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NOVEL



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Molly McAdams

New York Times Bestselling Author

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LINGER



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Published by Jester Creations, LLC.
First Edition

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Print ISBN: 9781950048120
eBook ISBN: 9781950048113

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*For Kristin . . .
You know why*

PROLOGUE



WILLOW

This wasn't me.

I wasn't the kind of girl to meet a guy at a bar and get lost in the night and laughter and an unknown amount of drinks. I didn't have one-night stands. I'd never even been the kind of girl who had sex on the first date—not that tonight had been a date.

I was a relationship sort of girl. Always had been.

But there I was . . . stumbling toward the bedroom of my new apartment. Clumsily undressing and leaving a trail of our clothes. Laughter still pouring free and bleeding into moans when his hands gripped and teased, and his mouth did that—

“Oh God,” I breathed when he set his mouth on me and reached back to ground myself to the doorframe we were standing in.

I wasn't sure when he'd settled on his knees or when we'd made it to where we were. And a part of me wished I was sober for this.

A small part.

Because right then, all I cared about was the sight of this commanding man on his knees in front of me, devouring me as if he'd been deprived of *this* his entire life. Making my legs tremble and my stomach flood with heat because nothing had ever been like this.

It could've been all the whiskeys . . . but as I shattered with a stunned cry, coming harder and faster than I ever had before, I had a feeling it was him.

His gray eyes and wicked smirk . . . the complex and enticing air clinging to him that shouted mystery and exhilaration and hinted at danger. And from how the night progressed, I had no doubt he *could* be dangerous . . . to my heart and body and mind.

“Taste like heaven,” he said as he stood, the words barely more than a growl as he crushed his mouth to mine and lifted me into his arms as if I weighed nothing at all.

The kiss was a punishing brand, sealed with a mixture of whiskey and me, as he moved us through my room and crawled onto the bed without ever losing his hold on me.

And then I was there. Shamelessly naked as I watched him move back to

grab a condom from his wallet and remove the last of his clothes. Heated eyes raking over every inch of me as I did the same to him.

Lingering on the scars covering one side of his torso and the massive symbol tattooed into the other before my attention fell to *him* when he freed himself.

Holy shit.

My lips parted with a shaky exhale as I watched him slowly stroke himself before rolling the condom on. But a laugh tumbled from my lips when I noticed the tattoo on his pelvis, just above and to the side of his thick length.

The corner of his mouth quirked up as he knelt on the bed and pressed one hand near my head, bringing his face close to mine. All that intensity never seeming to fade as he settled his hips between my thighs, even as he said, “Think you’re the first girl to laugh.”

“No, no. It isn’t—” I buried my face in my hands and cursed every one of those whiskeys because I couldn’t stop giggling, and this man was on top of me after just giving me the most intense orgasm of my life.

“I’m sorry. I’m sorry.” I blew out a steady breath and lowered my hands, teasing the defined ridges of his torso before trailing one over the large symbol. “It’s just that you have a tiny version of *this* tattooed in a very interesting place.”

“My mini rebel,” he said as that smirk widened into something mesmerizing and breathtaking and, most definitely, a little dangerous.

There’s nothing mini about that . . .

“I know,” he muttered. The short response was all mischief and amusement, and let me know I’d said my embarrassing thought out loud, thanks to my inebriated state. “But if a girl only has my pants undone to suck my cock, she’ll see that and know exactly who she’s dealing with. But you have all of me tonight.”

A whimper crept up my throat when he emphasized his words by slowly inching inside me, stretching and filling me so completely, and stealing my next breath when he stole the softest, sweetest kiss.

I was sure what he’d said would bother me . . .

I was sure I would dissect it and overanalyze the hell out of it . . .

Later.

Because I was still in a place where I wanted nothing more than a night with the mysterious man I’d just met. I was still being reckless and not at all

me. Too absorbed in the charming stranger holding me and already eagerly anticipating what he was about to give me.

So, instead of the disgust I would feel in the morning, instead of making him leave my bed as I probably should've, I just hummed in amusement as I wrapped my legs around his back, angling him even deeper.

Another moan slipped past my lips when he pulled back and drove in harder than before. "And who exactly am I dealing with?"

His nose skimmed across my jaw and over my neck to the spot just below my ear. When he spoke, his low, rough voice sent a flash of heat through me. "I'm a fucking bloodhound, baby."

Any other moment, any other man, I might've laughed.

But there was something about the way he claimed the words that made my heart race. There was something about the way they rumbled up his throat and fell from his lips, dripping with sex and sin, that made me ache with need.

Grabbing my hand from his side, he shifted back to bring my wrist to his face. But just when I thought he might kiss it, his eyelids shut as he drew the tip of his nose across the sensitive flesh. The touch was feather soft and incredibly sensual and made me tremble when he nipped at the same spot.

Curling his body over mine again, he leaned in close enough that his lips brushed against mine when he rumbled, "Now I can find you." The words sounded like a warning wrapped up in wicked, wicked promises.

And maybe it *was* the whiskey . . . but the blood pounding through my veins whispered that, when the night ended, I'd want him to.



WILLOW

He was lingering . . .

My heart raced this unforgiving beat as I watched him, waiting to see what he would decide, because I wanted him to stay.

This man who preferred ridiculous nicknames and tattoos. This man with a wicked smirk that made me weak. This man whose presence was a complicated combination of power and ease—danger and safety.

Diggs.

What was supposed to have been a drunken, never-to-be-repeated night had turned into something I still couldn't quite wrap my head around. Maybe because there was a part of me that knew the world outside my apartment would never understand this unconventional arrangement I'd somehow found myself in.

And yet, I'd quickly become addicted.

Because nearly every night in the three weeks since we'd first met, Diggs had somehow found ways into my apartment. Drawing me out of sleep as he knelt on my bed and pulled me into his arms, whispering *Found you* just before his mouth fell onto mine. The current of excitement and need and *longing* that raced across my body and clashed with his own effectively silenced all rational thought each time I let myself get swept away in this enigma of a man.

Maybe because, from that very first night, I'd wanted Diggs to *find me*. I'd wanted him to *stay*.

Not that he'd ever done the latter.

Every night with him had been filled with an intensity and passion I'd never known. Every night had been filled with carnal demands and body-numbing highs and veiled promises as he'd dressed to leave. Every night, he'd hesitated and glanced back at me before disappearing the way he'd come.

But tonight, he made it as far as putting his boxer briefs on before wavering at the edge of my bed, staring at his dark jeans.

I didn't move or say a word, afraid that if I let him know how much I'd started craving this—these moments *after*—he would be gone before I could

finish begging him to stay.

Then the pounding of my heart faltered when he turned and knelt on the bed, a flash of anguish creasing his expression before he could hide it as he moved closer and captured my lips.

And, somehow, in the way his mouth moved against mine, I felt Diggs begging me to understand the gravity of his decision.

“Don’t do this often?” I assumed when he sat back with a sigh that seemed to encompass the weight on his shoulders.

A dark laugh left him as a whisper of that smirk teased the corner of his mouth. Slanting his head just enough in answer, his gray eyes locked on mine when he said, “I need to leave.”

It felt like my lungs were burning as I waited for him to explain. When he didn’t, I asked, “Permanently or—”

“I just don’t stay, Tree,” he said, the nickname he continued using for me falling from him like a caress. “I don’t do *this*. I *should* leave.”

My chin dipped in the beginnings of a nod as I forced back the question gathering on my tongue.

Because I knew why he *wasn’t*.

That ever-present current that pulled and begged was stronger than ever as he lay there. Propped up on one elbow as the fingers of his other hand lazily trailed along my bare thigh.

“You just had to show up in my town,” he muttered, pulling a soft laugh from me.

“Your town, huh?”

The curl of his lips was slow and sinful, but he just asked, “What brought you here anyway?”

From the way Diggs’ fingers stopped their movements and his eyes were slightly narrowed when I focused on him again, he absolutely felt the way I’d gone still at the question—at the harrowing images that flooded my mind from it.

“Needed to get away,” I answered vaguely but truthfully. “Needed somewhere new.”

“And you chose here?”

“My turn,” I countered, then rolled my eyes and conceded, “But, yes. I put in for jobs in a handful of towns and was hired here first. My turn.”

His chin lifted. “Is that what we’re doing?” he asked, a gentle tease prodding each word when he continued. “Taking turns asking questions?”

“Yes,” I said, lightly smacking at his chest and earning a rough laugh that had chills sweeping across my skin in a heady way. “And you’ve already asked a few, so *hush*.”

He lifted his hand in surrender, then resumed his feather-soft pattern as he waited for me to go on.

“How do you get into my apartment?”

“Next question,” he said without hesitation.

My mouth fell open. “What—*no*! You have to answer that.”

“There are rules to this now?” he shot back, but that smirk was now a wide grin that had me smiling back at him. When he continued, he shrugged and sighed like he already knew I wouldn’t like his answer. “I have a lot of talents, and getting into places is one of them.”

“So, this is a common occurrence for you.” I tried phrasing it as a question, but it came out as a doubtful statement.

“*This*?” he asked, gesturing between the two of us. “There isn’t one damn thing about this that’s *common* for me.”

I felt my pulse go wild at the confession but managed to keep my tone composed when I said, “So, these other places . . .”

“Isn’t it my turn?” He playfully narrowed his eyes at me, waiting until I held out a hand in silent acknowledgment. “How do you feel about sandwiches?”

A short, bemused laugh left me at the drastic change. “How do we go from your ability to break into places to sandwiches?”

“Easily,” Diggs said as if he couldn’t figure out how I didn’t see the connection.

“You realize one has literally nothing to do with the other.”

“Food has to do with everything,” he countered seriously, and I pressed my lips tightly together to keep from laughing.

“Right, uh . . .” I began, my head bobbing as I finally answered, “I like sandwiches. They’re actually my go-to.” Dropping my voice to a teasing whisper, I asked, “Do you break into sandwich shops?”

Amusement touched the corner of his mouth. But just as *No* started leaving him, Diggs’ eyes widened and his expression filled with wonder. “Shit, why haven’t I ever thought of that?”

A laugh burst from him when I smacked his chest, and wings took flight in my stomach when he grabbed my hand and pulled me closer. Settling against the pillows and easily guiding me so I was partially lying on his toned

chest and stomach, our legs entangled and faces just inches apart.

When a contented sigh left him, and the hand at my back gripped harder in a silent but powerful claim, I asked, “Do you really break into places?”

His eyebrows lifted before he glanced around my room as if in response.

“Places other than my apartment,” I amended patiently, even though it felt like I was struggling to breathe as I waited for his answer. As I waited to learn more about this man I hardly knew, and yet, something inside me screamed I knew the parts of him that mattered.

Because I knew the way he held me. I knew the way he continued coming back to me as if he couldn’t stand to be away. I knew the way he worshiped me. I knew the way his eyes devoured me as if I might disappear. As if he was afraid I *would*.

I knew the way every part of me craved every part of him.

“I haven’t for a long time,” he finally said. “But there were plenty of times and situations where it was called for.”

“Times like sandwich shops?” I prompted carefully, earning a brief smile.

“Like surveillance. Protection. Rescue,” he answered vaguely.

I thought about the scars on his side and back—scars I’d felt and traced over during our nights together—and felt my breathing even out as things started adding up in my mind. “Were you in the military?”

Gray eyes snapped to mine and hardened. “No.”

I nodded, accepting the lie he so clearly wanted me to believe, and whispered, “Your turn.”

He studied me for a while longer, indecision drifting over his face and worrying me that I’d stepped too far, that he was about to leave, before he asked, “What do you dream about?”

“What?” The question was little more than a stunned breath. Not because it shocked or surprised me, but because he had an uncanny way of asking innocent questions that threw me into chilling nightmares I struggled to escape.

Diggs hesitated before lifting his hand to my face. Pushing my hair behind my ear, the tips of his fingers trailed along my cheekbone and over my jaw as he explained, “Most of the nights I’ve come to you, you’ve been so damn tense and gripping the comforter like a lifeline.” His large palm cradled my neck when he repeated, “What do you dream about?”

“Demons.” The word fell from me like a dirty secret even though it was far from that.

“And am I one of them?” he asked, seeming to understand the demons I dreamt of weren’t the Biblical kind.

“We wouldn’t be here if you were.” When Diggs nodded in acceptance, I asked, “Can I ask how you got your scars?”

A harrowing sort of look I felt in my bones passed over his face, and for a long time, he just held me.

Just as I was about to say he didn’t need to tell me, Diggs murmured, “That isn’t something we’ll ever talk about.”

“I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have—” My stomach dropped when Diggs deftly maneuvered from under me and climbed off the bed. Panic clawed at my throat and made it difficult to form words as I watched him agitatedly drag his hands through his hair as he rounded the bed to grab his jeans. “Diggs, I’m sorry.”

“Stop,” he muttered as he turned, looking for his shirt.

My lips parted as I struggled for something to say—*anything*. But I just stayed knelt on the edge of the bed, helplessly silent, a pit in my stomach, heart painfully twisting, as he dressed.

“That’s why,” he said tersely, his wickedly handsome face shifting toward me and making my chest ache at the clash of emotions there. The worry and determination and sorrow. “My scars, who I am, that’s why I should’ve never stayed. Why I can’t.”

“I don’t—” I choked out, my head shaking as I wet my lips. “I don’t understand. I’m sorry I brought them up. They don’t bother me if that’s what you’re worried about.”

A bitter laugh left him. “That isn’t—fuck, Tree.” He gripped at his chest as if to let me know he was talking about something so much deeper before he was erasing the distance between us. Cradling my face in his hands and capturing my lips in a kiss that sent me spinning.

Because the kiss was soft and tender, and he was holding me as if I were delicate and precious. But the storm of emotions rolling off him was bleeding onto me, making me shake with the strength of it.

“You’re good,” he breathed against my lips before placing another kiss there. “You’re so damn good.”

Chills danced along my skin when I felt him grab my hand, and then my heart was racing this thunderous beat when he repeated the same action he had every other night. Slowly, delicately drawing his nose across the length of my forearm until he reached my wrist.

My body swayed toward his when he abruptly released me and stalked across my bedroom. But just as he got to my doorway, he hesitated, the way he always did.

This time longer than the others.

And then, with a glance at me from over his shoulder and a whispered “I’ll find you,” he was gone.



DIGGS

Women had never been a distraction.

I didn't care to get to know them while giving them nights they would never forget. I didn't waste time thinking about them once we parted. I didn't have to worry about what it meant that I couldn't stay away because I'd never had the urge to revisit one . . .

Before.

But the past month had been a blur of nights with a girl I couldn't seem to stay away from. A girl who had me walking around in a haze because the smallest thought of her consumed me. A girl I desperately wanted to know on every level, even though my scars begged me to push her away.

But every time I tried reminding myself why, flashes of our previous night together would assault me, gradually stealing my focus until everything around me disappeared.

The way she reached for me when I slipped into her bed and sighed that wholly sweet sound each time I whispered *Found you*. The way she trembled beneath me when I made her come again and again and *again*. The way she looked as I fucked her. My hand fisted in her light hair. Those green eyes, heavy with satisfaction and lust and exhaustion. Those perfectly full lips parted in ecstasy.

Her bright laugh and hushed questions that ranged from teasing to far too personal. Her goddamn scent that haunted me. Lavender and vanilla in a mixture that was so subtle. So perfect. So fucking intoxicating.

"Diggs," someone snapped just before I was hit with a fork.

I jerked away from it as the memory of Tree's laugh faded, fumbling to catch something I should've been able to grab before it ever hit me, then looked around to see the worried and contemplative eyes locked on me.

My identical twin, Maverick.

His wife, Einstein.

Our Boss, Dare.

Shit.

"I know I'm pretty and all, but I figured you'd have better things to do than stare at me," I tried to tease as I tossed the fork toward the center of the

table and grabbed my own to stab at my food. My *untouched* food, even though the others were already done and had probably continued with our weekly business meeting.

“You weren’t eating,” Einstein said slowly, those assessing eyes narrowing the way they did when she was figuring out a complicated puzzle.

“And I’ve been asking about the restaurant,” Dare added, words slow and hesitant. “The Thai restaurant.”

I shrugged and stuffed nearly an entire pancake in my mouth. “They’re good.”

“So, they’re gonna pay us?” Dare asked when I didn’t elaborate.

And fuck me if I didn’t stop chewing to figure out exactly what he was talking about. Any other time, I would already know.

Give me food, and I’m on it. I know my job, and I’m ready to go. But this damn girl . . .

“Thai?” I asked as I forced the pancake down sooner than I should’ve, giving myself time to think while nearly choking on the syrup-covered creation I wasn’t sure I could even taste.

But at that moment, I couldn’t remember if I’d even visited the Thai restaurant for this month’s numbers, or if the restaurant was actually one of mine or Maverick’s . . .

When Dare had been forced into the role of Boss at thirteen years old—because a blood-bound contract had demanded a male Borello always be in control—he’d made it his goal to legitimize the mafia family he’d taken over. Throughout his first twelve years leading the family, he’d done exactly that.

Gotten us out of every illegal thing while slowly laying claim to almost every business in Wake Forest in the least hostile ways possible. Either by buying the businesses when the owners were ready to retire or investing when they were about to go under and taking a percentage of the company.

The Thai restaurant in town had needed help a second time just over a year ago but still hadn’t been ready to sell. So, we’d given more and now owned nearly half the business, but they’d stopped paying us our share a couple months ago.

“The restaurant,” I continued with a nod when it all came rushing back, then stabbed at another pancake. “Paying us. Right . . . no. They aren’t. And the owners are hiding from me. Well . . .” A breath of a laugh left me before I shoved the entire fluffy cake in my mouth and spoke around it. “They *think* they’re hiding from me. I know where they are.”

“That’s great,” Einstein murmured sarcastically as she wrote something down in the books she kept for Dare.

“When were you gonna tell me?” Dare asked.

