and I demanded updates on the surgery that would put plates and pins in her leg.

After that, I watched her sleep. And when she was discharged from the hospital and slowly made her way to Copeland, leaving me behind like we never met, I kept watch then, too.

Being me, with the connections I have, made it easier to keep eyes on this woman just to make sure she was okay. Sore, I concede, especially as she learned to walk again. But alive and safe.

It was working all the way up until she witnessed a murder she was never supposed to see.

“I’m ready to go,” I tell her on a quiet rasp. “When you are.”

“I’m ready.” Steelier than me, she steps away from the elevator and heads across to shake Mayet’s hand. They exchange polite thank yous and sweet goodbyes. Condolences are offered, and Rory’s eyes continue to swell with emotion.

But she repeats her steps with Doctor Emeri as well, though the second comes with a hug that Mayet doesn’t offer.

They talk bracelets for a moment, and kind brothers, and while they do that, I take out my phone and dial a number I haven’t had to call in a long time.

“Yeah?”

A soft breeze moves around on the other end of the line. Birds squawk, and a man’s breathing is even and sure.

“Are you ready?” I swallow the lump in my throat and wish things could be different. I wish this never had to happen, and above all, I wish I didn’t have to organize an innocent woman’s assassination.

But she saw things she shouldn’t.

She was in the wrong place at the wrong time. And Vallejo’s reach stretches too far.

“I’m ready,” he responds. Unfeeling. Unemotional. “Call it.”

“Drake?”

“Yeah.” I tug the phone from my ear and kill the call between me and another man. Then slipping the device into my pocket, I offer my arm and wait for Aurora to wrap hers around mine. She gives me her weight to carry, leaning on me when I’m not sure she’d hand such weakness to someone else.

Drawing a fortifying breath and filling my chest until it feels like it might burst, I exhale again and hit the call button for the elevator.

“Wait a sec,” Archer calls across the expanse of the glass and tile floor. “Fletch and I will come down with you.”

“I don’t want to wait for them,” I whisper to Rory, drawing her eyes and a sweet smile to her lips. Lips I’ve never kissed. Not the real, proper, soul-shattering, life-changing kind.

Not the kiss of a lover.

When the doors open and the elevator arrives, empty, I lead her in and turn back to face our distracted crowd. Detective Fletcher chats with Doctor Emeri, and Detective Malone talks to Mayet. Kane and his crew watch me, with narrowed eyes and curious stares, but they don’t make a sound as the doors slide shut and the elevator becomes just ours.

Me and Rory.

All alone, perhaps for the last time ever.

“Everything’s gonna be okay.” I turn to her so our toes touch and her chest presses against mine. She breathes heavily, nervous as her instincts scream that something feels off. But she trusts me. She gulps when I reach up with my free hand and press my palm to the smooth, warm skin of her throat, then she reaches up with her free hand and wraps it around my wrist. “It’s gonna be over soon,” I promise her. “I’ve got things in place to smoke Vallejo out. And the second he does...”

She swallows, so the movement rubs along my palm. “You’ll lop his head off.”

I choke out a small laugh and lean in to press my forehead to hers. “Something like that, Little Bird. I thought I already did it once. But I guess I needed to be more thorough.”

“I appreciate everything you’ve done for me since we met.” She blinks once, twice, three times so the third squeezes a tear from between her lashes and sends it dribbling along her cheek. “I appreciate that you were the best man I ever met. After knowing my dad,” she rasps, “and my ex, I guess I was convinced all men suck. That they cheat and lie.” Clearing her throat, she closes her eyes and breathes through her panic.

“Thank you for always being honest with me, even when you thought that honesty was a little too *real* and might hurt.”

“Always straight, right?” I hate that my voice cracks. That my heart aches and my nervous system sends shots of adrenaline pulsing through my blood. When she nods, I lick my lips and tilt her face up until she flutters her lashes open and sees me again. “As the cop who is supposed to protect you, it would be wrong of me to tell you that I love you, Aurora.”

Her eyes flash wide and panicked. But that panic quickly turns to fresh tears.

“It’s wrong of me to have feelings for a witness. Especially one as young as you are.”

Moisture dribbles along her cheeks and plops onto my hand.

“But?”

“But as a man,” I sigh, drawing her to her toes and bringing her lips closer to mine. “As a man, I promise to do whatever it takes to make you safe.” I run the pad of my thumb across her throat and lower until our lips touch and her breath explodes into my mouth.

Unraveling her arm from mine, she wraps it over my shoulder instead and forces me closer until nothing separates us.

Not air.

Not light.

Not the mafia paying a fortune to have her killed, and not a badge, forbidding me to touch.

Our tongues duel and her teeth score themselves into my mind forever. She kisses like she knows this is our one and only chance, and I try desperately to use this time to plan a different outcome.

A better way.

A safer way.

“Whatever it takes,” I murmur, savoring her flavor on my tongue, and her supple body beneath my hands. “Whatever,” I repeat, reaching out to hit the button for the lobby floor.

“We wasted time.” She nibbles on my bottom lip, playing with me and knowing we have seconds before we’re forced to part again. “So much time.”

“I was protecting you.” I slide my hand around and slip my fingers in the back of her hair, fisting her ponytail and earning a gasp from somewhere deep in her throat. “I wasn’t allowed to touch.”

“But you wanted to.” She leans on me, forcing us both to feel my steely length pressed to her stomach. “We both wanted to.”

“I often want things, Little Bird. Doesn’t mean I get them.” Pressing one last kiss to her plump lips, I push her away and turn to face the front a mere millisecond before the silver doors slide open and a burst of frenzied reporters charge forward. Thirty, forty, maybe fifty or more, packed into the George Stanley lobby. Lights and cameras and microphones, shoved in our faces and terrified, Rory’s hand squeezing around mine.

She swallows so the lump in her throat is almost audible, and definitely painful.

“Ms. Swanson!” one reporter shouts, giving her whereabouts away and blasting her stunned face all over the news. “Tell us what you saw last week.”

“Ms. Swanson,” another booms. “Is it true you witnessed a mob-style execution?”

“Ms. Swanson!” a third, fourth, and fifth reporter yells for attention.

Rory takes a step back, retreating from the noise and demands and shouted questions of people she doesn’t know. But while she goes one way, my eyes cross the expanse of the lobby to a glint of sunlight on steel.

I narrow them and try to focus. To see what is near, but too far to pinpoint.

“Ms. Swanson!” they keep bellowing, pushing closer and trapping us inside the silver box of death. “Ms. Swanson!” “Ms. Swanson.”

“Banks!” I wrench my head to the right, to the emergency stair exit as Malone and Fletcher burst through with their guns drawn and panic in their expressions. They’re at the back of the pack, and we’re at the front. Rory’s hand clings to mine for safety, and reporters press closer for an exclusive they have no right to have.

The noise within the lobby is deafening.

Roaring.

But years of training and decades of living under the rule of Henry Banks has my gaze zeroing in on a shadow in the back corner of the building.

Our eyes meet for just a beat.

His dark, almost black. But then one closes, and the other perches behind a scope.

“Everyone down!” Archer bounds through the crowd and shoves bodies to the floor.

The boom of a gunshot makes the windows rattle and my heart tear in half. I spin a mere millisecond after the explosion of a Remington rifle, reaching for Rory’s flailing hand. But a bullet slams dead center on her chest and throws her against the wall of the elevator, her head rapping against steel with a sickening blow.

Frenzied, I dive over her. Wrap her in my arms as crimson bathes her hoodie and soaks through my shirt. I use every scrap of willpower I possess to not spew, to not grab my gun and go on a spree to take down every man who dare hurt her. When Malone and Fletcher burst into the elevator too, smacking the buttons to have the doors shut, I brush hair off Rory’s blood-smeared face and search for a pulse. For life. For a silver lining. “Rory?” I tear her hoodie up to reveal her torso, searching for her wound, my hands staining with blood. “Aurora!” I shake her when her eyes refuse to open. “Wake up.”

“Clear the lobby.” Archer shouts into his phone, pacing the small space of the elevator as the doors close and looking down at the girl splayed out below us. “I fucking told you to wait for us,” he snarls, flexing his hand around his gun and staring daggers at the side of my face. “I told you to wait!”

I wanted a minute with her.

I wanted to say goodbye.

I wanted to taste, for the first and last time.

“How is she?” Fletch kneels on her other side and places his fingers on her throat. “Alive.”

“Unconscious.” I set my knees on the elevator floor and drag her up, her head dangling and her hair sitting in a pool of crimson. “She hit her head really hard.”

The doors open on the ninth floor and reveal Doctors Mayet and Emeri once more. But this time, a third is present. A doctor for the living, not the dead.

“Aw man.” She crouches down and does what Fletch and I did, checking for Rory’s pulse before allowing her eyes to scan across the Kevlar vest we strapped to her chest before leaving the house. “The bullet was too powerful.”

“Knocked her on her ass,” I rumble, lifting her body from the bottom of the red-smearred elevator and stepping out to place her on a stretcher Doctor Emeri wheels closer. “A concussion wasn’t part of the plan.”

“But she’s dead.” Mayet drags the hair off Rory’s face and looks down with an almost serene smile. “Her assassination is gonna be on every news station, every hour, all across the country. Vallejo will see.” She helps Emeri un-velcro the vest and removes it to reveal a small sandwich-bag-esque parcel of pig’s blood.

It exploded when the bullet hit her chest, making a mess, and selling the scene we’re trying to pass off to the world. “He’ll stop hunting her now,” Mayet adds. “Give things a couple of days to make sure he’s bought it.” Then she looks down at Rory, whose eyes flutter toward consciousness. “Hey there.” She steps aside to make room for the third doctor and a

penlight. “You went to sleep for a minute, Ms. Swanson. Way to make your ruse look more real.”

“Drake?” Rory’s voice crackles, her eyes squinting when Doctor Cleary, according to the name on her coat, flashes a light to check her pupils. “Drake?”

“I’m here.” I take her hand and wrap my fingers around her delicate wrist. Over her new bracelet and around to touch the pads to her pulse point. “You weren’t supposed to go flying like that.”

“Caught me by surprise,” she rasps, coughing and groaning when the movement hurts. “Judy Jinx got me. I didn’t think it was gonna hit that hard.”

“You’re free now.” Detective Malone stands on Cleary’s right and draws Rory’s eyes up. “Like Mayet said, we give it a couple of days to make sure Vallejo’s people catch the news. Then you get your life back. Freedom,” he smiles. Perhaps for the first time since this all began. “You won’t have to hang out with Detective Banks anymore.”

Rory

I asked for this to be over.

I wanted life to go back to normal. To be able to bury my mom and go to school like an ordinary twenty-one-year-old could. I wanted to be able to walk to the corner store, or out to dinner if a man were so inclined to ask me out.

I wanted to visit the hospital, attend physical therapy, study in the Copeland City Library, and go back to my house.

I wanted normalcy.

Apart from attending a *public* funeral for my mom—*the cops said no to that*—and except for visiting the home she worked so hard to pay off and hand down to me—*it's still a crime scene*—I'm given all the freedoms I wished for over the last few weeks.

I got to be in attendance as a priest blessed my mother and she was lowered into the ground, and I get to go for a walk anytime I like.

I can go to the store. Or the park. I can walk the grounds surrounding Malone's mansion as I please—*since going to my mom's townhouse is a little too gaudy for a woman pretending to be dead*—and I can sneak into the hospital to visit with Brenda as often as I want.

It's like life was handed back to me, *almost* exactly how it was prior to witnessing Lorenzo Lombardo's execution. But for now, for a few weeks, they say, a cop will walk close behind to make sure I'm not popped for the sake of it.

Officer Clay was released from the hospital after surgery that repaired his shoulder, and I'm released after they make sure the massive bruise forming on my chest doesn't turn into a blood clot that'll kill me anyway.

I was tossed off a cliff last year, and hit by a car the night of Lorenzo's murder.

Getting shot by a high caliber rifle and thrown against the back of the elevator, losing consciousness, and *almost* forgetting the soul-shattering, life-changing, heart-wrenching kiss Drake and I shared, is just part and parcel of being the woman Judy Jinx has dedicated her life and focus to.

Though perhaps, forgetting would be the best thing for my sanity, since Drake is never around anymore. He's assigned *other* police protection to my case now. He has *other* cops tail me everywhere I go, and when I sleep at night, *other* cops walk the halls of Malone's house and report back that I'm alive and in one piece.

He's abandoned me but *swears* he's working the case and searching for Vallejo.

Loneliness swallows me up and makes the world dull. Colorless. It makes life hardly worth living. Because walking to the store is no fun unless I'm going there to buy groceries for a meal I want to share with him. Studying is boring when I'm still not entirely sure of the specialty I'll choose once I hit medical school. And I can't make a choice, because I have no one to talk to about it. Freedom isn't freedom at all, not *this* freedom, at least. It's just a longer leash, almost as though the guy holding it allows just enough slack to hope that I don't notice it at all.

But when I walk the halls of a massive home, alone but for the shadows trailing twenty steps behind, and when I sit down to dinner at night, alone, I remember it still exists.

Or perhaps it's not a leash at all. But rather, a cage.

It's gilded and pretty and everyone pretends the doors are open and I can leave to explore.

But the world is colorless, remember? And whatever is outside holds no interest for me for as long as Drake is missing from my life.

Which is pretty lame, when I think about it.

This is Judy Jinx's best work yet. Have me fall in love with a man, then take him away and leave me rotating in the fire of loneliness.

"Ms. Swanson?" Officer Spears, *Aaron*, isn't a great deal older than me. He and Officer Clay were probably in the same graduating class together. But he doesn't have the boyish charm Clay does. And he doesn't possess the obsessive power Drake does.

He's just... here. Not infringing on my space. Probably would step in front of a bullet if one came sailing my way.

He follows fifteen feet behind me as I wander the halls between the kitchen and my bedroom upstairs. I occupy this house the way a ghost occupies any other of the same age. Quiet. Cold. Lost in eternity.

He clears his throat when I don't stop or turn to face him, repeating, "Ms. Swanson?"

"Yeah?" I cast a short look over my shoulder before continuing into the kitchen in search of a drink. Or a snack. Or maybe a cyanide pill. "Do you want a drink, too?"

"Uh..." he stops in the doorway and watches as I open the fridge to peruse my options. "No thanks."

I take a soda and slam the door so glass bottles rattle inside, the sound echoing throughout the otherwise silent home. "Your loss. What's up?"

"Um... Detective Banks would like to remind you that the pappardelle pasta with portobello wine sauce is available for your dinner tonight." He clears his throat again, nervous about the message he's been instructed to pass along. "He said to make sure you eat it."

"Yeah?" I lift my soda and take a sip that ends with an obnoxious *ahhh*. "Well, Detective Banks can suck a ketchup

bottle. He's not here to make me eat. And you..." I look the man up and down and scoff. Physically, he's bigger than me. Meatball arms and thick thighs. He was assigned, I'm sure, for his large frame and ability to absorb a bullet before it passed through his multi-muscle layers and embedded in my skin. But emotionally, and mentally, he doesn't have the strength to stand up to me. "Unless Detective Banks wants to come here himself and make me eat, I think I'm going to exercise this supposed freedom of mine and choose when to carb load." I set my soda on the stone counter and smile at Officer Spears. "But thanks for your concern."

"But Ms.—"

"Are you related to Britney?"

"Bri—" His brows shoot high in surprise. "Britney, ma'am?"

"Spears." I turn from the counter and open the fridge again to peruse its contents. Specifically, the offending pasta Detective Disappearing Act has declared my dinner. "Familial relations?"

"Uh... no ma'am. Not as far as I know."

"I would hope, if you were," unimpressed, I slam the fridge shut and turn away, "you'd disown the conservator folks." I wrinkle my nose and meet his concerned stare. "Money-spinning enslavement at its best, covered in glitter and diamonds to appease the masses." I fake a smile and cling to this conversation since it's the most enthralling one I've had in days. "How old are you, Officer?"

"Um..." He looks down at his plain-clothed self, then brings his focus up again. "Twenty-five-years-old, ma'am."

"I'm twenty-one."

"Y-yes," he stammers. "I know."

"So stop calling me ma'am. For god's sake." I bring my hands up and slide them through my hair. A habit, I think, that I've picked up in my time knowing Detective Doesn't Follow Through On His Promises. I seem to recall something about never leaving. About never letting me know loneliness. *It's us,*

Little Bird. Together. Blah, blah, friggin' blah. Dropping them again, frustrated with my own bad mood, I look at Spears and study his long frame. "Do you have any injuries you need dressing?"