I waved my fork around. “Now. Thought that’s what the meetings were for?”

“Idiot,” he mumbled, then looked at my brother, who hadn’t taken his eyes off me.

A stare I was refusing to meet because I didn’t want to know what he was gathering from everything over the last couple of minutes.

“You need to deal with this,” Dare told him, gesturing to me and adding, “First, we need to deal with the restaurant.”

“Fuck, I’ll do that,” I said, clapping my hands together and practically bouncing in my seat at the idea. “Told you, I know where they are. Just didn’t know we were allowed to pay those kinds of visits to people who aren’t in our world.”

“We aren’t,” Dare warned in a low, lethal tone.

“Fun-sucker,” I mumbled as I went back to my plate.

“I already have *legal* papers drawn up claiming breaches of contract, et cetera,” Einstein said, giving me a look as if I should’ve known that was what Dare had meant.

I held her stare, pancake suspended in the air. “That sounds boring as shit. My version’s way better.”

“Your version is how we get found out and ruin the lives we get to live,” Dare said, turning his dark stare on me.

Right.

Low profiles to stay off law enforcement radar and remain unsuspecting to the tiny town we lived in. Honestly, I had to hand it to Dare because he’d managed to accomplish that when the generations before him had done everything to make sure the world knew what and who we were.

Not only that, but we’d had three years without any kind of attack or threat from outside enemies. Before then, *months* couldn’t pass without blood being shed between us and rival mobs. Now? Everyone was living their lives and having kids because they were getting comfortable as more time passed without incident.

Except me.

I refused to pull someone into our lives. Refused to bring them into the darkness of our world. Refused to make them my biggest distraction and

weakness because that's exactly what they would be. My focus needed to be on finding and eliminating threats, not worrying that someone I loved would end up as a target.

"Then I'll take the boring papers," I reluctantly conceded as I pushed my plate away from me.

"I'm going with you," Einstein said, pausing from where she was closing her massive book when Maverick mumbled, "No."

One of her brows lifted. "Excuse me?"

"I'm going with him," he said, his tone holding no room for discussion. "He and I have to talk, and I can't trust him to keep you safe if shit goes south."

"Excuse the fuck out of you," I said, only partially teasing. "Where's the love? You're supposed to be nice to me on my birthday."

"Our birthday," Maverick corrected.

"Your birthday was yesterday," Einstein interjected as if that changed anything.

I gave her a look to assure her it didn't. "Pretty sure it's law that people need to celebrate you for the entire week of your birthday."

"Pretty sure you're wrong."

"Regardless," Maverick said over me when I started firing back at Einstein. "I'm going with you because you can't tell me your head's on straight."

"Not sure if I should be offended by that," I muttered dryly because he clearly already knew my thoughts were somewhere else.

"Maverick's going with you," Dare said with a decisiveness we weren't allowed to argue with. "Einstein, give Maverick whatever papers you created. Twins, go now and call me when it's over." After a meaningful look at my brother, he slipped from the booth and headed for the back office of the café we were in—and owned—where his wife was working.

"Great meeting. Go, team," I mumbled as I followed him out of the booth and cut in the opposite direction, taking me to the front door.

I'd barely set foot outside when I felt my brother come up behind me.

I never had needed him to make himself known. Our entire lives, I'd known when he was near. Something that had been damn helpful for me when we played hide-n-go-seek as kids. Not so much for him.

His loss.

"I know you plan on waiting for me to start talking, but I'll wait you out

for the rest of our lives,” I said as I started for his truck. “Might as well just ask.”

“Where’s your head at?”

I sent a sly grin over my shoulder as I rounded the front of the vehicle. “Literally or figuratively?”

“Diggs . . .” I practically felt the disappointment and worry rolling off Maverick in waves, but he didn’t say anything else until after we were in the truck and I’d told him the cross streets of where we needed to go. “You’ve been distracted the last couple of weeks or so, but it’s more than that. Lily went all out for our cake this year, the cake *you* demand every year, and you barely touched it.”

“Bullshit.”

“Everyone noticed, man,” he said before I could continue defending myself, shooting a glance at me before looking out the windshield again as he pulled out of the parking lot. “We spent days getting the theater room ready for this weekend. You wanted it to be the best fort yet. Once we got all the kids settled for the night and started piling in there, you were nowhere to be found.”

I roughed a hand over my face and held back a curse because I’d been sure everyone would’ve been too distracted with each other, their crying babies, and unpredictable toddlers to notice I’d slipped out.

Dipping my head in acknowledgment, I admitted, “Had things to take care of.”

We held every major event at the main Borello house. And once a month, our blended family of Rebels got together for a night that was pure magic, thanks to Maverick and me. Full of movies and so much fucking food in the large theater room that we always transformed into a massive fort. This month, it just happened to fall on our birthday, so we’d gone all out.

I’d planned on staying . . . I’d had every intention. But on the edge of every thought had been that girl I couldn’t seem to get enough of.

Like a siren, I’d felt drawn to her. My resolve weakening over the course of the day until I’d crumbled. Sneaking away and going to her because I’d needed those few hours wrapped up in her, even though I knew I needed to stay away.

“It isn’t a stolen sandwich,” Tree had said last night from where we’d sat on

her kitchen counter, eating the cake we'd made in the middle of the night after I'd let it slip that it was my birthday.

I'd struggled to swallow the bite I'd taken, my head shaking as my chest shook with the laugh building there. "Those are the best," I'd agreed, giving her a look as if to say it wasn't her fault the cake couldn't top stolen sandwiches. Then lifted one of my shoulders as I'd taken my fork to the cake again. "This is better."

Heat had built in her cheeks and her eyes had danced before falling to her lap. "Can I know how old you are?"

"Why wouldn't you?"

"I don't get to know a lot about you still," she'd said, trying to make it sound as if it didn't bother her. "Like your name."

My head had dipped in slow nods before I'd answered, "Thirty-four."

Her eyes had flared in surprise at that as a soft giggle rose in her throat. "I knew you were older, but I was thinking thirty . . . max."

I'd paused to study her, wondering for the first time if I should have Einstein look her up even though I knew I didn't want Tree on anyone's radar. "Wait, how old are you?"

"I'll be twenty-six next month."

"Fuck," I'd muttered, drawing the word out. "You're so young."

She'd tried throwing her fork at me, but I'd caught it just as it'd left her fingers and grabbed her wrist, pulling her close as her laugh had bubbled free. Filling the kitchen and my head as she'd playfully pushed at me. "No, you made it weird. It's creepy now."

"Then tell me to leave," I'd offered as I nipped at her neck, a smirk pulling at my mouth when her head rolled to the side and chills rose on her skin.

"Don't," she'd whispered as her fingers slid through my hair, keeping me there. "Please stay."

I'd gone still for what felt like a lifetime because it was the first time she'd asked me to stay. And, fuck me, I'd wanted to.

But just as fiercely as that need had surged through my veins, the fear demanding I keep her far from my life had beat it back.

So, I'd taken her back to her room and shown her everything I couldn't say. How she was driving me crazy. How she was becoming an addiction I never wanted to be rid of. And how I would always leave because she needed it.

I liked women . . . a lot.

I liked to fuck them and never see them again even more. It wasn't an asshole move on my part if that's all they wanted from me too. Besides, I had a lot of love to give.

But this was over a month of being unable to stay away from one girl. Of being unable to get my mind right because she took over every goddamn thought. This was over a month of closing in on such dangerous territory because I was falling for her, no matter how hard I tried denying it.

A month of slipping into her apartment in the middle of the night because there wasn't a place that could keep me out. A month of losing myself in her for hours before we parted ways all over again.

A month of her offering her wrist just before I left as if I could ever forget her scent now. But, fuck, I'll take the sweet parting. I'll take every hit of that addicting woman she offered because I knew this wouldn't last.

As weak as I'd been the past two weeks—giving in and staying longer and longer. Dodging her questions and demanding the same answers because I wanted to know everything about her and craved that extra time with her—I *couldn't* let this last.

“Diggs, I know you,” Maverick said, once again pulling me back to the present and away from thoughts of her. “I know you're doing something you shouldn't. You wouldn't be trying to keep it from me if you weren't.”

“It isn't like that.”

“You sure about that?” he challenged with a worried look. “Last time you tried keeping something from me, it was weed in *our* car.”

“Jesus, I thought you were over that,” I said on an irritated laugh. “We were seventeen, and I got rid of it.”

“Could've fucked my scholarship.”

“You didn't even use your scholarship,” I reminded him with a roll of my eyes.

“I know you,” he repeated through gritted teeth, getting back to the point of the conversation. “We don't keep shit from each other. You're keeping something from me.”

I blew out a slow, strained breath, head shaking as I murmured, “Just something I'm trying to talk myself out of.”

“That doesn't inspire confidence.”

Hesitation pulsed through me as I tried figuring out what all to tell him and how to say it. Because Maverick had fallen in love with Einstein right about the minute he met her, even though she'd been with someone else at the time.

He would've done anything and waited forever to have the life he was finally living with her. So, even though Maverick knew my thoughts on marriages and relationships in our sadistic world, I never mentioned it because I refused to bring my brother's happiness down.

"Don't make me follow you," he said under his breath as he took one of the last turns.

"You could try," I said just as softly. "You wouldn't be able to."

"Diggs . . ."

"There's a girl," I finally admitted, lifting my arm only to let my hand fall to my leg with a slap. "Just someone I met—new in town. And she . . . she's just getting in my head."

For a long time, Maverick didn't respond. Then again, he didn't need to.

He knew what it meant if I was bringing her up at all, just as he knew *why* I'd been so in my head.

When he spoke, hesitation fueled every word. "The right person can change everything you thought you knew or wanted."

My head was already shaking before he finished speaking. "That isn't what's happening," I said and hated how obvious the lie was.

Maverick made an unconvincing sound and pulled up along the curb when I gestured for him to. Two houses away from the one we needed to go to in case the owners of the restaurant were watching and felt like hiding.

Again . . . not that they truly could.

"So, what's her name?" Maverick asked once we were climbing out of the truck, forcing a laugh from me.

"I actually don't know," I admitted, even though I should've just shot the question down. When Maverick sent me a questioning look, I shrugged. "Walked up to her one night at The Jack and laid it on thick. Said something like, 'My name's Diggs. Remember it because I'll have you screaming it later.'"

Maverick's head tipped back with a laugh. "You're such an idiot, man."

I lifted my hands in surrender. "It works, but not on her. She just laughed and said, 'Oh, okay. I see your game. Then I guess you can call me . . . Tree,' after thinking on it for a second."

“To be fair, your name is almost as terrible as your pickup line,” Maverick offered, a smirk slipping across his face when I flipped him off. “Einstein only named you that because you were trying to dig through a concrete floor with a spork when they found us.”

“I would’ve gotten through the top layer of the floor eventually,” I said defensively, voice low as we neared the house. “Still, this girl’s the first one to question my name.”

“And is that why?” Maverick asked, drawing out the words meaningfully.

I gave him a knowing look before rolling my eyes because he knew me better than that. There were plenty of girls who were the first to do *something*.

They didn’t consume me.

Their scent didn’t linger in my veins, slowly driving me insane.

“When do we get to meet her?”

“Never.” My answer was immediate and harsh as flashes of my life—our world—burst through my mind. A world I refused to drag anyone into. “I just need to fuck her out of my system,” I lied, the words coming out unsure at the end when we stepped onto the porch.

Maverick had been giving me a disbelieving look, but within seconds, everything about his stance changed. Shoulders and back straightening as he tried to pinpoint what I’d already detected.

Years of working side-by-side had us picking up the other’s smallest cues, like my body tensing and my head slanting.

By the time I looked at him again, he had his gun in front of him and was slowly, almost silently, chambering a round. Head moving faintly to let me know he didn’t notice anything.

“You don’t smell that?” I asked under my breath, surprised because it seemed so overpowering to me. “Blood. A lot of it.”

“Get us inside,” he ordered, already reaching for his phone with his free hand when I turned and hurried off the porch. Keeping close to the side of the house as I readied my own gun while searching for windows that were easily accessible.

“They don’t have security cameras,” I whispered when I felt Maverick fall into step behind me. Effortlessly keeping pace as he moved backward, looking out for anyone coming up behind us. “If anyone’s still in there, they aren’t watching.”

“Dare’s been warned,” he muttered.

I slowed at a low window, putting my hand out to stop my brother as I searched the part of the kitchen I could see.

When there was no movement or sound from the other side, I smoothly passed off my gun to Maverick before reaching into my back pocket for the black fabric that always waited there.

A Borello tradition.

Ever since we'd been saved by them and recruited into the family, everything we did—whether on the offensive or defensive—was with our faces partially covered. It felt wrong to go without.

Like a sin.

Once I had the bandana tied around my head so it was resting just below my eyes and covering the lower half of my face, we moved. Switching positions as he passed both guns into my hands.

But I didn't hear anyone. I didn't see anything.

Most importantly, I didn't smell anything other than all that blood.

Once we were back in our original positions, and I had the window open, Maverick stopped me. Abandoning all training to grip my shoulder and force me to look at him as he asked, "You alive?"

"Yeah, man, I'm alive," I muttered as I pressed my hands to the windowsill, offering him a shit-eating grin he couldn't see from behind the fabric.

He nodded in return. "Keep it that way."

I was in the house without a second thought. Landing in the kitchen soundlessly and bringing my gun up as I hurried to clear the kitchen and adjoining rooms.

Fucking shit.

My steps briefly faltered, but I only took a second to confirm the two bodies on the living room floor were the owners of the Thai restaurant before moving through the rest of the house. Knowing Maverick was there every step of the way until we knew there was no one else there.

"Did you see it?" he asked as we started back toward the mutilated bodies.

"Yeah," I ground out, head moving in harsh shakes because I wanted so damn badly to have been wrong.

But Maverick's hushed curse when he entered the living room let me know I hadn't been. Let me know it was real.

Maverick had his phone out and was calling Dare before I'd even fully

taken in the entire scene.

From the look and smell of it, someone had very recently slaughtered them. Savagely. Blood was splattered across the walls and soaking into the carpet. Pieces of their bodies were across the room.

But it was their foreheads that changed everything.

Marked onto their skin in blood was our symbol. The one tattooed or branded into every Borello.

“What does it mean?” I asked out loud, knowing Dare could hear me through Maverick’s phone.

But Maverick just met my stare, looking as confused as I felt . . . and afraid. He looked *afraid*. And I knew down to my soul that his fear wasn’t for us, but for his wife and baby.

And that . . . that fear and this fucked-up room we were standing in was why I couldn’t let Tree mean anything to me.



WILLOW

“How long are you gonna keep this to yourself?” my fourth-grade teaching partner, and mentor, asked from where she was lounging on the couch in my classroom. “It really isn’t fair to those of us who need to live vicariously through others.”

A disbelieving laugh left me as I put the finishing, decorative touch on the last of my walls. Cora was one of those endlessly happy and energized women who truly thrived off teaching. She was also incredibly nosey and wildly young at heart, and the entire personality fit the woman who was almost old enough to be my mother.

I’d quickly come to adore her in the time I’d known her.

“Who? People with amazing husbands?” I pointed at her with one of the leftover cutouts. “Was it *every day* last week, or just *almost* every day, that he brought you coffee in the morning and lunch in the afternoon? Because I know he did it today.”

She waved me off. “Honey, I know he’s amazing. Still need to live vicariously if it has you looking like this.”

“Who are we living vicariously through?” an unfamiliar voice asked just before a blonde poked her head into my room and sent Cora a wink.

“Do not listen to this one,” Cora said, pointing at the blonde. “She will forever be in the honeymoon phase with her husband. They’re disgusting.”

The blonde snorted as she stepped into my room and went to sit on the arm of the couch as Cora made introductions.

“Willow, this is Aurora—*Rorie*. Rorie teaches kindergarten.” She looked at Rorie and mock-whispered, “This is the new girl.”

“I had a feeling,” Rorie whispered back before looking at me. “I heard we were getting a new teacher. You’re from Virginia, right? What brought you to North Carolina?”

In an instant, acid spread through my veins like flash fire. Forceful enough to make the room spin and my lungs ache as I fought the sickening images burned into the back of my mind.

“Yes—Richmond,” Cora answered for me before I could even attempt to respond. “And, apparently, Wake Forest is already treating her *extremely*

well, but Willow here won't give the details on why."

That had Rorie perking up. Her eyes brightened with excitement and intrigue as I successfully forced away the mental onslaught and took a steadying breath. "Oh?"

A different kind of heat began creeping up my neck and into my cheeks as my nights with Diggs slipped back into my thoughts, overwhelming every cold and horrifying memory that used to drown me so easily.

As if a month with a man could hold that kind of power.

"You can't keep saying 'no one' and 'nothing' when you blush like that," Cora said victoriously, then looked at Rorie when she continued. "She's been all glowy and walking with her head in the clouds for the last few weeks."

"I have not," I argued lamely, even though I was sure she was right.

"I saw you during our first meetings," Cora maintained. "The girl who first moved here wasn't smiling the way you are now."

Embarrassment swept through me when I realized I was.

Not just smiling *more*, but right then.

But the girl who Cora first met had just packed up her entire life and moved to a small town where she hadn't known anyone. The girl who Cora first met had felt at once ashamed for literally running away from her demons and slightly hopeful for her future for the first time in a year.

The girl who had been walking around in a daze the past month? The girl in front of them now?

God, I didn't even know who I was anymore, and I couldn't begin to grasp the emotions clashing and coursing through my veins.

But this had to be what it felt like to be high.

My body felt light and my stomach was in a constant state of chaos—all fluttering wings and heated needs. And I was buzzing. Like there was this awareness clinging to my skin, even though I felt wholly unaware of everything around me because my every thought was on *him*.

At the same time, I felt insane.

Reckless and idiotic and confused and—*God, what is wrong with me?*

"So . . ." Cora said, drawing out the word and making it sound like a question.