This is what prisoners in isolation experience, I think. A mania. An off-the-wall insanity no one on the outside could possibly understand.

"Um..." He gulps, his Adam's apple bobbing. "What?"

"*Wounds.* See, I'm training to become a nurse... or a surgeon... or something."

"Something?" his eyes widen with panic. "You want to operate on people?"

"Well, maybe," I hedge. "I have a hundred-thousand-dollar student debt so far that says I should. Ya know, wasting is bad manners and all that."

"A-and you want to cut into me?" He takes a step back, like I'm Jack Nicholson and I've found an axe. "Really?"

"Actually, I'd hoped you already had a wound, and I could practice stitching it up. But if you insist on the full package." I pull the utensil drawer open and yank out a butcher knife that makes the poor guy's face pale. "I'll be careful."

"Ma'am..." He raises his hands and takes another step back. "Did you see any sun today?"

I choke out a laugh and set the knife on the stone countertop. Shaking my head, I start toward the doorway that leads towards the pool. The same doorway I escaped through the day I met Felix Malone.

Poor Officer Spears is gonna ask for reassignment today, but until he makes that call and alerts Detective Ditch-A-Girl that I've officially lost the plot, I head outside and into the biting cold, the snow still sticking to the grounds.

The pool is beneath shelter, a patio with pretty lights and plenty of chairs to lounge in. Tables are scattered, and ashtrays sit empty. Unused.

But they paint a picture of a world that once was. Gangsters conducting business, and hands shaking on deals that'll make the men in attendance rich, but the poor schleps on the street who ingest the drugs or find themselves at the end of the barrel of a black-market gun, poorer than ever.

Families like Malone's. And Cordoza's. And Vallejo's.

They made money and built mansions like this one.

It's ironic really, that the man hunting me down is no better or worse, no different really, to the family who has offered me shelter and allowed me refuge amongst a war I didn't start.

"Ms. Swanson," Spears follows me to the door and softens his tone, now that I no longer have a knife in my hands. "It's cold out here. You really should come in—"

"Not yet," I whisper. Too tired to go anywhere but forward. Too listless to consider stepping back inside my prison for another night of solitude. "I lived alone before all this started." I head to the pool and pay no attention to the cop who follows me outside. He keeps his distance, circling the perimeter and doing his job to ensure I remain alive. "I mean, I wasn't the nicest person because of it," I admit. "Probably insufferable enough to force my ex's hand and push him into the arms of his professor for a sneaky tryst."

Stopping at the edge of the pool, I crouch and run the tip of my finger through the still water to create ripples that stretch all the way to the other side. "I don't accept fault for his cheating," I murmur, mostly to myself. "We're adults now, and we all make our own decisions. I didn't push them into a room together and take their clothes. But I can acknowledge when someone isn't very fun to be around."

I look to my left and find Spears almost exactly where Felix was when he breached the safety of our walls and snuck onto his own property. "Like me right now," I admit solemnly. "Lonely and bitter and terrible company."

"You're not terrible company," he placates. Drawing a smile to my lips. "You're just—"

"Hostile?" I offer. "Annoying. Depressing?"

“You’re stuck in a house all alone,” he counters sweetly. “With a guy you don’t know. For hours, and days, and weeks on end. You’re being told you’re free, but you’re not really.” He wrinkles his nose so the lines fan across to his cheeks and up into his eyes. “You’re in a prison, Ms. Swanson. Fancy house, good food, shiny things. But the jail walls remain, regardless.”

“How long do you think we have to stay here?” I sigh. “Have they told you?”

He shakes his head side-to-side, apologetic in his expression and relaxed as he leans back against the column that holds the patio roof up. “I just know Detectives Malone, Fletcher, and Banks are following down every lead and looking for the man responsible for putting you in this position.”

“We had a plan,” I rasp, swallowing the emotion clogging my throat and bringing my focus back down to the water. “Show my execution on the news. Make everyone believe I was dead. Vallejo goes away and I can get on with my life. But it’s not working out that way. Drake is still worried about me. He’s still searching. And though he said I was free, he lied.” A single tear slips from between my lashes and plops onto my cheek. “He promised to always be straight with me. But this time—”

“It’s interesting to me that Banks feels this deeply for any one woman.”

A stranger’s voice brings me around with a gasp, my feet shaky enough to threaten a dip into the freezing pool, but it’s the gun pressed to Officer Spears’ temple that has my stomach rolling.

I meet the eyes of a murderer, the eyes that stared into mine from across the street that night of Lombardo’s execution. But in the light of the setting sun, now that I’m actually paying attention, it’s easily apparent that he’s not Gregory Vallejo at all.

Not even close.

Vallejo is in his sixties. This man, perhaps forty.

He wears a shiny gold Rolex on his left wrist and the look in his eyes makes the blood run cold in my veins. “Hello, Aurora Swanson.” Then he looks at a terrified Aaron and grins. “We don’t need you, son.” He squeezes the trigger, his gun exploding against the side of Spears’ skull so blood sprays the patio floor, and nausea sprints along my throat.

I turn on my heels in a panic, only to come to a screeching halt when I find two more men stepping outside of the house.

“Don’t run away now, Aurora.” The man whose name I don’t know shoots another round, my breath bursting out on a scream when the floor by my feet explodes, concrete spraying up and biting at my legs. “I’m a very good shot,” he warns, his voice sickeningly calm. Almost kind. “The first was your only warning.” He tosses Aaron’s body to the right, letting him drop with a thud that will forever haunt my dreams. “The second will be your death.”

“W-why are you hunting me?” I turn from the burly men, soldiers, I suppose, and face my pursuer with faux bravado in my eyes. If I’m to die, I’ll do it with a bullet in my front, not my back. “What did I ever do to you?”

“You saw me.” He wears a suit, much like Felix did that day. Taking a stark white handkerchief from his breast pocket and flipping it open, he uses it to wipe the crimson blood from his hands. “You looked into my eyes, Aurora. You know people that matter to me.”

“I don’t even know your name!” Anger courses through my veins and replaces the ice with fire. “Even now, all this time later, I don’t know your name. So why the hell are you so bent out of shape and tracking me down?”

“Loose ends sink ships.” Finishing with his clean-up, he bunches the handkerchief and slides it into his pocket. But his right hand remains free, a shiny, silver gun like Drake’s, clasped in his fist. “Or however the saying goes.”

“Is Vallejo here?” I twist where I stand and look at the other two who work their way closer. Like I’m a trapped little

bird, and they're the hungry foxes readying to pounce. "D-did he send you?"

The man barks out a laugh loud enough to make me jump. "Vallejo is dead, kid. He has been since your detective put him down."

"But he's not." I search desperately for a way out of here. Back into the house. I could get my knife, and search for that panic room Archer mentioned our first day here.

Did I listen? *Not well.*

Did I think, during all my time of boredom over the last few weeks, to go searching? *Nope. Not once.*

"Gregory Vallejo is alive," I tell him, frantically wondering if I can outrun a bullet. And knowing, even without a steel rod in my leg, I stand no chance. "The morgue dug his casket up." I raise my hands, like the action will somehow save me. But then I take a step away from the pool's edge. A second step, as the possibility of being shot and falling into the water's depth, death by drowning and not from blood loss, becoming my newest, greatest fear. "His body wasn't in the box. He's alive."

"He's dead," the man seethes. "He deserved to die. But he's in my box instead."

Stunned, I refocus on his eyes and narrow mine. "What?"

"My casket." His lips curl high, creating an expression that scorches itself on the backs of my eyes. "Someone had to go in the ground, Aurora. Someone had to be buried beneath my headstone."

"I don't..." My heart thunders in my chest, burning so it aches, and hammering until I fear it'll give out completely. "I don't understand. Wh..." I risk a glance over my shoulder and whimper when I find his men circling closer. Closer. "Who are you?" I look him up and down and try to place him.

Why is he familiar?

Do I know him?

Should I?

“I still don’t know your name.”

Smug, in his thousand-dollar suit, with his shiny shoes, and slicked-back hair, he switches hands, placing his gun in his left and freeing up his right. Then he stalks closer and offers it, as though he actually wants me to shake. “Don’t be rude, Ms. Swanson.” He bends and grabs my hand, tightening his grip until the small bones in mine move, and a gasp of pain tears from deep inside my throat. “When a man is attempting to introduce himself to you, you look into his eyes.” He straightens his spine, so oddly, I do the same. “You stand up straight. You pay your respects.”

“I-I don’t...” Swallowing the painful lump in my throat, I risk a look over my shoulder, only to find the men just two feet away from me. I’m surrounded. I’m stuck. And as I bring my focus back around, I acknowledge I may just be looking into the eyes of the devil himself.

“Special Agent Gordon Fuller at your service.”

Before I get the chance to respond, or react, or in any way scream, a blinding pain crashes against the side of my face and turns my vision dark. If I hit the ground, I’m not conscious enough to feel it.

Small mercies, I guess.

Thanks, Judy.

Drake

I stride through the Copeland City police precinct—one of them, anyway—and charge toward the war room I’ve basically lived in for two weeks straight. I’ve slept here every night since handing Rory over to a new team for safekeeping, except for the snatches of time I’ve gone back to the house to ensure she was tucked in and asleep. I’ve eaten here. I’ve made a million calls from this room, and examined a thousand hours of CCTV footage, not only of the murder that took place weeks ago, but from that night five years ago inside Vallejo’s club.

I’ve replayed, time and time again, everything that happened on that op. Every word that was said. Every face I saw. And then I’ve scoured the Copeland City CCTV footage in a desperate search for those same faces to pop up again.

“I don’t know what’s missing.” I step through the war room door and catch Malone and Fletch by surprise, their eyes glazing over from countless hours of studying the same shit I’ve studied. They sit at an ugly, old, melamine-topped table with empty coffee mugs and overflowing case files, but they look across as I stalk toward the massive whiteboard we’ve used since this case began. “We’re missing something,” I snarl, my patience wearing thin as another day closes and nighttime ascends.

Rory will be at the house, stomping around in a bad mood and pretending that the dark doesn’t scare her.

The sooner I’m done here, the sooner I get to go to her and make sure she’s okay.

“I’m calling in every contact I have,” Malone exhales, as tired as I am. “There is no proof Vallejo set up a new life beyond that night at the club. He diversified his income streams and bank accounts long before his supposed death, but they’re all here.” He sets a manila folder on the table and sits forward to rest his elbows on top. “Everything is here, Banks. He had other identities, as most men in the business do, and plenty of hidden caches of cash. But none have moved since that night, except to funnel down to his heirs via a will and the authorities’ inability, or *refusal*,” he adds on a sneer, “to freeze it all.”

“You’ve tracked it all?” I come to a stop on the opposite side of the table and scrub a hand across my face. “You’ve got a handle on every asset? Every ID? Everything?”

“I’ve got it all,” he murmurs. “These contacts of mine are thorough, so if they can’t find anything, I’m led to believe that nothing exists.”

“So how does a man go on to live?” I drop my hands and set them on the back of a ratty chair, squeezing until my knuckles turn white. “How does he finance his new life, if not with the money he’d earned prior to the club?”

“That’s what we’re saying,” Fletch inserts. “If not for Vallejo’s missing body, we can’t find any hint he’s actually alive. He hasn’t shown up since the night you shot him. Facial recognition hasn’t popped him once in five years. We’ve run every airport, bus stop, shipping port, train station, and taxi rank across the country. He’s a ghost.”

“And yet,” I snarl, “he’s not beneath the fucking headstone we all thought he would be.” My phone trills in my pocket and sparks my ire, impatience soaring in my blood. Because I know we’re close. We’ve had our heads down on this for weeks in search of a man who’s made himself damn near impossible to find.

Reaching back and taking out my cell, I spy Rory’s name on the screen, and consider sending her to voicemail. This isn’t the first time she’s tried to call me since I dumped her with Spears. And it wouldn’t be the first time she’s sent a

barrage of angry texts after I've ignored her. But I swipe the screen and answer this time, bringing the device to my ear.

Because fuck it. I need to hear her voice.

“Rory?”

“It's not Vallejo!” she screams out in panic, sending shards of ice through my veins and the frame of the chair beneath my hand, splintering when my fist balls. “His name is G—”

“Tsk tsk tsk,” a man's voice, soft and calm, sickeningly sweet as he takes Rory's phone and silences her so her shouts are muffled. A hand clapped over her mouth, maybe. “She's spicy, huh?”

“Who is this?” I stare through Malone. Through Fletcher. Through the entire fucking homicide division and try to place my caller's voice. “Where are you?”

He chuckles, too familiar, too... impossible. “You offend me, brother. You don't know who this is?”

Archer shoves up from his chair and sprints around to practically press his ear to the other side of my phone.

“G—” I swallow the bile in my throat and shake my head. “No chance.”

“Gotta pay the bills, son. And when it all comes down to it, I had to choose between my family or yours.”

“I don't...” I crush my eyes shut and picture Gordon fucking Fuller. But from five years ago. Youthful. Stressed. My best friend. Buried. “I was at your funeral.”

He barks out a laugh so loud, even Fletch can hear it from across the table. “You do know it's me! I'm honored.”

“I'm confused,” I bite back. “What the fuck, Gord? You work for Vallejo? Why?”

“Not for Vallejo,” he tsks. While in the background, Rory's struggling grunts continue to play out. Because she won't sit down and shut up. She won't give up, even when the world is stacked against her. “I took over, Banks. I saw an opening, enough money to put my daughter through college, and a way

to make it all work.” He coughs out a laugh, almost pitying. “I’m surprised you didn’t do the same.”

“Do what? Work *with* the men who shot me on the way out? Work *with* the men who murdered my best friend?”

“You’re not listening to me,” he sighs. Though the sound is happy. Content. “I don’t work *with* them, Drake. I control them. I control it all. And now you’re running out of time. Come find me at—”

“I’ve been raising your daughter,” I explode, red-hot, vicious rage firing in my veins. “I’ve held Violet while she grieved you. I’ve been to every single birthday party for Tilly. Every single barbecue. Every single dance recital. I was there for you, Gord! And you’ve been—”

“Setting things up. For us both.” I see in my mind his wolfish grin. His pleased smirk. “Come to me down at the harbor. There’s a warehouse at the end of Dock Street. It’s three stories, and usually houses storage containers.”

I look to Archer, to make sure he knows where we’re going. He nods, so I bring my focus back to Gord. “You’ve got the girl?”

He snickers. “You like her? She’s completely your fucking type, Banks. Why am I not surprised you’re in your feelings about your witness?”

“I’m in my feelings about my dead best friend,” I growl. “And the nights I spent reading books to your little girl when she cried and begged for you.”

“Come to me,” he bites out, angry at my words. “Bring Malone if you want.”

I hold Archer’s eyes, mine widening in surprise. “You want the cops to come? You know I’m with them, right?”

“Yeah, but does he really count as a cop?” He chuckles. “He’s a Malone. You and I both know why he has a badge. Bring him,” he quips. “Let’s talk business.”

“This isn’t my first day on the job, Fuller.” I push away from Archer and charge through the war room door with the

other two close on my heels. “We come there, you shoot us when we breach the door.”

“Not you. I could have killed the girl and left you wondering. I could pin it on Vallejo and go back into the wind.”

“So why’d you call?” I bound onto the escalator that cuts through the station and heads toward the basement parking lot. “Why not disappear again?”

“Because I miss you,” he murmurs. Almost... *genuinely*. “I already said, I’m setting things up for *us*. Malone is Malone, which means he comes with his own slice of the city and contacts that stretch a long way. Bring him in, and he brings Felix Malone. Together, we can topple Cordoza.”

“Cordoza?” Stunned, I look back to Archer’s wide eyes. “You want to topple the most powerful crime boss in the country? What the fuck is wrong with you?”

“He’s getting on in age,” he chuckles. “Just like Vallejo was. It’s time for a new world order, and right now, I control the biggest share of the country after Felix and Cordoza.”

“This is why you killed Lombardo in Copeland?” I step off the escalator and charge toward the parking garage. “Copeland City—on the very fucking street Malone works and lives on—ensures he’d be assigned the case. Speak Vallejo’s name, and you ensure I’d be pulled in.”

“You make friends with Malone,” he drawls. “You test him to make sure he’s legit. You bring him to me. Yeah,” he chatters, “that’s about the size of it. Felix was already in the city, proving he and his little brother are still tight. Cordoza runs the country because he controls too many ports. We bring Malone into our fold, and we control Vallejo’s share. Cordoza isn’t gonna live to see tomorrow.”