"Okay, fine," I said on a heaving sigh as I dropped onto the corner of my desk. "But he—he's *complicated*. The entire thing is complicated and weird, and you're probably gonna think I'm crazy."

"Oh, now I'm really interested," Cora said, straightening on the couch as

Rorie listed her head and asked, “Complicated *how*? Is he married?” The last was asked on a whisper.

“No,” I said on a horrified breath, only to realize I didn’t know. “Oh God, I . . . I actually don’t know. But I don’t think so.”

Cora and Rorie shared a look, but neither of them commented. They just waited, more eager than before, for me to continue.

“I met him at a bar—The Jack?”

“Really the only bar worth going to around here,” Rorie murmured, prompting me to go on.

I nodded as I remembered that night better than I should’ve been able to, considering how much we’d drunk. “He came up to me and gave this pickup line that was so ridiculous, but he was funny and charming in the way he delivered it. We ended up spending hours at the bar, talking and drinking. And then . . .” I pressed a hand to my cheek that was so, so hot because all this was so unlike me.

“Well, I think we know the *and then*,” Cora said with a smirk.

“I don’t do this,” I said quickly. “I’ve never met a guy at a bar, and I wasn’t there *to* meet anyone—honestly. It was just that day . . .” I hesitated, momentarily caught off guard when I realized the pain that came with that day was dulled—*soothed*—by that unexpected night and the unbelievable month that followed.

By *him*.

“Anyway, I’ve never even taken a guy back to my place after the first date, let alone just after meeting him,” I went on. “But, God, it was the most intense night of my life. But when he was leaving that night, he did and said the oddest thing.”

“Wait, he left?” Rorie asked, sounding sad at the thought. “No . . .”

“There’s no way you’ve been flying around here because of one night,” Cora added, looking just as bummed.

I slanted my head before quickly shaking it. But my tone didn’t match their excitement when they realized it hadn’t ended there. “Anyway, he did this thing that sounds ridiculous. But when he did it, it was—well, it was incredibly hot. He grabbed my hand and sort of smelled my wrist.”

“He smelled your wrist,” Cora muttered, voice deadpan.

“Trust me.” Twisting one of my hands so my palm was up, I drew a finger along the same path Diggs always took. Down my forearm, just over my wrist, and so *achingly* slow.

“Oh,” Rorie whispered, blinking sluggishly. “Oh, I think I like this.”

“Uh-huh,” Cora agreed. “I take back everything I was thinking before. But you said it was odd?”

“Well, when he did it, he said he would find me. And I thought it might be another one of his charmingly funny, corny lines. And then he came back . . .”

The girls sat there, watching me. Waiting for me to continue.

But I didn’t know how because this was the part that made me feel insane. This was the part that made me wonder about a hundred times each day why I hadn’t called the police or gotten a security system installed.

“That night?” Rorie asked when I didn’t go on.

“A couple nights later,” I admitted, voice a shamed whisper. “He was just suddenly there. In my apartment. In my bed. Waking me up.”

“What the hell?” Cora asked, looking over at Rorie when she reared back—eyes wide and hands up as if she no longer knew what to do with them.

“Wait,” Rorie said but didn’t continue. It sort of looked like she didn’t know how to anymore.

“Again, *what the hell?*” Cora snapped. “He broke into your apartment?”

“I know, I know. I—”

“Did you call the cops?” she demanded.

“No, I . . . God, I sound insane. The next day, I wondered why I didn’t. Why I didn’t scream or demand he leave or *anything*. But it . . . when he shows up, it never feels terrifying or creepy or—”

“Wait, *shows up?* This keeps happening?” Cora asked and then twisted to yell at Rorie, “She said *shows*.”

My shoulders caved as I glanced between the women. “Yes,” I confessed shamefully. “Every couple of days or so.”

“Oh my God,” Cora whispered, sagging against the couch and rubbing at her temple as I continued.

“I know how it sounds. Trust me, I do. But when he’s there, I feel safe with him. I don’t feel like I need to be protected from him. And that line he always gives me, I mean, it’s ridiculous because it’s my apartment. He doesn’t have to look very hard for me. But I *want* him to find me. I want him to *stay*. I’m honestly devastated when he leaves.”

“Willow, psychopaths can be sexy too,” Cora said as if I was missing something so incredibly obvious. “This guy sounds certifiable. He’s letting you know he’ll stalk you and can get into your apartment.”

“No, that isn’t—” Hands like ice gripped at my spine and had that same nauseating feeling racing through my veins as I wondered if I had been letting some deranged murderer into my bed. If I was justifying what he was doing and saying because he fucked me in a way I hadn’t known was real.

But it was more than that.

He consumed my every thought. My body burned wherever he touched me and ached for him on the days he stayed away. My soul felt at peace when he wrapped me up in his arms. My heart soared whenever his rough laugh edged into our conversations.

Everything about this month said this was different. Said all those fears weren’t valid.

And I knew fears. I’d lived through them. I still saw the worst kind of evil when I closed my eyes.

The man in my bed may do sinful things to my body, but we wouldn’t have felt so right if he was capable of the same depravity.

“Wait, what’s his name?” Rorie asked suddenly, looking anxious at whatever thought she’d just had.

“Right. Yes!” Cora said excitedly. “Rorie’s husband’s a cop. He’ll stop this guy.”

“I don’t—I don’t actually know,” I whispered, and felt like I withered under their alarmed expressions. “He gave me a ridiculous nickname, so I did the same. We’ve never called each other by anything else.”

“What is his name?” Rorie repeated, enunciating each word and sounding more worried than before.

“Diggs,” I said with a helpless shrug because I knew that wouldn’t help anything.

Cora was ranting about the possibility of a Ted Bundy wannabe in Wake Forest, but I couldn’t take my eyes off her friend. If someone could be made of stone, Rorie would’ve been as soon as the nickname passed my lips.

“Do you know him?” I asked Rorie uncertainly, watching her reaction carefully.

After tense moments passed, she wet her lips and said, “You need to stay away from him.” Before I could repeat my question, she added, “Stay away from him and everyone he’s associated with.”

My eyebrows lifted, and Cora jerked back to look at her.

“Wait, you *do* know him?” Cora asked.

Rorie’s gaze darted across the floor for a while before she cleared her

throat and said, “My sister-in-law, Jessica, married into his family. Sort of,” she added on as an afterthought. She finally met my stare, and I felt my gut clench at the whisper of fear in her eyes. “I’ve met all of them at one point or another, but I only know a few of them. And they’re . . . they have good qualities. Jentry wouldn’t—um . . .”

Her head shook fiercely as she backtracked, “Jentry’s my husband. He wouldn’t let them into our home if they weren’t good. But that doesn’t mean they aren’t dangerous people, Willow. You need to stay away from them.”

“*Ted-Bundy* dangerous?” Cora asked hesitantly, then lifted her arms to look at them. “Oh my God, I have chills.”

“No,” Rorie quickly assured her, even though her attention stayed locked on me. “Just trust me. Whatever’s been happening between you and Diggs . . . you need to end it. Now.”

I studied her for a while, trying to figure out what she knew but wasn’t telling us. Trying to figure out exactly how *dangerous* these people could be if a police officer would allow them into his home.

Then again, I’d known Diggs was dangerous from that first night. I’d sensed it.

But it hadn’t been something malevolent or something to run from. It had been something that lingered beneath the surface. Something that had been more intoxicating than anything.

I’d known from the beginning that the real danger had been the effect he would have on me.

“His name is really Diggs?” I asked, the words coming out slow and awkward as I tried wrapping my head around what I’d just been told.

“Nearly that entire family goes by nicknames,” Rorie said with a shrug. “I’ve only ever heard of him referenced by that name.”

Cora gasped, throwing her hands in the air as if she’d just put it all together. “Are they in a gang?”

Rorie rolled her eyes. “You honestly think Jentry would let them near me or our son if they were? You think he wouldn’t have arrested them already if they were?”

“Oh, duh,” Cora murmured, then went back to trying to figure it out, a snort leaving her as she did. “A gang in Wake Forest. Right.”

“Right,” Rorie muttered before catching my stare again. The worry for me and the warning in her eyes clear.

I heard it. I felt it.

I just couldn't promise her I'd have the will and strength to push that man away from me the next time he slipped into my bed.

Cora stood from the couch and clapped her hands together. "Okay, and on that slightly terrifying note . . . it's muffin time, yes? Yes. Let's go."

I looked from her to Rorie in question, but Rorie was already shaking her head and saying, "I can't."

"What?" Cora asked, sounding confused and slightly betrayed.

"We have plans tonight, and I already told Jentry I was on my way home when I was walking this way to come tell you." She made a comically worried face as she stood and started backing up toward the doorway. "So, you know, I should probably start heading home."

"But it's tradition!"

"Right, I know," Rorie said apologetically as she continued backing away. "But we somehow have this *one night* where we're kid-less *and* Jentry isn't working."

Cora waved her off. "Say no more. Go. Enjoy. I'll bring your bread to you in the morning."

"You're the best," Rorie called out as she slipped into the hall, only to pop her head back in. "It was great meeting you, Willow. I'm sorry for . . . well, I'm just sorry."

"No, don't be," I assured her. "I appreciate everything you told me, and it was really nice meeting you too."

"All right," Cora said once Rorie was gone, turning on me. "Muffin time. Let's go."

"I'm so confused," I whispered. "What's *muffin time*?"

"Tradition," she said as if that explained it all.

"Yeah, I heard that part," I said as I put the last of my decorations away and grabbed my purse. Mostly because the day was over, and my room was ready for when kids would finally fill it tomorrow. Partly because Cora was already walking into the hall as she continued speaking.

"The days before the first and last days of school, we go to this one coffee shop in town. It has some of the best coffee anyway, but they also make these pastries that are to die for," she said with a groan, complete with a slow eye roll. "Plus, we need to treat ourselves because, as much as we love our jobs and the kids we teach . . ." She cleared her throat and sent me a mischievous look. "Well, we deserve to be treated."

"With muffins," I assumed, putting it all together.

“The best muffins you’ve ever tasted, Willow,” she said as if correcting me. “And we always grab one when we go because you can’t *not* get a muffin there. But they make this German cinnamon star bread that is probably the most incredible thing I’ve ever put in my mouth—don’t tell my husband I said that.” She tossed out the last on an impish whisper. “And it’s even better the next morning, so we save it for the first and last day of school because we think we should start those days with as much going for us as possible.”

“Got it,” I said with a nod. “So, it’s *muffin time* that’s actually *German cinnamon star bread time*?”

She snapped her fingers before pointing at me. “Exactly. And you’re coming with because, even if I hadn’t grown exceedingly attached to you this summer, I sort of feel like I shouldn’t let you out of my sight after everything you just told us.”

An uneasy laugh left me as I followed her out of the school and to the parking lot, listening as she rambled about the dangers in what I’d been doing and went over her outlandish theories based off the cryptic words Rorie had given us.

All the while, I was wavering between kicking myself for ever telling them anything and wondering what kind of death wish I must have to continue letting a virtual stranger into my bed the way I had been. But by the time we arrived at the coffee shop, my internal battle was weighed down by the same question that plagued me every day.

Will he show tonight?

There didn’t seem to be a pattern to his visits. Sometimes, there were two or three nights that separated them. The last few had been back-to-back, but that had also been three nights ago . . .

“Smells so good, right?” Cora asked when we stepped inside, and I think I hummed in response. “Have you been here yet?”

“No, not yet,” I mumbled as I swallowed the horrifying knowledge that I was obsessing over a man who was actually dangerous and who had legitimately been breaking into my apartment.

Oh my God, what’s wrong with me?

But even as that worrying realization swept through me, the craving to see him burned deeper. Stronger.

I *wanted* to be woken in the middle of the night by his tall, hard body curling around mine. I *wanted* the seductive, possessive way he grabbed my

hand and breathed me in. I wanted *him*.

“You’re thinking about him, aren’t you?” Cora asked, breaking me out of my internal war. When my gaze snapped to hers, she said, “I can see it. It’s all over your face.”

“Is there something wrong with me for wanting him?” I asked under my breath, the words wrapped in dread and hesitation.

Cora clicked her tongue and touched my arm in a telling way that made me want to beg her not to answer. “Honey, once again, two words: Ted Bundy.”

A heaving breath left me as I let her words sink in and make me doubt the need and craving twisting through my veins.

“He had women falling in love with him and falling all over themselves because of how charming he was. But you heard Rorie . . .”

“I know,” I muttered as she continued without stopping.

“And this Digging guy is probably incredibly charming and super hot. But that doesn’t mean you let him break into your apartment to sleep with you.”

“Say that a little louder for the people across the shop,” I muttered as humiliation washed over me.

“Sorry. I’m sorry,” she added on a whisper, then turned to look around us before conceding, “Even if he isn’t some serial killer, what he’s doing still isn’t okay. You need to protect yourself, Willow.”

My head bounced in something that might’ve been a nod. Logically, I knew it was wrong and creepy and so many things. I knew what Cora and Rorie were saying was right.

Logically . . .

But everything in my body and soul continued screaming that I was safe whenever he was there.

With another sigh, I looked up to meet her concerned stare just as the people in front of us finished ordering. My gaze automatically followed them to where a cluster of people waited for orders and snapped back in that direction because he was there.

Standing right there.

Tapping on his phone and oblivious to the fact that I was a dozen feet away.

I bumped into Cora when I took too large of a step forward and mumbled an apology but was unable to look away.

The one and only time I'd seen Diggs outside my apartment had been that first night at the bar. To see him now, like this, after everything I'd been told and reprimanded about in the past half hour . . .

I still wanted to fall into his arms. I wanted the firm, fierce way he always claimed my mouth before he backed off, giving the softest, sweetest kiss that made me melt into him.

"Coffee?"

I wanted the way he held me as if I was *his*.

"Willow, do you want coffee?" Cora asked again, finally grabbing my attention.

I blinked quickly and focused on her for the span of a second. "Yes, sorry. Sorry, whatever you're getting. Just get me that." I scrambled to dig my wallet out of my purse as my gaze continuously drifted back to him, then handed over my card. "I've got this."

"You don't—"

"Cora, he's here," I hissed, cutting her off.

"Who?" A gasp tore from her before I ever began to answer. "*No*," she breathed, drawing out the word before she hurried to finish ordering in an overly bright voice.

"He's waiting to pick up an order," I said once she was done, keeping my words soft enough that only she would hear. "Tall. Dark, messy hair. And—"

"Handsome?" she asked on a tease as she handed my card back to me.

"Obviously—oh, I get it." I smacked her arm when she began laughing. "Yes, he's insanely gorgeous," I said as I let my wallet slip into my purse and had to prompt Cora to keep walking when she turned and saw him. And I knew she saw *him* because the only other man waiting was adorable but incredibly old.

"Whoa," she said under her breath. "On second thought, I might let him break into my house too."

"I bet your husband would love that."

"I'll let him watch."

A stunned laugh broke from me, prompting a few of the waiting people to look over at us—Diggs included. A flutter of anticipation broke free when those gray eyes swept over me . . . only to disappear when his gaze fell right back to his phone without so much as a hint of recognition.

Rejection sliced through me, swift and hot, at that small yet incredibly significant action. The unexpected burn stole my next breath as I struggled to

grasp if that had really just happened.

What the hell?

“Um . . .” Cora began, then glanced my way. “Was I the only one expecting something else?”

I stood there, unsure of what to think or what to even feel. Because I knew the way Diggs looked at me. I knew the way he came back to me when he was trying to leave, as if he couldn’t help himself.

And yet, he’d just dismissed me with barely a glance.

I shook my head firmly and told myself I had to have gotten it all wrong—that he probably just hadn’t seen *me*—and rocked forward to go to him. Wanting to assure myself that the intense connection we shared in the middle of the night was there in the light of day. To know we were something real and not a twisted romance that was about to make news because of an unfortunate end.

But when he pocketed his phone and reached for the white box that had just been set on the counter, a woman easily maneuvered through the waiting people and slipped up beside him. Snatching the box from his grasp with the hand that wasn’t holding a chubby baby and smiling up at Diggs in a way that shouted familiarity and adoration and *love*.

A smile that was reflected in the way he looked at her as he seamlessly took the baby and wrapped his free arm around her neck, pulling her close as they turned to leave the shop.

“Oh God,” I breathed, clutching at my stomach and staring at the floor. “Oh my God.”

“You didn’t know, right?” Cora asked hesitantly, forcing my gaze to snap to her.

“No, I didn’t know.”

But I did now. I’d seen the wedding band on his finger when he’d grabbed the baby. I’d seen their obvious love for each other, and I felt sick over my part in our *relationship*.

More than that, I *hurt*. I hurt over a man I hardly knew. That earlier sting of rejection flared and spread through my chest. Gripping at me in a way it shouldn’t because he was no one to me.

Not really.

Diggs should’ve been a drunken hookup, but he’d turned into so much more.

He’d consumed my days and my thoughts. He’d filled my nights with

more passion than I'd ever known. He'd spent time learning and worshiping my body in ways my boyfriend had never cared to during our years together. He'd stayed longer and longer, gently begging for more pieces of my life before disappearing all over again.

And he was married . . . with a baby.

"It explains some things," Cora muttered. "Like, why you only see him every couple of nights, and why he leaves after—well, you know."

I reached for the nearby counter, my body trembling at the thought of what I'd unknowingly been doing.

"What are you gonna do?" Cora asked when I stood there, agonizing over the past month that had meant everything to me just minutes before.

Funny how breaking into my apartment and slipping into my bed hadn't been enough to make me want to stop him or stop what we were doing.

But a few seconds in a coffee shop had changed everything.

"Take Rorie's advice," I said resolutely. "I'm gonna stay far away from him."



DIGGS

I resisted the urge to move from where I leaned against the wall a few days after we discovered the bodies. Anxiousness coursing through my veins and made my aggravation grow.

But there were so many of us in one place. There were so many goddamn kids. And no one else seemed to recognize the absolute stupidity in the scenario as they all continued arguing with—and over—each other.