“All for what?” I spot the car and turn my walk to a run, my run to a sprint. Grabbing the handle and attempting to yank the door open, I bounce back again when it doesn’t give. Desperately, I look to Archer, who beeps the cruiser open and shoves me in. “You traded your family for money, Gord?”

“Nah. I traded my family’s suffering for money. They grieve me, but they’ll never go hungry again.”

“So you’re funneling money to Violet?” I pull my door shut and wait for Malone and Fletcher to pile in after me. “You’re sending her funds? Is she in on this too?”

“She doesn’t know. She’ll never know. But she got a mortgage-free home after I was buried, Banks. A life insurance payout that never existed. Tilly will go to college and never get a bill for it. We were ready to lose the house before I made my move.”

Gord—” I exhale. “This wasn’t the right thing to do.”

“We’re paid peanuts for what we do, Drake. Putting our lives on the line for ungrateful assholes. Kingpins like Vallejo and Cordoza eat like royalty while guys like you and me struggle. Not anymore,” he declares, resolute. “No fucking more.”

“Gord. I can help you—”

“Come to me,” he bites out. “If you bring Fletcher, he’s dead on sight. But bring Malone. I wanna talk, that’s all. I want to discuss a future collaboration. An introduction. That’s all I’m asking for.”

“Gord—”

“You have ten minutes to walk through those doors,” he snarls. “The girl is dead either way it goes down. But her suffering lessens the more you cooperate.”

He kills our call and shuts me out, my heart thudding to a painful stop. My stomach, rolling with rage. Nausea. Fear. “Fuck!”

“He wants me there?” Archer tears the car out of the parking garage and flies onto the street outside, skidding on the asphalt and rocketing us toward the bay. “He wants Felix?”

“He wants a fucking collaboration.” I crush the phone between my hands and work to slow my breathing. To calm my thoughts. To come up with a plan that gets Rory out, alive

and well. “He gave us ten minutes. Not long enough to organize ourselves with anyone else.”

“Intentional,” Fletcher snarls. “What’s the game plan?”

“You’re dead if he sees you,” I exhale a breath and empty my lungs. “He doesn’t want you.”

“The witness?” Archer demands. “Alive?”

“He said she’s gonna die no matter what.” Sweat beads on my brow and leaves me reeling. He doesn’t need her now. He has no reason to keep her alive. Sick, I drop my head to my hands and try to think. Think. Think. “Fuckkkk.”

Rory

JUUUUUUUDYYYYYY...

“He won’t join your army.” My body aches. The steel rod in my leg almost feels like it’ll bust through my skin. My brain, like it’ll explode through my skull. My arms and hands hurt. My face, tender and bruised. The side of my head aches where a steel gun collided into it and dropped me unconscious.

Only to wake, I don’t know how much later, in a dirty warehouse.

“He’s good,” I press, my hands tied together, and my neck, trapped in a noose that almost has my bowels liquifying. The rope is snug, but not yet restricting. The floor beneath my feet, unstable at best, and the drop, not nearly far enough to make my death instant.

This man, Gordon Fuller, would rather have me choke.

He can’t even extend the kindness of a broken neck.

“Drake isn’t going to trade that goodness for a payday,” I argue. Because I refuse to die without saying my piece. “He’s not weak like you.”

“And you’re incapable of shutting your mouth.” The man looks to the sky and rolls his eyes. “How’d I know that eventually, the woman who tames Drake fuckin’ Banks, is someone whose mouth wouldn’t stop moving?”

I swallow the lump in my throat and try to ignore the rope wrapped around it. The polyester itching my neck and sending me quietly insane, because I can’t reach up and scratch the annoyance away.

“He won’t join you.” I stand tall. Proud, but with the added benefit of taking pressure off my bound neck. “I know him better than you do, it would seem.”

Fuller only chuckles and turns to watch the doors as footsteps echo outside and grunts of struggle filter inside. My stomach dips with nerves. With fear. Because there are two nooses available. And only one is used by me.

“Nice show you put on the news,” he murmurs, sparing me a short, almost kind smile. “I knew it was a fake, though, because Banks knows better how to protect a witness. We went through training together,” he taunts, grinning when two of his stooges wrestle a man past the doors and into the massive warehouse.

The captive’s face is bruised and bleeding, much like how mine looks, I think. Though I don’t have a mirror to compare. He wears a suit, like Fuller’s, but he’s older. A little rounder. Though I’ll be damned if his eyes don’t come to mine and dig in so deep, I feel them in my stomach.

“Put him up there,” Fuller gestures to the second rope, pleased with his work and pacing, almost at ease as he casts a glance across to me. “Was it love, Aurora?” He tilts his head and runs a hand through his hair, the same way Drake does when he’s curious... or frustrated. Or thinking. Or plotting. “You and Banks?”

“Whatever it was,” I spit out, “it’s none of your business.”

“I’ve watched you together. I’ve watched for weeks. He protected you every single time you were near. He would happily take your bullets and go to hell laughing about it. But not in the elevator,” he sighs. “It was his giveaway that day, and it was played out live on national television in high definition. Henry Banks.” He looks at our newcomer, almost like he is welcoming a guest to dinner. “Have you met Rory yet? She would have been your daughter-in-law in a different world. A different lifetime.”

“Henry?” Bile rises in my throat and leaves me breathless. But I look the man up and down and know now why his eyes beat against mine. Why his stare penetrated and almost stung.

“I don’t understand...” Looking at Fuller, I try to figure it out. “Why would you bring him here?”

“Because Drake is good,” he chuckles, too casual at the thought of murder. Betrayal. Crime. “He won’t turn easily, Ms. Swanson. So I’ve got his girl, and now I have his dad.” He flashes a bright smile as his soldier slips the noose around Henry’s neck and leaves him to carry his own weight. “He’s gonna have some choices to make. And in the end,” he clicks his fingers as though to summon his soldier down, “well, in the end, he’ll lose you both. But this is how we create a man, isn’t it, Henry?” He stares daggers at the older Banks. Hatred pulsing in his veins. “We strip them down until there’s nothing left. We take everything from them, their identity. Their autonomy. Their hope. And when there’s nothing left except the broken pieces of a man who once was, the powers that be pick up those pieces and start rebuilding. But they manipulate and mold. They make damn sure the end product is nothing like the beginning. But they swear it’s for our own good. It makes us stronger.”

“You were never gonna make it,” Banks chokes out, his breathing already impacted by the rope around his neck. His blood pressure rises, his face reddening. Because he’s weak. His beating, too vicious. “You were always the weak link, Fuller. So when you died on the job and I pulled my men out of that club, I wasn’t sad.”

“If you were a better leader,” Fuller snarls in return, “perhaps we wouldn’t be where we are right now.”

“If you were a better agent,” Banks counters, his voice deep and pained, “if you were smarter. Stronger. More driven. You’d have lived.”

“More driven?” Fuller takes out a silver gun and flips the safety off, the sound of metal-on-metal as he cocks it loud in an otherwise quiet building. “More driven?” he demands. “I’m about to run the whole fucking country, old man.”

“You can’t even run your own life,” Henry chokes out. “Gambling debt left you desperate. It left you vulnerable, and it was my mistake allowing you to stay on the job and work

beside my son. You could have been somebody,” he rasps. “You could have worked your way up the ranks and really achieved something. But instead, you fucking failed. And you dragged my boy down with you.”

“Because he quit, didn’t he?” Amused, Fuller smirks. “You wanted a new powerhouse Special Agent Banks, and in the end, he walked away and left you in his past.”

“I’m approaching your doors!” Drake shouts from somewhere outside, his voice stealing my breath and instantly pulling my attention from the loaded gun pointed toward the older man. “I’m armed,” he adds, “since you didn’t say I had to leave them behind. I’m wearing my usual two. No more, no less. I have Malone with me.”

“It’s time to start.” Fuller turns his back to me and with a flick of his hands, has his soldiers relaxing. “Come on in, brother.” His voice shakes, almost like he’s genuinely nervous and excited to see his friend. “Slowly. I wanna trust you,” he continues. “But we’re on opposite sides of a war right now. I hope soon, we’ll stand side-by-side.”

My stomach heaves with nausea. Terror. Anxiety. But with anticipation, too. Because I want to see Drake. I want his eyes on me for the first time in too long. I’m desperate for his focus. His touch.

Because if I’m going to die today, the least Judy Jinx could allow would be for his face to be the last thing I see before I go.

But when he comes into view and crosses the threshold with Archer Malone on his right, his eyes meet mine, and his expression falls. When I’m so used to the adoration in them, or challenge, or desire, all I see now is disappointment.

Horror.

“Let her go.” He drags his eyes from mine only to look at the man on my right. His face pales, and his chest caves in a little. “Gord,” he breathes, weak with exasperation. “What have you done?”

“I have men outside this building,” he answers instead. “If you brought Detective Fletcher with you, consider him dead already.”

“We ditched him,” Archer inserts, drawing Fuller’s focus his way. “He’s still at the station working our murder board. Though the board has become somewhat useless now. What with Vallejo’s face all over it.” He lifts his chin in curiosity. “Is Vallejo’s body in your casket, Fuller? Is that what happened?”

“Needed a body,” he answers. “Paine was able to work some paperwork magic and switch a few things up. Fredericks was placed in Vallejo’s grave. Vallejo was placed in mine. I got to walk away and put things into place invisible to, well... everyone,” he adds proudly. “No one suspected I jumped the picket line.”

“How do you think this will all go down?” Drake questions. “Malone and I just... stop turning up to work? You don’t think there’ll be an inquiry? We’re both working on Vallejo’s case. We go missing. No one’s gonna be suspicious?”

“I know you have an M.E. on the take,” he looks to Malone. “You don’t marry a medical examiner unless it’s because you want one in your pocket. She’s your wife, which means she’s part of this too. Her husband dies in the line of duty. She’s grieving. Sad, sad. How horrible. She switches out patient files. She attends your funerals. We’re ghosts, and the case dies with Vallejo. Remember,” he smirks, pacing a little closer, though still an easy thirty-feet from the massive hangar doors, “Gordon Fuller was never here. Once you’re deemed dead, you join me. She follows, or you pop her since her job is done.” He lifts his shoulders and grins when Archer’s jaw tightens. Rage, pure and feral rage. Though he’s skilled at hiding it. “Soon, we take Cordoza’s empire, and we become the most powerful men in the country.”

“Fucking useless,” Henry sighs, dropping his head in disgust despite the rope biting further into his skin. “You had a family, Gord. You had a good life. And in the end, you blew it on slot machines and dopamine hits.”

“Shut the fuck up, old man!” Fuller twists his torso, gun raised, and shoots off a round that booms through the warehouse, startling me so I jump and knock the platform I stand upon. The bullet slams into Henry’s leg and out the other side, embedding itself in the steel wall. The older man cries out in pain, the sound of anguish etching itself in my mind for life.

But Drake starts forward, his gun drawn and rage pulsing in every breath he takes. Before Fuller has a chance to turn back around, Drake presses the end of his gun to the man’s temple and startles his former partner.

His former best friend.

“Turn around, Good.” Behind him, Archer pulls his weapon and circles to keep Fuller’s two stooges in his line of sight. “Slowly,” Drake continues. “Put your gun on the ground, and I won’t have to kill you.”

Fuller laughs. Maniacal, he slowly rotates to look into Drake’s eyes, but he doesn’t drop his gun, and he doesn’t give up. “I don’t think you’re listening to me, Banks. We’re going to work *together*. We’re not enemies here.”

“We became enemies the moment you traded right for wrong.”

“Oh please!” he throws his arm up and points toward Archer. “He’s literally the fucking mob! Have you forgotten?”

“That he earned his badge?” he snarls, his shoulders and chest pumped full of adrenaline.

I twist my wrists behind my back, searching for a way to snap my bindings. Plastic cuts into my skin, burning and stinging the more I move. But I’m a sitting target up here, my neck strung up, my chest open and no Kevlar vest to keep me safe today.

“Malone knows dirty people,” Drake seethes, taking a step to the right, and drawing Fuller around with him. “We all know dirty people, Gord. Doesn’t mean we join them. You know that just like I do.”

“Life wasn’t created for men like us to succeed unless we bend a few rules, Banks. Going straight doesn’t cut it in today’s economy.”

“Going straight is the only way I know how to be,” Drake snarls. “It’s all I’ll ever be. Because I want to live my life. Free. As Drake Banks.”

“You’re a fool.”

“You married the love of your life, Gord! You made a beautiful baby girl together, and you were getting ready to make another. And you gave it all away for money?” he takes another step to the right. “Who is the fool? Because you sure look like the clown to me.”

“They’re safe now,” Fuller booms, blind to the blood dribbling along my wrists and the plastic that contorts and stretches as I twist. If I can get my hands free, I can remove the rope readying to take my life. “They’re fed,” he continues. “They have money to pay the bills.”

“And they grieve you! They want you! Not the fucking house. Not a vacation.”

“I did what was best for them!”

“And now I get to be the man in their life,” Drake taunts. “I get to put your baby to bed and read her bedtime stories. I take Violet’s calls late at night when she hears a bump, or a spider has crawled out of the walls. I went to Disney with them last year, and to kindergarten orientation day before that, because they wanted me there.” He peeks at me over Fuller’s shoulder, his eyes darkening with danger. Derangement. Fear. “When Violet finds out what you are, she’s gonna stop grieving you. And she’ll start hating you. That hate will help her move on, so when she marries again, I’ll walk her down that aisle, and I’ll know she chose better the second time around.”

“You’re wrong!” Fuller shouts, emotion making his voice crackle. “No one will love them like I do. No one would die for them. But I will. I did!”

“You did it for you!” Drake snaps. “You did it because you were greedy.”

Tears burn my eyes and make it difficult to see. My breath, catching in my chest as panic grabs a stranglehold on me and my movements become clumsy. I choke out a gasp, drawing Drake’s attention when the temporary floor shifts beneath my feet and wiggles perilously. If it goes, I fall. And if I fall, I’m not sure I’ll get up again. But his distraction, just a single millisecond of time, is all Fuller needs, because he shoves Drake back and raises his weapon.

They stand gun-to-gun, threat-to-threat, and circle while Archer pulls the focus of the others in the room. Henry grows weaker, his wound bleeding, and the red tinge to his face replaced with a sicker green. Grey. Death.

“You have to choose.” Fuller whistles, the sharp sound cutting through the warehouse and stabbing my ear drums. But his action has another dozen men striding through the door. More guns. More danger. Too many men to fight against Drake and Archer’s two. “Join me,” he seethes, wrapping his finger around the trigger of his gun, my stomach almost rebelling at the thought of Drake being shot. My nerves choking me long before a rope could. “Or one of them dies.”

Panicked, Drake’s eyes flick to me and widen. But he doesn’t pale until one of the dozen armed men strides to my platform and places his hand on the single sheet of wood keeping me up.

I still my body. I give up on the restraints around my wrists. I swallow the ball in my throat and hold my breath, though I have no logical reason for doing so.

“If you say no,” Fuller seethes, “she falls. If you say no again,” he flexes his finger on the trigger in warning, “the good old Special Agent in Charge falls. After that, you get to experience the longest four minutes of your fucking life while you watch them die. Then,” he shrugs, the movement of his shoulders visible from behind, “I kill you anyway.”

“Okay.” Drake lowers his gun, stunning me with his move. Stunning Fuller, too. And Archer.

Half bending, slowly, he sets his weapon on the dirt-packed floor and spares a glance for the other cop. “We’re done, Malone.”

“What?” Henry livens up in the face of his son turning against the agency. “Drake!”

“I’m not doing this for money.” Straightening out again, Drake lifts his shoulders and faces his former friend, eye-to-eye. “I’m not doing it for power. But I’ll do what needs to be done to save my family.”

“As will I.” Fuller whistles again, prompting his men to swarm in and relieve Drake and Malone of the weapons strapped to their bodies. “You understand now?” Taking a step back, Fuller angles around so I catch his profile. The movement of his Adam’s apple, and the coloring in his cheeks. His voice catches with raw emotion. With power. With glee. “You understand why I did what I did? Why I had to choose my family over the job?”

“I understand love,” Drake rasps, looking at me, his eyes scouring my face. My body. “I understand doing what you need to do, even if it means going against the rules and making enemies.”

“I didn’t hurt anyone,” Fuller insists. “I killed no one who was innocent.”

“Lombardo?” Archer questions, turning to converse. It’s almost casual. Almost friendly, the way three men would chat. “What about him?”

“Drug dealer. He was pushing powder on your streets. He brought it upon himself.”