“There has to be something we’re missing,” Dare said, voice low and showing his irritation with the news we’d been given.

“Clearly, but not with them,” Kieran responded in a tone that still managed to scare the shit out of me, even though we’d been working together for years.

But Kieran Hayes had been trained to be an assassin from the day he could walk. So, even when speaking with friends, the guy was just as terrifying as he was lethal. There was a reason he was the most notorious assassin alive—not that Maverick wasn’t bitter about that title.

“Moretti family still looks too scared to even come out of the shadows of Chicago,” Kieran went on as he scooped up his son when he tottered over to the bladed killer. “Tennessee Gentlemen look like they’re falling apart because we took out an entire generation of them.”

“But they’re the obvious ones,” Maverick said through clenched teeth from where he was leaning against Einstein’s desk. “One of the TenGen took Einstein from the Thai restaurant. The owners of that restaurant were killed and had our symbol put on them.”

“You’ve made that point,” Kieran murmured, cold eyes locked on my brother. “Jessica and I checked it out. It isn’t them.”

“Looks like they’re just trying to keep their businesses and lives afloat,” Jessica, Kieran’s wife, said from where she sat in one of the computer chairs with their infant daughter.

I stood there as opinions and the little facts we had were tossed back and forth like fuel for a blowout we didn’t have time for. But I kept my jaw clenched tight as the tension between everyone thickened and let my gaze drift around the main room of ARCK again.

Sometimes, it was still crazy to me that we were all here. Not in this building, even though that was fucking grating on me, but just . . . *here*.

Our families had been rivals—the biggest until Kieran had broken his sworn-and-blood oaths to the Holloways and begun covertly working with us to take out their boss and disband their family.

Not long after their boss was in the ground, Kieran, Jess, and Conor—another Holloway—had opened ARCK, a private investigating firm that also secretly helped women and children escape shitty lives and start over.

Next thing we'd known, Einstein decided to work for them, taking care of the illegal side of things that needed to look legitimate, the way she always had with her skill of hacking. The move had caused more than a few heated arguments at first, but ultimately, it'd brought our broken families even closer together.

Then, a few years ago, Maverick and I began unofficially working with them considering they'd needed the help on jobs once everyone started having kids.

So many kids . . .

And at that moment, nearly all of them were in that room. Nearly all of *us* were in that room.

My gaze swept the open space again, landing on every single member of our blended family. Counting them. Tallying the potential blood on my hands if I didn't find this threat before it came for us.

Kieran and Jess. Conor. My brother and Einstein. Dare. His sister and her husband. Six toddlers and infants.

The oldest of all the kids was at school. Conor and Dare's wives were working, but Lily would've been there if she hadn't gotten held up at Brooks Street Café. And everyone else?

We were there. Practically begging to be taken out in one hit, considering the building wasn't battle-ready.

As if he could sense my growing anxiety, Maverick's head snapped my way and his eyes narrowed on me.

Before I could let him know in any way that I was fine, that *we* were fine, Maxon said, "I gotta go."

I glanced at Dare's brother-in-law as he pressed a swift kiss to his daughter's cheek and reluctantly released his wife. "I'm already late for rehearsal, but I'll be watching for anything out of place and make sure the guys keep the estate locked up."

“They don’t need to know what’s going on,” Dare reminded him, referring to the other members of the famous rock band Maxon was part of: Henley.

Maxon released an edgy laugh as he glanced around at us, his voice hesitant as he backed away. “I know that. All of you make that a little hard though.”

“He isn’t wrong,” Libby said once her husband had slipped from the room. “If the rest of Henley doesn’t already know what we are, they will one day, considering we aren’t subtle around them. Maverick left a dead man on their driveway for crying out loud.”

“Finding you was more important,” Maverick shot back defensively.

Libby lifted her free hand in the air. “I’m just saying.”

“Next time one of you has been taken, I’ll make sure to clean up my mess first.”

Einstein smacked his back as Libby flipped him off. But before anyone could say anything else, Dare spoke. Tone unwavering and full of authority.

“Anyone who knows is a target. The other members of Henley can’t know.” But his words sent the room into a weighted, eerie silence.

Because every one of us knew that we already had enough targets. And nearly all of them were *in that fucking room*.

I rubbed at my jaw and pushed from my spot against the wall, struggling to keep my mouth shut when I wanted nothing more than to yell at all of them that they were putting their kids in danger.

Just as I started turning to follow in the direction Maxon had gone, I turned back and said, “It isn’t Moretti or Tennessee Gentlemen.”

Dare lifted his chin in question, but it was Kieran who said, “Your assuredness would’ve been helpful seventy-two hours ago.”

“I told you it was personal, and it is,” I ground out, feeling more anxious by the second. “Moretti have only ever wanted one thing: Libby. If they would’ve come back looking for a war, they wouldn’t have taken unknowns out. They would’ve grabbed her, killing as many of us along the way.”

When no one argued, I went on, pointing at Maverick as I did. “We already killed the members of TenGen who played psychological games. The ones who are left are old school. If they want retaliation, they’re coming back looking for our blood, not a loose connection to scare us. This is personal. This is someone who knows *us*. Why am I the only one who sees that?”

I took a step back, a huff leaving me as I realized the source of my

anxiousness was also my answer. “It’s because I’m the only one who can see it clearly. I’m the only one who isn’t blinded by the fear of losing *them*.” I gestured to all the toddlers and babies, ignoring the looks of pure rage that followed the absolute horror as I started leaving the room.

“You’re saying the thought of your niece being taken or killed doesn’t scare you?”

I’d gone still the instant Maverick’s cold warning began seeping through the room but didn’t turn until he finished speaking.

“You know damn well that wasn’t what I meant,” I said as I met his furious stare. “I would protect and save any of them the same as I would do for all of you.”

I let that hover between us for a while and knew he got my meaning when his jaw twitched. Knew he was remembering when we nearly lost Einstein. When I saved her because she was my brother’s *world*.

Because she was one of *us*.

Because she was a fucking *person*.

“For fuck’s sake,” I continued with a bitter laugh, “I’ll kill anyone for even looking at Conor’s kid wrong because that girl’s my mini-me. But I can still see a threat and think about what I need to do to stop it. You used to be able to do that. Now? You worry about who it might take from you. Speaking of . . .” I gestured to the room again. “Considering there *is* a threat, we shouldn’t all be gathered in one place unless it’s the main Borello house—especially this building where anyone can walk in.” I gave Dare a pointed look. “The fact that you haven’t thought of that shows how blinded you are.”

No one tried stopping me that time, and I’d already said everything I’d been trying to hold back.

It wasn’t until I was halfway down the block that I felt him coming up behind me. I slowed and took a deep, calming breath, preparing for any number of reactions from him.

“You can’t talk to Dare like that,” Maverick said as he fell into step beside me.

“He needed to know.”

Maverick placed a hand on my chest to stop me and waited until I met his gaze. “You wanna say shit like that, think of a better way to deliver it and wait until it’s just Dare and me. Or, hell, even Kieran and Conor. But for as strong as all those women are, they’re now flipping out.”

I glanced toward the building as a deep-rooted need to apologize and

calm them pulsed through me while another part wondered what those women looked like when they were anything less than the calm and composed mafia badasses I'd always known them to be.

But I just shook my head and muttered, "I didn't say anything all of you weren't already thinking."

"It's different," he admitted after a second. "Hearing your fears out loud and knowing they're legitimate." Gripping my shoulder, he pulled me closer and lowered his voice. "What's going on?"

"What do you mean? We just went over—"

"I know you," he said firmly, forcing an irritated laugh from me.

"This again?" But he just lifted an eyebrow in response, so I explained, "After years of nothing, there's an open threat on our family, and we had nearly every member in there. Thought that was obvious."

Maverick slanted his head. "The thought of any threat always has you pumped and so goddamn excited that I can never keep you still because you're ready to go, no matter what." He jerked his chin toward ARCK. "I saw you in there. You were amped up in all the wrong ways."

"And I just fucking explained that," I ground out. "*Again.*"

He studied me before saying, "And maybe you were explaining it for *you*. I told you, the right person can change what we thought we knew or wanted."

"Fucking hell," I snapped, shoving him back and stepping away. "There's no *right person*. She's just *a person* I'm already done with, so there's nothing more to discuss."

"You think I don't know what you're doing?" he called out, irritation lacing his words. "For the first time in our lives, you're blocking me at every turn. You're scared because of the way she makes you feel. You're scared of this threat the same way we all are . . . and it's because of her."

I slowed to a stop and my stare shifted from the ground to him at his disturbingly accurate accusations. Not that I expected anything less from him. He was in my head the same as I was his.

"You're fearless, Diggs, I know that. I've fought by your side for nearly half our lives. You're allowed to be scared when you feel something this damn powerful. You're allowed to *want it.*"

"I already told you—"

"Stop fucking lying to me, Evan."

One of my eyebrows lifted. Not at the harsh demand but at the sound of my name.

It was weird to hardly associate with your name . . . to barely recognize it. Maverick and I hadn't exactly accepted new identities when we'd joined the Borellos, but *Diggs* was just who I'd become over the past fourteen years. I couldn't even remember the last time anyone had called me *Evan*. But if Maverick was using it, I'd clearly pushed him too far.

"I don't want it," I finally said, then gestured to the building we'd left. My words dripping with meaning when I continued. "I don't wanna be so consumed in someone else that I lose all sense of reason and forget how to protect people."

"We still know how to protect people."

"Dare should've had all the kids in the Borello house within an hour of us finding those bodies," I said unapologetically. "You know I'm right."

"I know," Maverick whispered. "Dare does too. Should've seen his face when he realized it."

I shrugged and looked pointedly around. "I don't see anyone leaving."

The Borello house was large enough to keep all of us, even if it was a little cramped now that there were a ton of minis running and crawling around. But more than that, we had a massive safe room.

Whenever there had been any whisper of a threat or worry of retaliation over the years, Dare had forced us to hole up there to wait it out. The fact that he hadn't immediately done the same and still wasn't working on it said enough about everyone's true worries.

"Things are different," Maverick started somewhat hesitantly. "This will be the first time we've had something against us in this way since Kieran, Jess, and Conor joined us. Dare can't force them to bunker in that house."

"When the safe room's activated, no one can get through those doors—Kieran, Jess, and I have all tried." Considering the three of us could get past most locks and slip into seemingly impenetrable places, the room might as well be a fortress. "Kieran knows the Borello house is where we need to be."

"Then he'll decide that," Maverick said firmly. "He and Dare call the shots. We don't. And *you*?" His head shook as he rocked closer to me. "Think about what you're doing. You know how miserable I was without Einstein, and that wasn't my choice. I get that you're afraid to be with this girl, but you're already keeping things from me and pushing me away because you're trying to make yourself believe you don't want her. You're gonna ruin your life if you keep yourself from her."

I dipped my head but refused to change the course I was on because I'd

already committed to avoiding Tree—whatever her real name was. I could stay away long enough until she was nothing more than a blur in the nameless faces of women I'd slept with.

“You know, I'm not completely fearless,” I muttered as I started backing away again, a grin stealing across my face when he looked at me doubtfully. “Kieran still nearly makes me piss myself.”

A scoffing laugh left him as he nodded in agreement. “But you still look him in the eye and smile like you find him amusing.”

I held my arms out to my sides. “Better to face your enemies with a smile than—”

“Let them know they scare you,” he finished for me, eyes rolling even as a smirk pulled at his mouth. “Right, you've always said that. Except you're genuinely never afraid, even when you should be.”

“You're welcome for lightening the mood whenever we're about to die,” I teased, then tossed a half-assed wave as I turned. “First day of school. Gonna pick up Mini and take her to get ice cream.”

“Where will you be after?” he asked before I could get far, concern lining the question he normally wouldn't ask.

Then again, I didn't usually keep things from him.

“Gotta bring her back here to her dad,” I said indifferently, as if I hadn't heard his worry, then shot him a look from over my shoulder. “Unless I get a message that I need to take her to a certain house . . .”

When he only nodded, I continued down the street and headed toward the elementary school that rested just off the main streets of Wake Forest, a few blocks from ARCK.

For the most part, the town was small enough to walk wherever you needed to be, so long as you were already in or near the downtown streets. Not that I didn't have ways to get me from one place to the next faster than I could walk. It was just that the vehicles I owned only had two wheels and one seat as a reminder of the vow I'd taken.

I'd willingly stepped into this dark and twisted life. With everything I'd seen, I wouldn't ask someone to do the same. Another seat behind or beside me signified collateral damage, and I refused to have any on my conscience.

“Ladies,” I crooned to the front office staff as I stepped into the elementary school, slightly delaying their shock at seeing me enter the front doors that had been locked.

“Um, e-excuse me,” the older woman at the main desk said when I

continued through the office as if I had somewhere to be, because I did. Standing, she smoothed her hair with one hand while touching her flushed cheek with the other. “You can’t be in here.”

I pressed a hand to my chest in mock offense, twisting to keep my eyes locked on her and letting a wicked grin shape my lips. “Baby, if you’re trying to wound me . . . I can think of better ways that are much more fun.”

Her eyes widened and snapped to the other woman before shifting to me again, but they didn’t hold. Her blush deepened and her eyes darted everywhere as she stammered, “T-the school day h-hasn’t ended yet, sir. You’ll need to go—”

“What was that?” I cut in, my voice a lighthearted tease. “I need to continue on my way and think of nothing but you until I return?” When her lips parted, I winked at her before turning away. “If you insist.”

A stunned huff sounded from behind me, but neither of the women said anything else or tried stopping me as I made my way to the principal’s office, letting myself in without so much as a knock.

“We need to talk,” I said in way of announcing myself after I’d already locked the door behind me.

The elementary school’s principal blinked rapidly as she looked up from her computer, fingers reaching for the frame of her glasses and an irritated huff pouring from her when she noticed who was in the room with her.

“Mr. Pierson,” she muttered and gestured to one of the chairs on the opposite side of her desk.

I shifted my head, stopping just before I could show my full discomfort with that name.

Once again, it was something I didn’t associate with.

Only this name? It truly wasn’t my own. It was the only thing Maverick and I had changed when we’d been brought into the family.

Einstein had done some sort of genius witchcraft so our prints and faces wouldn’t set off alarms if they were ever scanned, considering we were extremely wanted by the government. But we were still *known*.

Our names and military photos had been top news for weeks, even before the Borellos had rescued us from the black site we were being held in. They’d continued being top news for a while after, even though the military had never admitted that they’d lost us. Probably because they’d been trying to pin a secret op gone wrong on us, and we’d known the truth.

So, we’d remained out of the public eye for years, but our surname was

something we'd had to drop. Forget completely.

Before they'd even grabbed us, Einstein had created new identities and legitimized backstories for us. But the name *Pierson* was something only she'd found funny, even after explaining it to everyone as if it should've been obvious. "*Because we found them in a prison.*"

But that wasn't exactly something I wanted to be reminded of.

Thankfully, I hardly heard that name, so I wasn't forced to remember that time in my life often.

I cleared my throat as I strode through the office, bypassing the chairs the principal had gestured to and slipping around her desk to lean against it, near her.

"May I ask why you're in my office when it's only the first day of school?" Her sigh had the corner of my mouth lifting because it only partially covered her fear.

She wasn't exactly sure who our family was and what we did, but she had her suspicions. Then again, her brother owned The Jack. And while Zeke was the only owner, we were in every part of that business.

Libby was a bartender.

Older generations of Borellos who hadn't fled when Dare disbanded the family were bouncers, and their kids were barbacks.

Maverick had worked there until he'd broken someone's jaw because the guy had touched Einstein, and where one of us went, the other always followed.

Suffice to say, we were there often, and Zeke had probably seen more than he should. So, his sister was smart to hold a level of fear whenever she encountered one of us.

"Security's lacking here," I muttered, folding my arms over my chest.

Her head slanted in disagreement. "I assure you, we're taking every precaution to make sure—"

"I got in," I said over her. "Not only that, but the women in your front office let me talk my way right past them."

She tossed her glasses onto the desk and rubbed at the corner of her eye, where her skin was just beginning to wrinkle. "Past the locked doors?" When I nodded, she asked, "How?"

"Can't tell you that."

"Mr. Pierson—"

"You don't need to keep calling me that, Zara." I gave her a charming

smile, knowing it would only irritate her more because she hated when I called her by her first name.

But I kind of fucking hated when she used that last name.

She drew in a slow breath, her eyes flashing with anger and worry at overstepping some invisible boundary that she really didn't need to worry about with me. "It would help us greatly to know how you managed to get past doors that are meant to be locked."

"They were locked," I told her, shrugging my shoulders. "All you need to know is it can be bypassed, and your ladies up front don't do much to stop people who shouldn't be here." Before she could continue arguing her side, I went on. "But that isn't why I'm here."

One of her eyebrows lifted. "Please enlighten me," she said dryly, pulling a full smile from me.

"So much fabricated hate," I teased. "I know you secretly love when I visit you."

"Always a highlight."

A hushed laugh bled past my lips but quickly died as I narrowed my gaze on hers, watching as her feigned irritation leached away until the only thing left was her fear. "Alexis Kennedy might be in danger."

Zara watched me for a few more seconds before she leaned forward, reaching for her phone and jolting when I slammed my hand on top of hers.

"This isn't the type of conversation that leaves this office or your lips ever again, do you understand?"

Her fear-filled eyes flashed my way. "W-we need to check on her! We need to check on the class she's in."

My head shifted, just the slightest movement to let her know there wasn't a need just yet. "At some point, her parents might pull her from the school. If that happens, you make sure her teacher doesn't ask questions and there's no trace of it happening. Until then, I need to know that you'll do more than you've been doing to keep people out of this school. I need to know that if something happens, you'll call me before you call the police."

Zara looked more flustered than I'd ever seen her. That fear that always seeped from her was blatant and thick, coating the walls of her office and my skin as she seemed to try to figure out her next move. As she seemed to assess me in a different light.

"I need a response, Zara," I prompted, my eyebrows raising when her head moved in quick shakes.

“If she’s in danger, the rest of my kids are in danger. What kind of danger are you people putting her in?” she asked, nearly demanded.

I would’ve been proud of the strength behind her words if I didn’t need to focus on pulling her back to a world she could understand and digest.

A world where there weren’t monsters sitting directly beside her.

“‘You people,’” I echoed, drawing out the words and feigning confusion. “I don’t know what you mean by that, but her biological dad has found out where they are. They fled from him because he was abusive, among other things. We’re worried he’ll come here and try to take Alexis.”

Technically, it wasn’t all a lie.

He *had* been abusive to Sutton—Lexi’s mom and Conor’s wife. They *had* fled from him.

But he was extremely dead, thanks to Maverick.

“Oh God,” Zara said, a hand going to her throat as she sank into the chair, seeming to accept the story as her stare fell to her desk. “That poor child.”

I glanced to the side when the bell rang for dismissal. “So, what are you gonna do?”

“I’ll call you,” she said, head bobbing. “If anything happens, I’ll call you first.”

“Glad to hear it.” I pushed from her desk and started for the door, my steps pausing and my neck cracking as unease slid through me when she called out to me.

“Mr. Pierson.”

Slowly, I met her worried stare from over my shoulder again.

“I, uh . . . well, I know you’ve asked for personal details on staff, but that isn’t something you can demand, and there are privacy laws . . .”

I turned fully to face her, my brow furrowing because we’d had this conversation last year. She’d given me the list of her staff and their files.

If any of our little Rebels were going to be somewhere day in and day out, we needed to know who was with them.

It was something Einstein could’ve easily gotten, but Lexi was—unofficially—*my* little Mini. So, the task had fallen to me. And from Zara’s tone, I had a horrible feeling I’d failed.

“Speak faster,” I ground out, the words cruel and dark and visibly shaking Zara.

“I-I-I gave you everything. Last year,” she added as an afterthought and then rushed to continue. “But it never sat right with me because of—well, for

many reasons. So, I didn't inform you that we brought on a few new members to our team this year."

"Names." The demand ripped from me as horror coated my veins and twisted around my lungs. Because there was an open threat on our family, and Lexi had just spent an entire day in a building with people we hadn't thoroughly investigated. "I need them."

"I'll send the files," she agreed with a shaky nod, her worry dripping from her and fueling the apology in her voice when she admitted, "One of the new staff is Alexis' teacher this year."

I was out the door before she finished speaking. Stalking through the hall and ignoring the stunned stares of the women in the office as I wove through the crush of little kids and toward the front courtyard, where they were already lining up and greeting their parents.

Movements jerky as my heart crashed against my ribs until I saw that adorable little girl. Dancing to a song in her head and smiling when she tilted her face up to talk animatedly to the person approaching her.

And then everything stopped.

My feet. The fear coursing through me at the knowledge that I could've failed everyone. My heart . . . before it furiously took off in a completely different rhythm.

Because there, locked in a conversation with Lexi, blonde hair cascading down her back in waves and smile so damn bright, the sun didn't stand a chance against her, was *Tree*.

I took a cautious step forward, and then another. As if easing across a minefield toward the woman who was a constant thrum in my veins.

One wrong step, and I would be sucked into those green eyes all over again.

One wrong step, and I'd be sneaking into her apartment tonight when I'd managed to keep myself from going to her the past few.

I inhaled deeply when a whisper of vanilla and lavender teased me as I drew closer, letting it fill my lungs and my head. My eyes briefly rolling back at the delicate combination that was so much more intoxicating because of the woman it clung to.

And then I was just five feet away . . . four . . . three . . .

Wondering how I'd managed to stay away from her at all when it took physical effort not to grab her and pull her into my arms when I made it to her side. Blood practically buzzing with need as I took in her profile and

body that I knew fit perfectly against mine as I leaned in to whisper in her ear.

“Found you.”



WILLOW

“**F**ound you.”

I jerked away from the unexpectedly deep voice, but awareness was already spreading over me and down my spine like a welcome caress before I ever fully registered the words or his voice as my head snapped in that direction.

“Excuse—” The reprimand cut off half a second before I met gray eyes. *His* eyes. Those eyes that had been plaguing me.

My heart threatened to escape the confines of my chest when I realized he was standing there. Directly next to me. That horribly sexy smirk shaping his lips and doing unfair things to me as he studied me as if he’d never seen me before.

“Diggs.” His name fell past my lips on a whisper and was drowned out by the excitement of the girl at my side.

“You came!” she shouted.

The knowing set of his mouth transformed into an affectionate smile as he focused on one of my students, Alexis, and held out his hand for her. “First day of school, Mini. Where else would I be?”

A shuddering breath ripped from me as I took a step away from him, trembling hands pressed to my stomach as yesterday flashed through my mind like a nightmare and continued directly in front of me.

Because he was *married*. He had a baby.

And, apparently, he was the father of one of my students.

Oh my God.

“Where are we going?” Alexis asked as I tried looking anywhere else—at *anyone* else—but my attention pulled back to the man standing so close to me.

Without a care.

Eyes once again locked on mine. Trapping me in place and keeping me prisoner the way they always did. As if he hadn’t dismissed me the day before. As if his daughter wasn’t doing some complicated-looking handshake with him.

“I was thinking ice cream,” he told Alexis as his gaze slowly raked over

me in a way that felt wholly indecent considering our surroundings and his marital status.

“Can I get the biggest one?” she asked excitedly, finally drawing his stare back to her as that affectionate smile returned to his handsome face, making him look so different than ever before.

I’d seen him with that cocky swagger. I’d seen him study me with intrigue and reverence. I’d seen him look at me as if he wanted to own me. Devour me.

This was different.

This was pure adoration. But even still, there was something about the way he looked at his older daughter that felt different than when he’d been looking at his wife and baby the day before.

Not as deep.

Not as unfailing.

It was almost as if there was a touch of amusement to it. But that could’ve all been in my head. I could’ve just been too shocked and horrified to accurately study his expression at the coffee shop.

Now that I’d had twenty-four hours to come to terms with the knowledge of who he actually was and *why* Rorie had been warning me to stay away from him, I was seeing him clearly.

“Who do you even think you’re talking to right now?” Diggs asked her as he dramatically pressed a hand to his chest. “We always, *only* get the biggest. Period.”

Alexis laughed, her head tipping back as she whispered, “Mom’s gonna be so mad.”

“Your mom?” Diggs countered on a hushed laugh. “Shit, let’s maybe revisit who’s more pissed after I drop you off.”

“Can you not?” I snapped over him, voice low and disapproving as I glanced around at the staff scattered throughout the kids still waiting to be picked up. “You’re on school property, and there are children around.”

Bemusement washed over Diggs’ expression as he met my stare as if he couldn’t understand what I would be reprimanding him for, but that intrigue I’d come to know well flared deep within his eyes. “Lex,” Diggs muttered as his gaze fell to my mouth, “this your new teacher?”

“Right,” she said with that adorable enthusiasm she’d shown all day, bouncing as if she never truly stopped moving. “This is Ms. Bennett—she’s new to the school and to Wake Forest. She said she was thinking about

adopting a dog. Right, Ms. Bennett?”

“Something huge and terrifying,” I acknowledged. “To protect me.”

But the pointed jab only seemed to amuse Diggs. “Bennett.” He let my last name roll off his tongue as if he was tasting it. “There a first name to that?”

“Not one you’ll ever know.”

Surprise flashed across his face at my anger, but those eyes continued studying me and taking me in as if it were just the two of us there. As if he could figure out every one of my thoughts just by looking at me.

“Ready, Mini?” he finally asked, releasing me from his gaze and grasping Alexis’ shoulder, prodding her forward as she waved at me.

“Bye, Ms. Bennett! See you tomorrow.”

“See you then, Alexis,” I promised, choking over her name when Diggs’ hand wrapped around my forearm.

Grip strong and familiar and *comforting* when it shouldn’t be.

“I think I like it when you’re mad.” His words were soft enough that they nearly got lost in the noises of the end of the day, but then he tilted his head so his lips brushed my cheek when he continued. “But I have every intention of finding out why you are.”

“If you show up in my apartment again, I’ll scream for help,” I warned, voice nothing more than a weak tremor.

A wicked laugh rose in his throat as his thumb trailed toward my wrist, making the same path his nose normally took. A silent vow that had my knees shaking and heat unfurling in my stomach. “Baby, I’ll make you scream. Gladly. But it won’t be for help.”

My body shook when he released me, walking away without so much as a backward glance.

And I hated that it disappointed me because he’d always been drawn back to me for one last goodbye. I hated that I wanted him to come back as much as I never wanted to see him again. I hated that my body craved him and that my heart stupidly ached for the way he held and regarded me.

But I’d never been so disgusted with someone in my entire life.

With an unsteady exhale, I brushed my hair away from my face and glanced around, a pit of ice and guilt opening inside me when I caught Rorie’s stare from where she stood about a dozen feet away.

Her head moved in faint shakes as if she were equally disappointed and worried before she focused on the few kids around her.

I wanted to know why she hadn't told me he was married. I wanted to know why she'd made it seem like he was something *else* instead of what he was.

I wanted to know so many things.

But I was just as disgusted with myself because I'd helped Diggs cheat on his wife—even unknowingly—and nearly every part of me still wanted him. So, I studiously avoided her and kept my conversations with Cora short and about work until I could slip away from the school an hour later.

And when I got home, I went through every room and made sure the windows were locked, then spent an embarrassing amount of time moving furniture to barricade my front and back doors.

My eyelids opened to my dark bedroom some time that night. But as I lay there, listening for any sign as to what might've woken me, I realized I already knew.

Because adrenaline wasn't coursing through me and stealing my breaths, as it often did when I woke from memories posed as devastating nightmares. I didn't feel as if I'd been abruptly torn from sleep by the evil presence I couldn't seem to escape. Instead, I felt comforted. Protected. My body was responding to and reciprocating the heady sense of desire creeping through the room.

It'd been that way every night he'd somehow found a way into my apartment, when there only should've been suspicion and red flags.

"Found you," he muttered, and my eyelids momentarily slipped shut as those words and that voice rolled over me like branding touches and punishing kisses.

"I told you I'd scream," I whispered just before he entered my line of sight. Something about watching him lean against the wall, arms folded over his chest and eyes narrowed in frustration, had my chest aching.

Every other night I'd woken to him, he'd been climbing onto my bed. Grabbing me up in his arms and pulling me close. Barely giving me the chance to fully wake before his mouth was pressing against mine.

The change from those nights to tonight was oddly heartbreaking, but he shouldn't have been here at all.

He *never* should've been here.

"Heard you," he continued in the same hushed voice. "Think I deserve to know why." He jerked his chin toward the front of my room. "Think I deserve to know why you're trying so hard to keep me out."

"You still got in." My tone hinted at my desperate desire to know *how*.

His mouth slanted impishly. "Hard to keep me out of places, Tree."

"If everything is locked, and I've barricaded the doors, take a hint," I snapped as I sat up to kneel on the bed. "You disgust me, don't you get that?"

Genuine shock flared across his features and pulsed with hurt before his face went void of all emotion.

"I'm disgusted with *myself* because I let you touch me."

Long seconds passed before he nodded and pushed from the wall. Rubbing at his jaw as he turned to leave.

My heart faltered.

I swallowed back a sound of protest.

I hated that a little over a month with this man had somehow turned into something so significant that it still felt wrong to watch him leave, even with what I now knew.

He stopped at the foot of my bed, his voice low and edged with warning when he asked, "How did you find out?"

A disbelieving breath fled from me. "I saw you."

"When?"

"With your family." Each word came out clipped and filled with irritation at the boldness of his questions, considering he'd clearly seen me too.

"*When?*" he repeated, turning to look at me. Eyes searching me and pleading for something I couldn't quite understand. "What were we doing?"

"Getting—oh my God, what does it even matter?" I seethed. "You're married. You have children. Your daughter is one of my students."

Shock had replaced everything else as I'd spoken. But just as I was about to tell him he needed to leave, he stepped toward me and said, "You're mad because I'm married." The words coming out more of a confirming statement rather than a question.

"Yes," I cried out, irritation bleeding from me because he seemed surprised by that.

"You said you'd scream—you're trying to keep me out—because I'm married."

"God, Diggs, *yes*." I flung my hand toward my bedroom door. "And I

hate you for using me to betray your wife and your family. Now, *leave.*”

“Give me a minute to explain something, and then if you still want me to, I’ll leave,” he said, honesty weaving through each word as he slipped his phone out of his pocket and began tapping on the screen. His face illuminated in the otherwise darkened room.

“Diggs, if you’re gonna try—”

“One minute,” he begged, his gray eyes meeting mine before his attention returned to his phone. But just as quickly, he was watching me again as he moved along the side of my bed, closer to me. “Need you to tell me if there’s any other reason you’re mad. Any other reason you’re *disgusted* with me.”

“I think you being married is reason enough.”

A brief, stunning smile lit his face before he crushed his mouth to mine. And even though my hand automatically shot to his chest to shove him away, my fingers betrayed me by curling into his shirt instead.

Because I knew in the way my spirit shuddered the moment he touched me that I wanted to wake up to him slipping into my bed for weeks and months and years to come. I wanted the way my body sang and my heart soared when he touched me. I wanted the undeniable craving during the long days as I restlessly waited for night to come.

Guilt and betrayal burned in my stomach as I was hit with an image of his wife and baby. Forcing my face away from his, I finally managed to push him back a step as I cried out, “I can’t.” I pressed a hand to my uneasy stomach, my head moving in slow, wide shakes. “I can’t. You’re—”

“Tree, I’m not married,” Diggs hurried to say as he held out his phone for me to take.

My stare shifted between the lit screen and the relief in his eyes before I hesitantly took the device. My breath catching when I saw the picture of the man who had been slipping into my bed the past month—mid-laugh as he looked at the man beside him.

Fully identical.

From their gray eyes to their amused expressions to the way their dark hair looked as if they styled the short, messy strands by running their fingers through them.

Except, the one who wasn’t centered in the photo was holding a woman with fiery red hair against his chest, and she had a baby on her hip.

The same woman and baby from the coffee shop.

“Maverick,” Diggs informed me when I just sat there, taking in their

similarities, “and my sister-in-law and niece. Alexis?” he continued as he bent, placing his hands on my bed so his face was directly in front of mine. “That kid isn’t blood or mine in any way you’re thinking. But her parents are as good as family, and we take care of family. Which means I would take care of her, even if she didn’t act like my little mini-me. Understand?”

“You’re not married?” I asked slowly, trying to wrap my head around what he was saying. Because in less than a minute, he’d taken everything I’d been agonizing over and tossed it away.

“No,” he said tightly, almost seeming repelled by the idea of it.

The relief I felt from that one word was profound and dizzying, but before I had a chance to fully absorb what that meant, Diggs was wrapping me in his arms and capturing my lips.

Numbing my jumbled thoughts and stealing my breath as he knelt on the bed and laid me back. The desperate, almost primal way he kissed me and ran his hands over my body was something I understood because I needed him just the same.

It’d only been a day of thinking he’d used me to betray his family, and I’d been wrecked over it. More than that, I’d been broken over the thought of never having *this* again.

“Jesus, what are you doing to me?” he asked as his shirt joined mine on the floor, the words so soft I wasn’t sure he meant to say them out loud.

My eyes rolled back as he made a wickedly teasing path down my stomach, and my fingers secured in his hair just as he whispered, “Been going out of my fucking mind thinking I was losing you.”

Wings took flight inside me at the confession. But just as those wings began shifting into heat when he gripped the edges of my sleep shorts, his words fully registered and brought everything to a crashing halt.

Because Diggs wasn’t married . . . and that left more questions. *Worrying* questions.

“What are you?” I rasped, the question nearly inaudible, but from the way Diggs’ body stilled against mine, I knew he heard. Swallowing thickly, I lifted my hands and scrubbed them over my face as I forced myself to think clearly. “I was warned to stay away from you. I was told you were dangerous. When I saw you—well, your brother, I guess? But when I saw him, I thought those warnings had been some sort of fabrication to save me from the mortification and hurt of knowing I’d been sleeping with a married man. Except, they weren’t.”

I propped myself on my elbows when Diggs pushed up so he was hovering over me, his expression once again a mask of *nothing*. The only tell that he was bothered was the slight hardening of his jaw that shifted every few seconds when I went on.

“And you accepted that I was disgusted with you. You wanted to know *how I found out*.” I lifted my chin at him. “But now I don’t know what you think I might’ve found out or what you are.” A frantic-sounding laugh tumbled past my lips. “I’m trying to figure out why I’m relieved you aren’t married because you’re clearly *something*. And I have a feeling this *something* is why you’re so hesitant to tell me anything about your life. I have a feeling that, whatever it is, it’s worse than if you’d been married.”

Long moments passed as he watched me without responding, seeming to take in everything about me before he pushed away from the bed and straightened to his full height. Just as his lips parted, his phone began ringing from where I’d dropped it on the bed.

He barely spared a glance at it before hurrying to scoop up the phone and answer the call as he stepped away. “Yeah?” As he listened, his face and eyes shifted into something so cold and terrifying, yet somehow, they didn’t seem to change at all. “On my way.”

I scrambled to my knees as he grabbed his shirt and started stalking away from me, a question and a plea on the tip of my tongue when he suddenly turned and erased the distance he’d just placed between us. Grasping my face in his hands and leaning close until his lips were teasing mine with every breath.

And I knew in the way that next kiss felt like possession and desire, respect and adoration, that I didn’t care about Rorie’s warnings or Cora’s theories.

I didn’t care who Diggs was at all.

“I don’t know who gave you the warning, but listen to them,” he begged, shattering my revelation.