“Who is the man in Vallejo’s casket?” Drake questions. “Why him?”

“Fredericks, just a soldier from the club. He was pushing powder too, and if that night went the way we’d planned, he’d have gone away for life anyway.”

“And Doctor Paine?” Archer asks. “He was just a civilian.”

“He was dirty! He was dirtier than most others. He was reporting whatever the fuck he was asked to report, and he was on the take his entire career. In fact,” Fuller sneers dangerously, “if this were going to a grand trial, I’d show proof the Malones have connections to Paine, too. So don’t stand there, all sanctimonious and arrogant, like you think you’re better than me.” He throws his hands in the air and looks to the doors. “Where’s Felix? I want him here too.”

“I’m around.”

I swing toward the doors, the wood slipping beneath my feet and the noose tightening around my neck. But I stop on Felix Malone, relaxed like he’s on his family’s pool patio once more. But today, instead of a cigar, he holds a gun in his hands. Not just a handgun, like the kind Drake taught me to use, but one of the big kinds that shoot a hundred rounds in ten seconds and kills anything in its path. “I don’t take kindly to anyone pointing a pistol at my baby brother.” He cocks his weapon and brings it up to point.

Fuller and all of his men raise theirs in retaliation. Fifteen guns to one. But the one has the power to mow everyone down in a matter of seconds.

“You called for me, Gord. You asked for me to be here. So you’re gonna lower your pieces, and you’re gonna show me the fucking respect I demand.”

“Lower yours,” Gordon commands. “You don’t point that at me and think we’re gonna be cool.”

“Right, except you already threatened my brother.” Felix squeezes the trigger so only one shot explodes from the end and bounces in the dirt by Fuller’s feet. I jump in fright and cry out when my platform shifts. It’s perilous at best. Deadly if I don’t maintain my balance. “I’m not sure if you know this about me, Gord, but I’m not a fucking boyscout pretending to be a gangster. I’m your god, and there’s no fucking chance in hell I’m gonna work *for* you.”

“Not for me,” Gord argues. “With me. We could combine our efforts and—”

“I’m not working with you either, dickhead. If you wanna be in the same room I’m in, the best I can offer is to unzip my pants and allow you to suck my cock while I work.” Grinning, arrogant, he reaches down with one hand and unsnaps the button. “You should probably show me your skills first. I have plenty on the payroll already who know how to get me off.”

“I think you’re confused.” Fuller whistles again, perhaps to have his men lift their weapons. Maybe to have them turn them on Felix. But they don’t move. They don’t do a damn thing.

Frustrated, he turns to ascertain why. “We’re not getting anywhere today,” he booms. “These gentlemen do not wish to do business.”

“No shit,” Felix giggles. Like a child, he bounces and brings his weapon back up to peek through the sights. “You’re the burger flipper, Gord. And I’m the CEO. I think your britches got a little large for a sec there.”

“We’re done here.” Unafraid—or desperately trying to look that way—Fuller orders his men, “fire. They won’t work with us. So we’ll take their fuckin throne and keep it for ourselves.”

He aims his handgun toward Felix and flexes his finger around the trigger. But when no one else follows suit, he looks around again. “I said fire!”

“Oh, dear.” Drake reaches around and takes a gun from the back of his jeans, placing the end against Fuller’s temple. “You tried to climb the ladder too fast, Gord. You were always about the shortcuts and *get rich quick* schemes. You wanted Cordoza’s seat at the table, though you were willing to settle for Felix’s. In the end,” he flips the safety off and smirks, “you forgot Felix’s reach goes further than yours ever will. Your soldiers are not your own.” He flashes a devilish grin when the men turn their guns away from Felix and point them at Gordon instead. “You want me to take you in, bud? Or...”

My stomach flips, and nerves make it harder for me to breathe. For my lungs to catch up, or for my heart to slow. I watch desperately as Gordon slowly raises his hands in

surrender, and when he angles further my way, the tears on his cheeks. The complete and utter devastation at his failed plan. “Don’t tell Violet,” he rasps. “Okay? Let them believe I died a hero.”

“You want the accolades for something you didn’t do?” Drake snarls. “You want to go down in history as something you’re not? You’re a fucking coward! You’re a crook, and you’re a loser. You couldn’t stay afloat on your own, so you killed and lied and stole, and in the end, you did it for yourself. Not for Vi. Not for Tilly. You did it for you! Because if it was for them, you would have figured something out and stayed.”

“I did it for them,” he chokes out. “Because I’m a loser. Because I’m better for them dead, than I ever was alive.”

“You don’t deserve the lie.”

“Please,” he whimpers, his chest bouncing as his new reality slams down over him. He’s caught. It’s all over, and in the end, his greed undid him. “I don’t want to take the lie from them,” he cries. “I don’t want to saddle them with that shame. They don’t deserve it.”

“I’m not gonna execute you, Gord.” Drake takes a single step back and lowers his hand. “You don’t get the shortcut today. You don’t get to skip to the end so fast.” He looks to Archer and lifts his chin. “It’s your case, Detective.” Then he broadens his chest and speaks louder. “Detective Fletcher. It’s yours, too. You can take him in.”

“I’m not going to prison,” Gordon snarls, the ferocity in his tone enough to chill me. “I will not sit in that fucking cell while my family grows older and moves on without me.”

“Sounds like something you should’ve considered before you jumped the fence and decided to play house somewhere else.” Drake takes out a set of shiny, silver cuffs and starts forward. “Consequences and all that jazz.”

“I’m not going to prison!” Fuller swings around on his heels and brings his gun up to point straight at my chest. Adrenaline pounds through my blood when I realize I’m

looking down the barrel of a gun, and the man holding it *wants* to die.

“Oh shit.” I frantically start twisting my hands once more. “Oh shit, oh shit, oh shit.”

“Put your gun down!” Drake roars, aiming his weapon again. Fletcher does the same. Archer. Felix. And a dozen other men. “If you shoot her, you die.”

“Kinda the point, brother.” Gordon narrows his eyes and tightens his grip on the handle. “I’m not staying behind to watch the news articles that bring shame to my family.”

“I said put the gun down!”

“I’m sorry.” Gordon Fuller’s hands shake. His jaw quivers. Lines fan out from his closed eye, while the other lines up his shot and expels tears to blur his vision. “It was never supposed to go down this way,” he rasps, gulping, his throat bobbing with the movement. “Don’t tell Violet,” he whimpers. “Please don’t tell the girls.”

“Put the gun down!” Drake booms. “Now, Gord!”

“I’m sorry.”

I crush my eyes shut as Gordon squeezes the trigger and a blast roars throughout the warehouse. I don’t want to watch. But I hear it. I feel the breeze and count the milliseconds between the explosion and the pain I know I’ll feel. Then I fall, through the rickety floor and down until the rope catches my neck and my spine crackles in response.

My world shatters. Red bursts behind my eyelids, and shouting men is all I hear. Gunshots. Panicked frenzy. Sprinting feet. Dust fills my nostrils. Blood, too.

But no air.

There’s no air.

Judy Jinx strikes again, but at least she gives me Drake. His words. His touch.

“No!” He’s rough. Mean. Jerking and not careful. “No! Rory! No baby. Open your eyes.”

Epilogue

“You can sit here when you’re spending time with us.”
Doctor Aubree Emeri is far friendlier than her boss.
Significantly more welcoming than the Chief Medical
Examiner.

Minka Mayet is a solid, dependable, professional woman... but she has no interest in babysitting—*her words*—a medical school student wanting to follow her around for eight hours a day.

She’s anti-intern.

Anti-free labor.

And most important of all—to *her*—she’s anti-slowness and spending her time teaching someone who hasn’t even finished medical school yet, who—*again, her words*—will probably traipse off in four years to pursue a career in surgery. Or nursing. Or something other than finding justice for the dead.

But hey, this is where my heart yearns to be.

Not because I was hung from a noose. Or because I could have sworn I’d died and woken up in heaven—or wherever it is we go once the lights are out. It’s not because gangsters wanted me dead, or because we staged an unsuccessful assassination live on television. And it’s not because a drunk crashed into my car last year, toppling me over the side of a cliff and putting my femur through my skin.

Those were all the doings of Judy Jinx. That nasty, horrible bitch, hellbent on punishing me for crimes I never committed.

No, I'm here now because of the kindness I was shown when I was at my lowest.

When my mother's body was transported in-house, even against regulations, and I was allowed a chance to say goodbye to the one and only parent who ever loved me unconditionally. I was given a bracelet, a talisman I swear warms some days for no reason except for, *the sweet hope swelling in a young, orphaned woman's heart*, that wherever my mom is now, maybe she's rubbing hers and thinking of me, too.

I want to work, not only with the dead to bring justice when the world has already taken everything from them, but I want to learn from the very best.

I want to dedicate my life and education to the deceased, and I yearn to always be as compassionate and kind as the good doctors were that day I last saw my mom.

"The zero temperature fridges are on the second floor," Aubree yammers, drawing me back to the present. Away from a dusty warehouse, and out of the memories from a lifetime ago. From the way my heart aches, missing a certain detective who was once an agent. Too noble to touch, too stubborn to let me die.

I bring my hand up to touch the rough scarring on my throat from where the rope cut in that day.

I lived to tell the tale. Spent more long days and lonely nights inside a hospital. Took time to think about what I wanted. And I wished for Drake.

Every single morning when I woke, I wished for him.

Every night while I lie in bed and prayed for sleep, I wished for him.

Every day, while I played with my bracelet and caught snatches of what happened to us on the news, the Special Agent Henry Banks, who lived, and the former, disgraced, Special Agent Gordon Fuller, who didn't, I wished for Drake.

And when I saw him on the news, on the doorstep of another woman's home, protecting her and her child from the

media when word spread and they came looking for her, I nursed my aching heart.

And I wished for him.

“Coffee machine,” Aubree continues, “is this way.” She pushes my new chair in at the side of her desk, located on the other side of a glass doorway that leads to Mayet’s office, then with a beautiful smile, she leads me through halls, past other medical examiners and ridiculously smart people, then into a small lunchroom I’m not sure anyone actually eats in.

But the coffee machine is fancy. Its huge, and well used.

“We have nine autopsy rooms.” In the throes of the tour, Aubree circles out of the small room that smells deliciously of caffeine. “Most people have claimed their favorite. But you’ll spend most of your time in Autopsy Room One, with me and Chief Mayet.” She flashes a taunting grin as a man, handsome as the devil himself, wanders by. “Doctor Campbell.”

He turns on his heels, smiling for us both. “Doctor Emeri.” Then he looks to me.

So Aubree clears her throat and announces, “future Doctor Swanson. She’s still in school. But she’s the chief’s newest pet.”

“Her pet?” He comes to a screeching stop and furrows his brows. “She *wants* a pet?”

Aubree wrinkles her nose and jerks her head side-to-side. “No. But she rarely knows what she wants. Sometimes, we have to make those decisions for her.” Sticking her foot forward, she twists it and shows off a glittering chain that hits me in the stomach like a feather filled sledgehammer. “That’s how she accepted me as her best friend.”

“Under duress,” he chuckles, turning on his heels and continuing toward the elevator. “Noted. I’ll stay on my floor then, until the cussing dies down.”

“She only cusses when we screw up.” Bringing her sky-blue stare my way, she flashes a wide grin. “Don’t screw up. And definitely don’t leave a live body inside the fridge. Chief Mayet gets real sensitive about that stuff.”

“Doctor Emeri!” Minka charges from her office with her sexy, white coat flapping from the speed that she moves, her phone and keys in hand already. “Tour’s over. We got a case.”

“Oh!” Aubree’s energy spikes, excitement and anticipation as she takes off like a shot. But she swings back, remembering her pet, and grabs my hand. “You can come too. But you can’t touch anything.”

“O-okay!” I ignore the mild discomfort in my thigh when she makes us practically run toward the elevator. It’s easy to do, when exhilaration beats in my veins.

“You don’t need to come.” Mayet smacks the elevator call button and glances up to watch the numbers above the doors light up. “If you can’t touch, you can’t document, you can’t work, and therefore, you become dead weight, then perhaps you could stay here and read over case files.”

“I invited her,” Aubree grumbles. “She has a paper to write, Chief, and a hankering to learn.”

“A *hankering*?” Mayet brings her chocolate brown eyes down, but at least she points them at her *best friend*, and not at me. “What the hell does hankering even mean? It’s not a real word.”

“It’s totally a word.” Aubree taps the toes of her high tops to the floor, *tap-tap-tap* as the elevator moves from the lobby floor up past the first, second, third, and fourth. “To hanker, is to have a strong desire for something.”

“Yeah?” *Fifth floor. Sixth. Seventh.* “Well, I hanker for you to be quiet.”

“I mean...” Grumbling, Aubree casts an eye to the numbers. *Eighth floor.* “I guess, in the most technical sense, you’ve used the word correctly. Though I’ll note: you make it sound weird.”

The elevator dings on our level and draws my eyes, my heart in my throat at the thought of going to a real-life homicide scene. To a real death where we get to help whoever was left behind.

But when the doors open and reveal a familiar face, I take a step back and gulp.

“Oh, Doctors.” Detective Drake Banks steps out in his usual jeans, button-up shirt, two heavy guns strapped to his chest, and the smile that had my heart from the very first time I saw it. “I was just coming to find you.”

“Yeah?” Minka presses her hand to the center of his chest and pushes him back into the elevator. “Talk while we move. We have a case to get to.”

“I know.” He reaches out and snags my hand, yanking me into the elevator so the fronts of my shoes stop against the toes of his, my chest crashes to his, and my pulse skitters as I look up into perfect, green eyes. “I’m your primary today. Transfer was made official this morning.”

“It was?” My stomach jumps with nerves as the doors shut and we begin our descent. With happiness. With wonder and excitement for the future we’re working toward. “The captain accepted it?”

“Yeah.” Cupping my cheek, with complete disregard for my future boss—*maybe*—Drake bends his neck and comes closer. Closer. Closer to me until I feel his breath on my lips. “Still waiting to see who I’ll get for a partner. But I don’t need one to run this case, so Malone tossed it to me.” He lowers some more and presses his lips to mine, stealing the breath from my lungs and my will to live, if not with him. “He said Doctor Mayet gets testy about kissing on the job. And that if I’m gonna do it, I gotta do it in the elevator.”

“Yeah. But the ride’s over.” The doors slide open in the garage I once walked with Drake, but Mayet grabs my wrist and yanks me around until I almost trip on my own feet. “Between the hours of eight till six, she’s mine. Not yours. Get in the car.” She slingshots me toward an old, beat-up sedan and turns, because Drake follows us with a goofy grin plastered across his lips. “She’s mine inside this building. Now go work your case. If we get there before you, you’ve already failed.”



If you want to know more about the cops in Copeland City,
read [Sinful Justice](#)

If you want Felix's Malone's story, read [The Tallest Tower](#)

Acknowledgments

Thank you, thank you, thank you for being here.

I don't often get to write acknowledgments these days. After 60 books, I felt my thank yous were a little stale.

My team has remained largely the same since I began.

My supporters, the same.

So when I thank Britt for designing my cover, I felt like a broken record.

But seriously, thanks Britt! Your work is always amazing.

When I would thank Lindsi for proofreading my books and finding those pesky typos, I felt those simple (same acknowledgments every time) appeared insincere.

But seriously! Thanks, Lindsi. My books wouldn't be as clean as they are without you.

When I thank Jen for editing and cleaning up my mess, I probably assumed y'all scrolled past this page, since you'd seen it all before.

But truly Jen, I adore you. You make me a better writer.

I have a special addition to my thank yous this time. Britt (a different Britt from the one above) is a baby editor in the industry who wanted to try out her skills with one of my works. So this is the book she got.

She did a fabulous job and worked under what I know would have been crushing pressure. Thank you!

My readers in [The Crew](#): you're amazing. Slightly unhinged sometimes, sure. But amazing. I cherish every single one of you.

My children: growing wayyyyy too fast.

My friends: I love you.

To you: thank you for continuing to support my work. From fighters, to cops, to muscle, band guys, paramedics, florists, chemists, vets, vigilantes, mafia, and everything else in between, you continue to be here for me.

You don't pigeonhole me so I'm forced to *always* write fighters. Or cops. Or doctors. You don't want me to write, rewrite, and rewrite again the same formulaic story over and over again. You allow me to follow my muse. Thank fk!

Without your support, I wouldn't be able to continue doing what I love.

So seriously, sincerely, from the very bottom of my heart, thank you.

If you're so inclined, please leave a review for this story on Amazon. Reviews matter.

Also by Emilia Finn

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