My chest shook at the realization of what he was saying and the depth of his plea. “I know there’s something dangerous about you. I *felt it* that first night—*every night*,” I admitted, gripping at his forearms. “And, whatever it is, it isn’t enough to make me want to be farther from you than I am right now.”

His head shook as he pulled away, his jaw clenched tight as his eyes devoured me. Everything about the action and look screamed that he wanted

me to take back the words. That I didn't understand their meaning.

And just as he had that afternoon, he ran his thumb down my forearm and over my wrist instead of his usual parting. When he spoke, his voice dipped and twisted with indecision. "Gonna be hard forcing myself not to find you."

"Diggs." His name punched from my lungs, and I scrambled to follow him as he swiftly and silently stalked from my room, shutting the door behind him.

But when I tried wrenching it open, I fumbled over the knob, taking a second too long to realize why my door didn't budge.

And that extra second was all he needed.

Because in the short time it took me to twist the lock he'd flipped and follow him, he was already gone. The only sign that he'd ever been there at all was the lone living room window that was still partially open. Showing me *where* he'd been getting in but not *how*, considering I'd locked it earlier. But when I hurried over to look outside it, there wasn't a trace of him.

I didn't go back to sleep . . .

I spent the rest of the night righting the furniture in my apartment and struggling through the whiplash of the past day and a half. My feelings. The information. All of it had been so much and so jarring.

And in the end, I was right back where I'd begun. Wanting nothing more than for Diggs to find his way into my apartment and slip into my bed.

Only now, I was afraid he never would.



DIGGS

“Told you it was personal,” I mumbled under my breath when Kieran neared my side about an hour later and held his stare when he slanted a lethal look my way.

I wouldn’t give him the satisfaction of seeing the effect he had on people on any given day. Asshole already knew he was terrifying. But after this?

He could glare at me all he wanted; we both knew I’d been right. I’d warned them. But Dare hadn’t moved anyone to the Borello house because Kieran had dismissed my worries.

And now we had another body with a symbol.

After taking a quick look inside the van, Kieran stepped close, tapping my chest with a blade he’d been rolling along his knuckles. “Looks personal to *Borellos*. Not the rest of us.”

“Funny,” I grunted when he stepped away, “didn’t know that symbol disappeared from your skin, removing you from our family.”

An animalistic smile flashed across his face and was gone just as quickly as it had appeared. “Don’t mistake my words for disloyalty,” he said, voice dripping with a cruelty I knew he didn’t mean. “But if it isn’t Tennessee Gentlemen or Moretti, then the feud’s old. Whoever’s doing this doesn’t know Conor and I are involved with the rest of you. Which means it isn’t personal to us, our wives, or our kids. That doesn’t mean we won’t be here, helping the rest of you.”

“That isn’t necessarily true,” Einstein said from where she stood near the van, rapidly tapping on her tablet. Searching for more clues, even though she’d already found out the van had been stolen from a place with no security.

With a sigh, she spared a quick glance at Kieran before saying, “You’re well known in our world, and it isn’t exactly news we came from rival families. So, even if this is an old feud, they’re more than likely watching us and have deduced that we’ve created a new family. Together. You’re just as at risk as the rest of us.”

Kieran’s only response was a slight lift of his chin just as Dare’s car came to a screeching stop behind the van, warning the rest of us that he didn’t have

good news.

Maverick stole from the passenger seat as soon as the car settled and stormed over to Einstein, already speaking to her in hushed voices before he managed to pull her away.

Dare hesitated once he was out of the car. One hand gripping his door and the other fisted in his hair as he rocked like he was about to follow Maverick before he stalked toward Kieran and me instead, slamming the door as he went.

“Need you to find someone.”

My eyebrows lifted at his tone, all agitation and fear and barely concealed rage. “Else?” I clarified as my gaze snapped to the open side door of the van. “You need me to find someone *else*?”

His dark eyes shifted to me, narrowing in answer before he explained, “Einstein ran through all the locations we have any ownership in. An employee at the flower shop didn’t show today.”

“That where you went?” Kieran asked.

“To her apartment,” Dare confirmed. “Identical note and setup as the other apartment. Find her,” he bit out with a cold look at me.

“Tell me where she lives,” I said with a jerky dip of my head, my blood already racing and my body a mess of restless movements as I waited for my starting location.

Before Dare could respond, Kieran hissed a curse and pointed at the van with the knife he’d pressed to me earlier. “They had her in there.” He spared me a look that I would’ve said bordered on respect if this wasn’t Kieran and added, “When I got the call, Dare told me you were surprised you only found one person in the van because they had a second set of cuffs set up on the opposite side.”

“Right.” I cut a knowing look at Dare, my hands slowly curling into fists. “Which means I’ve just been standing here, wasting time.”

“Find her,” Dare ground out.

I stalked past him and toward the van, knowing that Dare’s urgency wasn’t because he expected the girl to still be alive but because we couldn’t afford to have anyone else find these people.

We would take care of the victims, making it as gentle for the families as possible when they found out their loved ones were gone.

They didn’t need to know the people closest to them had been brutally murdered. More than that, the public didn’t need to see the messages left with

the victims. That would only bring unwanted attention onto us that we'd successfully avoided for a long damn time.

That earlier restlessness was now all twitching muscles and jerky movements as I stepped into the white, windowless van and took another look around. Searching for anything I might've missed the first time.

After leaving Tree's apartment earlier, I'd gone straight to the address Maverick had texted me. All I'd known before arriving was another symbol had been left for us, and a person was missing.

It had ended up being one of the night waitresses from Brooks Street Café. When she hadn't shown for her second shift in a row, Lily had gotten worried.

The girl's car had still been in front of her tidy apartment with no signs of forced entry. The only thing out of place had been the chair positioned just inside the entryway.

Handcuffs had still been hanging from the spindles. But even though the scene was entirely different from the massacred restaurant owners, the note on her front door—our symbol, written in paint—had been all I'd needed to know we were dealing with the same person.

People.

Whoever.

It hadn't been hard to find her—to find the *van*. Even though they'd kept a clean scene, they'd killed her in the apartment, and blood was one of those scents that always seemed to overpower everything else to me.

Guess we could thank war for that.

But it was almost as if these assholes had known I would be the one looking for her. Because I could've sworn I'd followed the scent of blood all too easily to where they'd stashed the van on a seedy little road.

Not that they'd left a trail. I'd looked.

But almost as if they'd left the front windows or back doors open while driving to the location to ensure I'd find her.

Like I'd been saying . . . it was fucking *personal*.

With one last glance at the empty handcuffs, ensuring I hadn't missed anything else, I turned to leave the van and stopped to look at the waitress, still handcuffed to the opposite side of the van.

Bullet holes riddled her chest. Drying blood covered her Brooks Street Café shirt. Our symbol was carved into her forehead.

She couldn't have been more than thirty years old, and her only crime

was working at *our* diner.

We owned, or partially owned, most of Wake Forest. How were we supposed to protect everyone linked to us in that way? We couldn't hide an entire town in a safe room.

We didn't even know who we needed to protect them from.

And how was I supposed to protect Tree when I was already aching to get back to her after only an hour away from her? When every beat of my heart was demanding I keep her close. Safe. With me. Nearly drowning out all logic that bringing her deeper into my world would only put her in more danger.

With a harsh shake of my head, I stepped out of the van and said, "I know how to find her."

"I'm coming with you," Maverick said as soon as I started distancing myself from the van.

Before I could object, Kieran asked, "How?"

I glanced at him absentmindedly before focusing on him when I realized he was talking to me. Surprised that he would even question me, considering Dare never once had.

He just always expected me to do what he needed, which was *this*. And so long as it hadn't been days or there wasn't a shit ton of rain, I did my job flawlessly.

"Excuse me?"

"How are you gonna find her?" he asked, challenge and doubt in his voice. "You didn't even know she'd been in the van."

I took a step toward him, a harsh smirk curling at the edge of my mouth just as Maverick shoved his hand against my chest, pushing me the opposite way.

"Why don't you tell me how *you* find people, *Nightshade*?" I suggested, dragging out the dark world's nickname for the assassin as I held my ground against my brother. "Do you make pacts with demons or just use the fear of your next victim to get information?" At the narrowing of Kieran's eyes, my smirk widened.

"Enough," Dare snapped, but I was too lost in my restlessness of this mission, rage from the threat, and fear of what would happen next to stop.

"How about this? Someone says *go*, and we start tracking her." I smacked Maverick's hand away when he tried shoving me back another step and kept my stare on Kieran. "Last one there has to divulge all their secrets."

“The hell is wrong with you?” Maverick hissed when he finally succeeded in pushing me away, horrified stare on me before he spared a glance over his shoulder at where Kieran stood, watching us.

I just turned and continued in the direction I’d been going, away from the van. Taking in deep breaths, trying to clear the smell of the blood I’d been tracking and standing in for the better part of an hour.

“Diggs—”

“It’s blood,” I said over Maverick. “Whoever’s doing this wants us to find these girls. Wants *me* to find them. They’re making sure I can smell them.”

Maverick wavered for a moment before speaking, voice soft and low. “How sure are you?”

“Mav,” I muttered irritably, then gestured to the van and the people we’d left with it. “That van? The inspection expired years ago. I should’ve been following the smell of it, but I followed blood. Fresh blood, even though they’d had the waitress since yesterday.”

I rocked back a step and let my eyelids shut as a soft breeze kicked up, bringing with it the exact scent I was worried I’d find. Drawing in a slow, deep breath, I let the scent fill my lungs until that restlessness consumed every part of me.

“This way,” I said as my eyes opened, then started in the direction of rust and copper.

“More blood?” Maverick asked as he kept pace with me, keeping a step just behind me. When I grunted, he added, “People know we have a tracker.”

“Right, but why go through all this trouble just to make sure I could find the people they’re killing?” I challenged. “We’re either walking into a trap, or they’re setting us up for something bigger. Something we won’t be expecting after what they’ve been doing.” I sent him a meaningful look and added, “Something I won’t be able to track.”

“We’ll find them before that can happen,” he said, trying to give us both hope when there wasn’t a whole lot of it at that moment. “Einstein’s working on it at every angle. She’ll find something. Until then, you need to figure out your shit because you’re pushing everyone, and Kieran fucking Hayes isn’t someone you should push.”

A breath of a scoff left me. “He’s fine.”

Maverick grabbed my shoulder and brought me to a stop, turning me to face him as he did. “Diggs, I’m serious. You’re not yourself lately, and it’s

worrying. When are you gonna see that keeping yourself from what you want is gonna hurt you?”

“When are you gonna see what we’re in the middle of?” I seethed. “Why the fuck would I put a target on Tree’s back by linking her to me when people are getting murdered *because* they’re linked to us? Why can’t you understand that I don’t want to bring anyone into our world?”

“I do,” he argued. “You know I do. Einstein and I were so against any kid being brought into this life, but that changed for us. It’s obvious this girl has changed your wants too.”

“Not right now.”

“Yes, right now.”

A harsh laugh scraped up my throat. “Maverick—”

“You’re already so goddamn distracted by trying to keep yourself from her that it’s putting all of us at risk,” he snapped. “And if you think you’re protecting her by keeping yourself from her? Diggs . . . you’ve *been* sleeping with her. This threat we’re up against knows us—*clearly*. They’re *here*. Why are you so sure they don’t already know about her?”

I went so damn still as shards of ice pushed through my veins and stopped my heart.

“If the rest of us can see what she’s doing to you, threats can too. If she’s stealing your focus and fueling the air in your lungs, she’s on their radar.” Maverick’s voice dropped low as he stepped even closer to me. “Don’t you get it? She’s already in our world because she shifted yours.”

I didn’t try to continue denying it—there was no point. He’d known I was lying from the beginning. I didn’t even bother responding. I just turned and continued following the fresh scent of blood, trying like hell to clear my head of the thoughts Maverick had just put there.

That Tree was already in danger, even though I’d been trying so damn hard to ignore the constant pull to her.

But the harder I tried pushing away those fears and thoughts of her, the more she was there. Her wide eyes and innocently seductive expressions. Her intoxicating scent. Her shaky yet brave words before I’d left her earlier.

“I know there’s something dangerous about you. I felt it that first night—every night. And, whatever it is, it isn’t enough to make me want to be farther from you than I am right now.”

My head slanted and my steps slowed, then stopped altogether before I took a quick step back. Eyebrows drawn close as I forced myself to focus on

the darkened street beneath us. On the glimpse of what I'd just barely registered as I walked right past it.

The light of the moon reflecting off liquid on the otherwise dry asphalt.

Grabbing my phone, I turned on the flashlight as I dropped to a crouch. My jaw clenched as I looked at the trail laid out before me. Shining the light behind me, I followed the trail as far back as I could see before focusing on what was directly in front of me.

"That's a lot of blood," Maverick murmured.

"And it's leading us to her," I said unnecessarily, pointing to where the thick liquid left irregular patterns of lines and droplets. "That didn't slowly drip out of somewhere."

"They were carrying her," he agreed. "Wound side down."

I released a slow, steady breath as I stood and pocketed my phone. Reaching for the bandana in my back pocket, I twisted and found Maverick already covering the lower half of his face, wrath flaring in his eyes as he looked around.

"Kieran's been following us," I told Maverick as I finished knotting the fabric, then glanced toward the tree line, where I was sure he was waiting. "Do we need to warn him?"

Maverick covered his surprise before he glanced over his shoulder to confirm what I was saying, head shaking as he drew his gun. "Second he saw us getting ready, he knew we were possibly walking into something. Let's go."

I grabbed Maverick's arm to keep him in place when he quickly started in the same direction we'd been going, head slanting in warning as I muttered, "She's close. It's overpowering."

A sound of affirmation left him before he asked, "You alive?"

"Yeah, man, I'm alive," I muttered as I slowly started toward the scent.

"Fucking keep it that way."

My gaze snapped to my brother at his harsh tone—the near plea. As if he wasn't just talking about tonight and whatever we were about to walk into.

But *after*.

As if Maverick was genuinely worried this *distraction* would be the thing that finally succeeded in killing me because I was refusing to acknowledge and accept it. Because I was allowing it to put walls between my brother and me.

Dragging my gaze forward, I drew my gun and readied it as I listened for

anyone who might be waiting for us, but the trees were silent.

No footfalls on the hardened ground. No more breeze rustling through the leaves. I couldn't even hear Kieran—not that I'd expect to. The guy was creepy that way.

But there was blood on top of blood. So much that it was dizzying. Then again, I was still instinctively dragging in deep breaths of it as if I might somehow lose the path to the girl.

As if I could lose it now.

"If anyone else is here, they're waiting in the distance," I told Maverick. "But I think they're gone."

"They haven't been waiting for us anywhere else," he acknowledged, then drew in a hissing breath. "Jesus."

"Explains the smell," I mumbled, then glanced around to ensure no one was watching us before focusing on the girl's butchered body.

Being mindful of where I stepped, I moved closer to where they'd left her and bent close to her head. The only part of her they'd left untouched. Mostly.

"What was her name?" I asked Maverick as my stare drifted from the smeared letter on one cheek to our symbol on the other, both in blood.

Maverick paused from pulling out his phone. "Becca? Becky? I can't remember," he said before starting a call and lifting the phone to his ear.

"If that's Dare, ask him if there's a letter somewhere on the waitress. There's a letter *I* on this girl's cheek."

Maverick ripped his bandana off his face as he came to see what I'd been looking at. After relaying what I'd said to Dare, he spoke to me, voice low and ominous. "There were letters on the owners of the Thai restaurant."

I twisted to look at him, accusation sitting on the tip of my tongue, but he continued before I could question it. "The cleanup guys found them on two of the palms. *R* and *T*. Einstein was documenting the entire thing; that's how I know. But we didn't think anything of it because the owners' names started with those letters. We thought the person behind this was being morbid by letting us know which hand belonged to who since there were body parts everywhere."

"Don't think this has to do with names," I muttered, and he lifted his eyebrows in agreement just as Kieran stepped into view.

"I didn't see anyone," he grumbled as he studied what was left of the girl's body.

“A,” Maverick said before I could come back at Kieran with a smart-ass response. “Dare said there’s an A on the back of the waitress’s hip.”

My retort died and my head bobbed a few times. “Her name doesn’t begin with A,” I said knowingly.

Even though it hadn’t been a question, Maverick answered, “No.”

“Explain,” Kieran ground out, seemingly irritated at not knowing what we were talking about.

Gesturing to the side of the girl’s face that held the letter, I blew out a heaving breath and stood. “They’re sending a message within their messages. R and T with the first victims. A and I with these. They could be in either order, but—”

“But the waitress was taken first,” Maverick finished over me as he placed the call on speaker. “If it’s a word, then right now we have T-R-A-I . . .”

“There are train tracks in Raleigh,” I muttered, unconvinced with my line of thought, “but they wouldn’t warn us where they’re gonna be, would they?”

“No,” Kieran said, then gestured at me with a knife. “It’s personal . . .’ you keep saying that.” At my hesitant nod, his tone dropped meaningfully. “And this is *personal* because you’re traitors.”

Dare whispered a curse and started barking orders at Einstein as Kieran went on.

“There were a lot of members on both sides who weren’t happy when Dare and I separately disbanded our families. And now that *we’re* a family? That’s clearly hit a spot with old Borellos. They just let you know why they’re coming after you and who they are.”

“Diggs was right,” Maverick said, glancing at me. “He said they might be setting us up for something bigger. Something we wouldn’t expect after what they’ve been doing.” He gestured to the girl we were gathered around. “If they’re spelling out *traitors*, they’re letting us know how many people they’re gonna take. It’ll keep us busy and worried about all the people linked to us. But it can’t be that simple—they’re giving us too many clues and leading us to everything. They’ve gotta be preparing for something else.”

“Borello house,” Dare said through the phone. “We’ll call cleanup, but everyone needs to pack and get there now.” Before Kieran could even think to object, Dare seethed, “*Everyone*, Kieran.”

“Heard,” Kieran mumbled, already turning away and pulling out his phone.

I just held Maverick's worried stare, knowing his worry at that moment wasn't for what was coming with this threat. It was because he knew my *distraction* was about to keep me from where I needed to be.

I had no intention of bringing Tree to the Borello house. It didn't matter that she stole my focus or shifted my world, or however Maverick had put it. I didn't even know her real name—there was no asking her to lock herself away with me, let alone a house full of people she didn't know.

But from the way my brother was watching me, he absolutely knew I still planned on making sure there wasn't a chance of anyone getting close enough to touch her.



WILLOW

I hadn't seen him.

It'd been nearly a week since Diggs had woken me, wanting to know why I was so angry with him. Nearly a week since he'd made sure I couldn't stop him from leaving. Nearly a week of him continuing to slip into my apartment and leaving without waking me.

I'd tried waiting up. I'd even stayed on my couch so I would hear the window open.

The first few nights anyway . . .

But every night, I'd fallen asleep. Every morning, I'd woken in my bed. And every morning, there'd been a gift of sorts, letting me know he'd been there.

Lattes. Breakfast wraps. Lavender sprigs. Mini blueberry scones.

At first, I found them comforting and adoring because they let me know he was still there—that he was still coming back to me.

Now, they were just a reminder of what he was doing: Keeping himself from me in the only way he apparently felt he could. They were a frustrating display that he could be near me—*carry me*—undetected if that's what he wanted. Because I was well aware that his presence alone was powerful enough to wake me.

I'd stopped accepting his gifts after that second morning, but if he was bothered by the fact that I left them untouched, he had yet to show it.

Sparing one last glance at the vanilla latte and lavender sprig he'd left on my counter that morning, I ignored the way my heart dipped with a muted sense of longing and rushed out the door and to the parking lot before I could do something foolish . . .

Like grab the coffee.

I couldn't keep Diggs out of my apartment—that was obvious. But I was done playing this game by his rules.

"*Oh.*" I staggered back when I nearly ran into someone just as they came through the space between two trucks. "I'm s-sorry." The apology came out as more of a horrified wheeze than anything else when I lifted my head enough to see the nightmare walking toward me.

Because that's what this was . . . a nightmare.

My nightmare.

The mask covering the man's entire face. The neon X's crossing out his eyes and the neon, stitched smile, almost making him look like a scarecrow. And with the sun just beginning to greet the horizon, the neon glow was still prominent enough to draw my entire focus and root me in place.

I internally screamed at myself to close my eyes because I knew—I *knew*—this wasn't real. It couldn't be.

I begged my body to move. Run. Do *anything*.

But I just stood there in all my terror, with my heart in my throat and pounding so fiercely as he continued toward me. Head slanting menacingly just before a scream ripped from me when I was touched.

Nudged.

Prodded in the chest . . . by his dog.

A rough laugh left the man as he led his giant mountain of a dog past me, all while I struggled to *know* that I wasn't taking my last breaths.

Whirling around to keep them in sight, I began taking unsteady steps away. My chest heaved against the pressure on it as I desperately fought for oxygen and my head swam. After another few seconds to ensure they were out of reach, I turned and hurried for my car. Fumbling with my bag and nearly dropping my keys half a dozen times in the process before I finally fell into the seat and locked the doors behind me.

It wasn't until I went to turn on my car that I realized I was shaking. That I noticed the pressure on my chest had moved into my throat and was choking me until it felt like I would never be able to breathe again.

Balling my trembling fingers against my chest, I dropped my forehead against the steering wheel just as a pained sob broke from me, shattering the suffocating silence in my car.

I thought I'd escaped this.

I thought by getting away from Virginia and starting over somewhere new, somewhere small and quiet, I'd be able to live my life without the nightmares that haunted me at every turn.

And it had been better . . .

I hadn't had a flashback—hadn't seen a man in a chilling, neon mask—in a couple months. And I hated that bumping into a stranger in pre-dawn's darkness could send me spiraling right back to that night.

Then again, I hadn't slept much the past week, my thoughts were a

jumbled mess of hurt and frustration with a mysterious guy who snuck into locked places, and I'd been plagued by thoughts and terrifying dreams of what *kind* of dangerous Diggs could be.

Sleep deprivation and over-active minds were never a kind combination to people who'd endured what I had.

A huff punched from my chest, sharp and full of self-deprecation, when I realized how it must have come across to the man with the dog. A woman so terrified from bumping into a man alone that she literally froze in fear and *screamed*.

"Fantastic," I murmured as I finally turned on my car and reversed out of the space. "Move to a small town to get away from everything, and I make an ass—"

I slammed on the brakes almost as soon as I started driving when my attention snagged on something out of place.

A man and a mountain of a dog just feet from where I'd nearly run into them the first time and nowhere near where I'd last seen them.

Dog sitting stoically by his person's side. Man standing eerily still with his head slanted in that same menacing, almost taunting way as before.

Neon mask in place.

Both of them watching me.

No, no, no, no. This isn't happening!

My chest pitched as adrenaline and fear raced through my veins as I once again—stupidly—sat there. Frozen.

A year ago, I would've been confident in saying I knew how to handle myself in situations that had my pulse spiking. I *had* handled myself in one of those situations.

But a lot had changed in a year. A lot had changed in a night.

And this? That *mask*?

It was the ominous air the mask created and the memory of that veiled look that had the ability to hold me hostage. And I'd let the memory of it catch me twice in one morning . . . but this couldn't be real.

It can't be. It can't be.

Forcing my stare away, I squeezed my eyelids tightly shut for only a moment before I blinked them open. My lungs were straining and every muscle was locked tight in preparation for being met with a nightmare I wasn't ready to relive when I risked a look in the same direction.

A heaving breath ripped from my lungs when I found the space empty.

But the chill that continued clinging to my spine had me tearing from the parking lot even though I didn't see the man or his dog anywhere at all.

I reached for my bag once I was on the main street, already digging for my phone before I realized I didn't know who to call. My parents would use any excuse to get me back in Virginia. My heart was screaming for me to call the man who'd continued watching over me, no matter how infuriated I was with him, but I didn't know his number. And my therapist?

I didn't need her asking me in *that* tone, "*And who else are you seeing that isn't really there, Willow?*"

Even still, I couldn't make myself put my phone back in my purse throughout the drive to grab some much-needed caffeine and then to school. Because as I repeatedly went over every second of the short encounter with the man, second-guessing everything I saw and felt, I knew there was one number I wanted to call. One number I could call.

Just to ask.

To speculate.

But I already knew the answer he would give. And talking to him would reopen wounds even deeper than my neon-masked nightmares because *he* made it real.

Gathering my things in a freaked-out daze, I awkwardly climbed out of the car and nearly screamed when I came face to face with Cora.

"*Jesus,*" I cried out, desperately clutching my bag close to my body.

Her brows lifted in amusement and curiosity. "Is that so?"

"Sorry, I—*ugh.*" I released a ragged breath before shutting my door and starting toward the school with her by my side. Hurrying to explain about the man and the dog, excluding the fabricated mask, and how running into them had me jumpy.

"Okay, now, wait," she said as we reached the back entrance. "First, you have a dangerously hot, Ted-Bundy-wannabe crawling through your window. Now you have a gorgeous man just showing up out of nowhere with his adorable puppy outside your apartment, and you didn't get his name or number or ask him up to your apartment for a quick get-to-know-you?"

"Cora," I hissed as embarrassed heat crept up my neck and into my cheeks, all while that chill around my spine fortified. "First, I never said anything about the way the guy this morning looked. Second, that dog was closer to a horse than a puppy."

"Details," Cora said over me, brushing away my words. "I've already

seen this whole thing play out in my head. He's gorgeous. *Also* probably a serial killer with your track record."

A frantic-sounding huff left me as I lifted my coffee, but before I could think of a proper way to respond, we both caught sight of Rorie at the end of the hall . . . talking with Diggs.

"*Oh*," Cora whispered on a gasp, reaching for my arm as she did and gripping tight as giddiness poured free. Her next words falling from her as quickly as they did quietly. "Did you know he would be here, or does *someone* have oddly perfect timing considering the gorgeous stranger outside your apartment? Wait, how do we know if it's the family man or Mr. B&E?"

"It's Diggs," I said under my breath and hated that the softness of my voice was purely due to my reaction to seeing him there. To getting trapped in his gaze when he noticed us standing there. "And, no, I didn't know he'd be here."

Cora tried muting the high-pitched noise that rose in her throat and squeezed my arm even tighter. "Remind me, do we still hate him?"

I contemplated the fierce beating of my heart and the wings that had taken residence in my stomach the instant I'd seen him. The way my soul ached for the distance between us to be erased—for us to be in the dark of my apartment instead of a brightly lit school hallway. How my wrist tingled in anticipation of his touch.

"We're not thrilled with him," I finally muttered as every one of those feelings and wants were replaced with the deep disappointment and frustration of the past week.

"Then we're not thrilled with him," Cora echoed resolutely as if it were that simple.

After finding out I hadn't been sleeping with a married man, Cora had pulled daily Diggs-and-Willow updates from me. Even though she liked to maintain our encounters had *Ted Bundy wannabe vibes* written all over them, she seemed nearly as devastated as I was that Diggs had been sneaking in and out without waking me. And while I adored her for having my back, I would give anything to be seeing him again without an audience.

"I'd still let him sneak into my bedroom," Cora said on a wistful sigh, forcing a choking laugh from me just as we got close enough to hear the hushed words of Rorie and Diggs' conversation.

The harshness of her voice.

". . . deserve to know," she snapped at him.

My eyes widened as I brought Cora to a stop when I realized we weren't walking in on a friendly conversation, but there was no point in turning around.

Diggs clearly knew we were there, and our classrooms were just past them.

"You can demand to know things all you want, little five-oh wifey," Diggs said, voice dripping with ease and that cocky swagger he'd portrayed the first night we'd met, "doesn't mean you *deserve* to know a goddamn thing."

He took a step away from her, away from *me*, but stopped when Rorie latched onto his arm. His gray eyes widened with surprise when he twisted to meet her stare as she fired back at him.

"You're *here*, which means there's trouble. And if you're putting our kids and our school in danger, then, yes, I deserve to know."

Diggs carefully removed her hand, his voice taking on a slight warning when he said, "As much as I love having beautiful women touch me, I'm not in the habit of messing with law enforcement property. You're also the wrong blonde." He jerked his chin in our direction. "We have an audience."

Rorie turned, her eyelids blinking slowly as if struggling to remove herself from the track she'd been on and realize her surroundings. But then her eyes narrowed on me as if she finally grasped Diggs' warning and she whirled around, her voice sharp and disapproving. "I told you to stay away from her. I *told you* to leave her alone."

"Seems you warned her too," he said softly, angrily, as those eyes flitted to me. Only touching on me long enough to bring that chaos to life all over again before he seemingly forced his stare away. Head shaking subtly as he turned. "We're done, Aurora."

"Don't call me that," Rorie muttered irritably as she followed him.

"Good Lord, this is better than trashy reality TV," Cora whispered, but I ignored the comment and took a few steps after them, unable to help myself.

"You can't do this. You can't leave us blind when you know something," Rorie said, voice at once pleading and outraged. When he continued walking away without a word, she snapped, "Then tell me Lexi will be here today."

My stomach clenched at the break in her voice. As if she already *knew* Alexis wouldn't be at school, and it had something to do with Diggs.

Diggs paused, and that worry in my stomach grew the longer he stood there. Hands slowly clenching into fists before relaxing.

“They weren’t there,” Rorie went on when it was clear he wouldn’t. “Kieran and Jess . . . Conor and Sutton . . . the kids. They weren’t at our house this weekend, and they’re there every Sunday night. Jentry knows Jess is lying to him about why, so you can’t tell me nothing is happening. You can’t tell me we’re safe—that the kids of this school are safe. Because my husband’s worried, and you’re *here*.”

After what felt like an eternity, Diggs finally turned just as Rorie started pleading with him again. Expression that relaxed arrogance he so easily wore and so out of place with the tension in the hallway and the caution rolling off him in waves.

“The funny thing about that is I keep trying to leave *here*, and you won’t let me,” he said in that overly cocky way of his. “You and I both know you’re aware of too much, little five-oh mama . . . so you know you’re safest when you’re far from us.” His stare had shifted to me and his voice had dipped with meaning at the last part before he returned to that cool confidence as he spoke to her. “If we’re not crowding your house for Sunday dinners or occupying your school’s desks, I’d say you’re about to be the safest you’ve been in a long damn time. *Thank you* sounds a little better than the demands you’ve been spitting out.”

“Something’s happening,” Rorie said shakily when he took a step back. “I want to know.”

“And what if I said we’re protecting the town?” When a condescending laugh burst from Rorie, Diggs lifted a brow knowingly. “Again . . . we’re done, *Aurora*.”

I watched as Rorie’s hands dragged over her face before falling. A defeated sound crawled from her as she watched him leave, her body rocking in the direction he was going before she turned to face where I stood with Cora.

But then I was moving.

My feet carrying me in Diggs’ direction despite Rorie’s protests until I was nearly running to stop him just as he stepped outside the main doors.

“That’s it?” I asked and firmly gripped my coffee and bag so I wouldn’t reach for him when he continued walking away from me. So I wouldn’t fall into his arms. So I wouldn’t stay there forever. “Why are you doing this?”

“And what might ‘this’ be?” he asked as his gait changed. Slowed. But the way his body twitched agitatedly showed how reluctant he was to stay there.

“Running the second I show up somewhere,” I said to his retreating back. “Ensuring I don’t see you.”

“You’re seeing me now.”

“You know what I mean,” I shot back and was horrified at the way my voice dipped and wavered. I wanted to believe I was only so close to breaking because I’d just been dragged into my horrifying past, but from that first night, this man had been different in every way.

Swallowing the emotion building in my throat, I drew in a fortifying breath and said, “I’m done with this feigned distance.”

A sneered curse escaped Diggs when he abruptly turned and cleared the distance between us as if it’d never been there at all. Getting so close that I was instantly dizzy with *him*. His scent. His body heat. The way his strong hands vibrated as he forced them back to his sides when he automatically reached for me. “You’re safer the farther you are from me, Tree, don’t you get that?”

“I don’t believe that.”

“You heard her in there,” he ground out, irritably gesturing to the doors behind us. “You heard me.”

“Then why have you been in my apartment every night?” I asked softly.

“You said you wanted a dog.”

“I—” My brow furrowed and bewilderment pulsed from me at the unexpected response. “Wait, what?”

“First day of school, you told Lex you wanted to get a dog to protect you.” He stepped closer still, forcing my head to tilt back so I could maintain eye contact and stealing my breath when his chest pressed against mine. When he continued, his voice dropped to a low rumble that had my heart racing. “Already told you I’m a bloodhound. I’ll protect you better than anything else could.”

Why a tendril of fear and intrigue wove through me at that inane title he continued claiming, I had no idea. But I fought the urge to ask him to elaborate because I wanted an answer.

A *true* answer.

“And what’s the real reason you’re still sneaking through my window?”

From the way Diggs stood there—subtle, restless movements betraying the internal battle he was waging—I had a feeling he was talking himself out of spilling every one of his secrets right then. Right there.

An eternity of torturous seconds passed as he searched my face before

admitting, “I can’t answer that. Just . . .”—one of his hands lifted to my face before he managed to pull it back to his side, his head shaking as he began walking away—“let me take care of this the way I have to.”

“No.”

Diggs froze. Eyes widening with a cold sort of dread as he slowly looked back at me.

“I told you I sensed something dangerous in you. Clearly, you think it’s really bad. But you won’t give me a chance to show you that I can handle it—that I can handle *you*. And if you won’t give me that chance, then I don’t want whatever you think you’re *taking care of* by being there every night.”

His lips had parted as I spoke, pleas and denials swirling through his eyes before he locked it all up. Brows drawn low over his cold eyes. Mouth a firm line. Muscle feathering in his clenched jaw as he gave a hard dip of his head and grated, “Nice cup,” in parting, the words laced with meaning.

I glanced at the to-go cup in my hand, only then remembering the one I’d left on my counter that morning. The designs and colors from each shop clearly shouting they were different.

A sliver of guilt pushed through my stomach and was overwhelmed by the sinking feeling that always came with watching Diggs walk away from me. The hope that struggled to bloom when he hesitated and backtracked a couple steps was consumed by a startling pain that wove a path through my body when he stalked toward an awaiting motorcycle and rode away.

I still couldn’t wrap my head around the knowledge that a month and a half with a man had come to mean what it had, but I knew what it felt like to lose someone significant to you.

Diggs was significant.

Still, I wouldn’t let him remain in my life on his terms.

With a shuddering breath, I headed into the school and back to the hall, where Cora and Rorie were talking just outside my classroom.

“Girl, *what?*” Cora said on a gasp as soon as she saw me. “Rorie said she saw Mr. B&E talking to Zara this morning and that they hurried to end the convo as soon as they realized staff was showing up.”

“He’s—” Rorie’s words caught in her throat and her head quickly shook. When she continued, her eyes were filled with pleading concern. “Willow, you *need* to be careful. He isn’t someone you should be with.”

“Your sister-in-law is with someone in his family,” I countered instead of immediately offering Rorie the relief she would get from my short

conversation with Diggs.

“That—she’s different,” Rorie answered carefully.

Cora glanced between us, mouth in a perfectly formed *O* as she waited for details Rorie clearly didn’t want to give.

I nodded. “You were mad that Diggs wouldn’t tell you what was happening, yet you keep warning me to stay away from him and won’t tell me why.”

Rorie’s expression fell as she realized the similarities, but I could see it in her eyes. She wouldn’t be the one to tell me. “It’s complicated,” she finally said. “It’s so complicated because they are *good* people.”

“But they’re dangerous,” I finished for her when she seemed to struggle with what else to say.

“Yes,” she choked out helplessly. “If you knew what Diggs had done, what he’s capable of, you would be shocked.”

The past year burst through my mind in terrifying and horrifying images. “Nothing can shock me,” I finally said, the words sounding numb to my own ears. “But if it eases your worries at all, that was the first time I’d seen him in a week. He wants to keep us apart just as much as you do.”

Her head moved in subtle nods as if she was relieved but worried because she knew it was hurting me. “It’s for the best.”

That pain searing my veins said otherwise, but I just nodded and slipped past them and into my classroom. Intent on focusing on my kids and forgetting about my agonizing past, neon masks, and men that could ruin me with a night.

With a touch . . .

With ridiculous, irrational words.



DIGGS

We had two more bodies—a dental assistant and a gas station manager. The *T* and *O* marring their skin confirmed what I'd been saying all along and what Kieran had amended: This was personal, and it was personal to Borellos.

At least . . . those of us who were still left.

A good majority of Borellos hadn't been happy when Dare started working toward legitimizing the family. When he disbanded, those old school members had gone searching for other mafia families who were still heavy in the old ways.

Any one of them would feel betrayed that we'd created a new family—especially with Kieran and Conor. But, even for Einstein, it would take time to track them all down. It would take even longer to look into their whereabouts to see if they were *here*.

We didn't have time.

We had bodies. We had a town taking notice of the number of disappearances and deaths. We had a paid-off coroner working overtime to ensure no one found out the deaths were anything other than natural or accidental.

Our luck was bound to run out.

Not to mention, we were running out of letters. And with each new letter, with each new body I was so easily led to, we were all convinced something big was coming at the end.

On top of everything else, there was Tree. A constant whisper in my veins. An endless calling to be wherever she was . . .

And she'd been crying before she'd gotten to the school this morning.

It'd taken physical effort to stay in place when I'd seen her. It'd taken strength I hadn't been aware I had when I'd noticed her red-rimmed eyes and the way the glassiness of them made the green so much more vibrant.

I shifted restlessly as I fought the urge to leave. To go to her. To beg to know what or *who* had hurt her.

Except I was already actively doing that. Hurting her. Keeping her as far as I could stand, all while hoping she would see that I was bad for her. But

the second she'd pushed back this morning, I'd known in the heaving of my chest and screaming of my soul that I'd fucked up. Ruined everything that would ever truly matter in ways that honestly scared me.

But there were bodies on top of bodies . . . so I'd still forced myself to leave.

"Where would you hit?" Einstein asked suddenly, making the three of us look at each other and then at her from where we sat in our usual booth at Brooks Street Café since we were *always* here on Monday mornings.

Routine.

Part of Dare's threat orders: Keep routine. No one goes anywhere alone. Free time and nights are spent locked up in the Borello house.

It'd always worked before. It'd never felt suffocating before.

There'd never been Tree and a shit ton of kids before.

"What—" Maverick began, but Einstein spoke over him.

"Where would you hit?" she repeated. Looking up from her tablet, she focused on Dare and rapidly explained, "If this were you. If you'd been betrayed. If you were making a statement."

"Home," Dare said without hesitation. "I'd hit home." His face paled and a breath of a curse left him as we all realized that this threat *knew* our home.

He hurriedly grabbed his phone and tapped on the screen before lifting it to his ear. His eyes hardening with each ring as he waited the few seconds it took for the call to be picked up.

"Kieran," he ground out, then roughed a hand through his hair and forced a calming breath as his gaze darted to the other people in the café. "If I betrayed you now, after everything, tell me how you'd come after me."

The mumbled sounds of Kieran responding could be heard for a split second before he audibly cursed as if he'd easily come to the same realization Dare had.

"Get the kids out," Dare seethed before ending the call and slamming his phone on the table. His hands shook as he dragged them over his head and down his face before he met our anxious stares again.

"Is he—"

"Yes," Dare snapped over Einstein. "He was already there. He'll take the kids somewhere else."

"Speaking of kids," I muttered as my mind raced, trying to rationalize that the Borello house was no longer safe and trying to think of a place that *was*. "Ran into Jess' sister-in-law this morning, and she's asking a lot of

questions.”

“Like?” Maverick prodded when Dare just shot a cold look my way.

“Wants to know why we’re around because she knows it means people are in danger. Wanted me to tell her that Lexi would be there today like she was sure Lexi *wouldn’t* be.”

“But Lexi’s at school,” Dare said confidently.

I reached for the container of sugar packets, nodding as I began mindlessly sorting them to help with the anxiousness that had been coursing through me since I’d walked away from Tree a couple of hours before.

I was well aware that Lexi was currently in class. I’d had to let Zara know that Jessica would be hiding somewhere within the school to keep an eye on our little Rebel so long as we were still following our routines.

“But Aurora practically shouted it at me in front of other teachers—Lexi’s included,” I informed them. “Also said her husband knew Jess was lying about why they didn’t show up for dinner last night.”

“They didn’t go to dinner because everyone agreed Jess’s brother would’ve been able to tell something was up,” Einstein said, and Dare gave an acknowledging hum as he watched me, waiting to see if there was more.

“They need to be talked to,” I said with a quick shrug. “Aurora’s going to become more of an issue, and we don’t need her husband getting involved.”

“I’ll talk to Jess,” Einstein offered. “I’ll make sure they’re taken care of. *Appropriately*,” she quickly added.

I held up my hands, letting her know I hadn’t been suggesting otherwise.

“Fine,” Dare muttered as his gaze made another sweep of the diner. “More pressing issue: Where are we moving everyone?”

“Anywhere we could hold everyone, a Borello would know about,” Maverick muttered, keeping his eyes notably off Einstein as he did.

A lie.

I wasn’t Dare by any means, I couldn’t sniff out a lie from just anyone, but Maverick? Yeah, I knew his tells just as he knew mine.

But before I could call him on it, I caught the haunting look that flashed across his face when he spared a glance in her direction and knew what he was seeing. *Where* he was seeing.

The Holloway bunker Einstein had been locked in, repeatedly drugged in, and almost died in.

There was no way any of us would make Einstein go back there, even if it was our best option.

Clearing my throat, I pushed the packets of sugar aside and said, “That’s not entirely true.”

“I’ll fucking shoot you,” Maverick said under his breath, surprising only Einstein.

Should’ve known Dare would figure him out too.

“You and I know every inch of Holloway Estate because that was our job,” I went on, not at all bothered by his threat. “We’ve seen those blueprints enough times that we might as well have drawn them up ourselves, yeah?”

“Yeah . . .” Maverick said slowly, hesitantly.

“But Conor told me there’s a basement.”

“No, there isn’t,” Dare said confidently as Maverick’s head slanted in doubt.

“Said Mickey used to toss him down there in pitch-black, fight-to-the-death matches with random people, enemies, or members when he was still coming up,” I informed them. “His brother and Kieran didn’t know because they thought they were keeping Conor from Mickey. And we obviously didn’t know about the basement.”

“So other Borellos don’t,” Maverick stated needlessly, words still low and gruff as he studied me.

“Why did Conor tell *you*?” Dare asked, voicing the question Maverick had clearly been fighting the pull to.

“Wanted to know how he saved me—how he knew what to do.” I shrugged as if that particular close encounter with death had been nothing more than another day. “He said he hadn’t really been given a choice and told me what Mickey had him doing when Kieran and Beck weren’t around.”

Einstein’s fingers were already flying across her tablet before I’d finished talking, but Maverick and I just looked at Dare, waiting for his thoughts.

“It isn’t a bad idea,” Maverick finally said when Dare just sat there. “That’s a massive property, and even though these old members know we’re working with ex-Holloway now, it’ll give us time because I doubt they’re expecting us to *go* there.”

“Especially considering the Holloway disbanding was so public, as was the abandonment of the property,” Einstein added, then set her tablet on the table so Dare could see the live feeds she’d pulled up. “And I can see when people come for us there.”

“Of course you still have working cameras around the estate,” Maverick mumbled, but a smirk was tugging at the corner of his mouth.

“I’m looking out for the rockstars,” Einstein defended. “They’re welcome.”

“That’s one problem,” Dare began, pointing at the feeds, “the Henley guys live on Holloway now. We can’t just pile in there and expect them to allow that *or* understand it without explaining things they aren’t allowed to know.”

“They thought the dead guy Maverick left on their front porch was a TV show prank,” Einstein said dryly. “I doubt they’ll think anything of this.”

“Never saving any of you again,” Maverick said, feigning irritation, and Einstein just hummed in disbelief as she leaned against his chest.

“Second problem,” Dare went on, “I’ve continuously promised my wife she’d never have to set foot on Holloway grounds again, and I keep breaking that promise. You want me to do it again?”

“To save her and your son?” Einstein challenged, then waved a hand at me. “This is a good plan, as surprising as that is, considering who it’s coming from.”

A stunned and slightly offended laugh burst from me. “Damn, E. Thought Maverick was the one threatening to shoot me.”

“You know what I mean,” she said on an exasperated sigh. “Your plans just usually involve sandwiches and forts and nothing truly helpful to the situation.”

I went still as her words cut deeper than before.

Resting my forearms on the table, I leaned close so she would hear me when I grated out, “Say that again.”

“Diggs,” Maverick whispered in warning, but Einstein just squared her shoulders to stare me down.

“Everything’s a joke to you, and your suggestions are usually food-fueled or heavily laced with innuendo. Think it’s safe to say everyone blocks out your plans as soon as you start making them. Want me to continue?”

“That’s enough,” Dare cut in before I could respond.

“We done here?” I asked, still holding Einstein’s challenging glare.

“No,” Dare ground out. “If we’re going to Holloway, we need a reason for being there. The Henley guys will need it.”

“See, that’s the thing, Einstein,” I began when the three of them started discussing possible options, “I do like to have fun.”

“I said we were done with that,” Dare cut in, but I continued as if he hadn’t spoken.

“It makes life easier to deal with—especially this life. It also helps me focus when going into life-or-death situations because then I’m not stressed the fuck out. Because I might not be the planner, but I execute them. And when I’m having a good fucking time, I execute those plans flawlessly so people like *you* don’t die.”

“Diggs,” Maverick warned as I went on.

“And I won’t get into the fact that nearly everyone needs *me* in order to do their jobs—because that’d be fucking awkward to need the guy who doesn’t take life seriously—but a small part of my job is taking in our surroundings at all times. Every movement. Every smell. Every word. Which means I know Henley’s out of state promoting their upcoming album—which you should know too, considering that’s why Maxon left early last week.” I sat back and shrugged as I reached for the leftover silverware to play with. “But what do I know, Einstein? I don’t ever offer anything helpful.”

Her eyes rolled as she tapped on her tablet. “Are you done being an arrogant asshole, or do you want to show the size of your dick some more?”

“I always love showing—”

“Stop,” Maverick seethed. “Just stop.”

A heavy breath left Dare as he reached for his phone. “I’ll let Kieran know. We’ll move our stuff from one house to the other in shifts in case we’re being watched.”

“I’ll go last since I don’t have kids,” I offered.

Dare grunted and then nodded toward my brother. “Then the two of you go first. Einstein can pick the locks at Holloway and get her systems set up before the rest of us start bringing the kids over. Let me know when you’re settled.”

Maverick looked like he wanted to say something, to maybe apologize or reprimand me—could’ve gone either way with how he was watching me. But he just bit back a sigh and placed a hand on Einstein’s shoulder to lead her out of the booth, all while she stayed focused on her screen.

“She knows,” Dare said when I stood, preparing to climb over him to get out of the booth. When I hesitated and dropped back into the seat, he added, “Einstein knows what you do and what you’ve done for us.”

A condescending breath escaped me. “Yeah, really sounded like it.”

“She’s scared.” He dropped his phone to the table and twisted to focus on me. “You know how she gets when she’s scared—defensive and hurtful. This shouldn’t be new territory for us, but it is because we have kids to think

about, and this is directed at all of us. So, on top of worrying about their daughter, *you* are scaring her, so she's gonna take it out on you."

"Me?" I asked, choking over the confirmation with a short laugh. "Why's that?"

Dare studied me as if waiting for me to explain it, or maybe he was searching for something. I wasn't sure.

Finally, he admitted, "Einstein said you're distracted—that you've *been* distracted—and it's going to get you or someone else hurt."

The fuck.

"Maverick unwillingly confirmed it and told me what's been going on with you." Dare leaned close as his tone lowered. "Maverick shouldn't be unwilling to tell me anything. None of you should be keeping anything from me. Especially a girl."

"I didn't—"

"I don't give a shit if you were trying to deny your feelings or keep yourself from her," he said, already knowing what I'd been about to say. "Your internal battle over this girl is the root of every problem here. Understood?"

I nodded.

"End it."

"We never really began."

"End your battle," he said gravely.

I hesitated before eventually nodding. Just as he began standing, I asked, "When you first started seeing Lily, before you knew she was Holloway or part of our world, how did you handle knowing you were bringing her into our world after everything you'd seen?"

Dare rubbed at his jaw as he considered the question. "This girl a civilian?"

Civilian.

That word had held different meanings for me throughout my adult life.

For a little while, it'd been the people I'd sworn to protect in the military. For much longer, it'd encompassed the people so far removed from our world that their biggest problem was getting a wrong coffee order or finding out their date didn't look anything like their picture. And yet, *civilian* fit Tree so perfectly.

The girl was all infectious laughter and adorable movements whenever she had that ridiculous country music station on. She was a light shining so

damn bright with a subtle southern accent that let her fit into North Carolina better than I ever would. She'd known pain I had yet to uncover, but not *this*. Not the dark demons of our world. And I knew I'd die to protect her.

"Lexi's teacher," I finally confirmed, earning a hissed curse from Dare.

"It wasn't easy. If you remember, I tried making her think I didn't want her so she'd leave at one point," Dare finally answered. "But Lily wasn't afraid of me, even though she should've been. On top of that, we all thought she was trapped in a bad situation, and I knew I could protect her better than anyone."

A hushed laugh climbed up my throat at the similarities.

"Sound familiar?"

"A little," I admitted.

"A true civilian's going to be different. She'll have to be made aware of our life and brought into it slowly. Gently. On top of that, it'll be dangerous for her because, if she decides to leave one day, she'll know too much," he said meaningfully. "You could always talk to Conor or Libby about how it was for them with their partners, but Maxon had known about us his entire life, and Sutton wasn't even a civilian. She just hadn't known what she'd been born and married into until we unveiled it all.

"But none of that matters," he went on. "This girl of yours could be the daughter of our greatest enemy, or she could have no idea our world still exists. What matters is if your world exists without her."

I went still as the past month and a half blasted through my mind, shouting the answer as I forced my mouth to remain shut.

"I've watched you go through women like it was a game for more than a dozen years. I've never seen you like *this*," Dare said as he finally stood. "It's okay to be worried about what can happen in the future. That's normal for people who aren't even in this life. But you should be afraid for your immediate future if you let yourself stay in this war because your head will always be invested in *that*."

"That's what I'm worried about," I admitted. "Something happening to her, of course. But despite Einstein's bullshit earlier, people rely on me having a clear head. On alerting everyone else to danger. On being the first one *into* danger. What if I get so distracted because I'm worried about her, that someone gets hurt?"

Understanding sounded in the back of Dare's throat even as he slanted his head. "Yeah, that isn't how it works."

“That’s exactly how it works.”

“No, because she’ll be safe. You’ll have made sure of that,” he said without hesitation. “And then you’ll be hyper-focused because you’ll have no other choice than to protect *her* because every cell in your body will demand it.”

Pressing his hands against the table, he leaned forward and dropped his voice. “Protecting your partner? The person whose soul has attached to yours? That’s something that’s ingrained in you. It’s primal. And in protecting her, you’ll be protecting everyone else.” Tapping on the table, he stepped away and repeated, “End your battle.”

I didn’t respond.

I just sat there a while longer, thinking about what it would be like to let myself have that life I’d always been so against, only for those fears to build higher and higher despite Dare’s assurances.

If only ‘ending my battle’ were as easy as he made it seem. But I’d almost died the night I first entertained the possibility of settling down and having a family. And for as much as I didn’t let things affect me, there were some that stuck. Some that lingered.

That was one of them.



WILLOW

“And you’re sure you’re okay?” my mom asked for what had to be the sixth time that evening.

“Mom . . .”

“You sound . . . well, you know,” she said, her voice dropping to a whisper that was filled with worry.

I did know, only because so many of our conversations had begun and ended this way over the last year. In her defense and mine, her worrying over the way I even sounded had become almost nonexistent in the past couple of months.

Until tonight.

But the last thing I wanted to tell her was that I was seeing men in masks again.

I dropped the blinds and stepped away from the window, hating that I couldn’t shake the feeling that a person in a neon mask was waiting just outside.

Ridiculous.

“I just didn’t get much sleep last night,” I finally said.

Silence filled the call for a while before she asked, “Are you sure that’s all? You could always come back to Virginia. I’m sure the school—”

“Mom, don’t. You know I needed to leave.”

“You thought you had to leave, but your entire support system is here,” she said, reverting to her favorite argument. “It was a rash decision that was made when you couldn’t make sound decisions.”

“I met someone,” I blurted out before she could continue.

I went back to the window, unable to resist the urge to check outside as silence once again met me.

“I hadn’t realized you were ready for that,” she said after long seconds had passed, that worry even stronger than before.

“I didn’t think I was,” I admitted. “And I wasn’t looking, but he’s . . .”

Incredible. Unpredictable. More than anything I could’ve ever imagined. Infuriating. Confusing.

“Tree.”

Here . . . he's here!

A heated shiver raced across my skin as I dropped the blinds and whirled around, barely managing to stifle my surprised excitement when I saw Diggs locking my front door behind him.

Because as much as I'd wanted this for days, as much as my heart had just been racing at the mere thought of him when I'd been preparing to tell my mom the vaguest details about him, I needed Diggs to stop doing *this*.

I needed him to stop choosing when to be in my life. I needed him to stop appearing, just to keep me at a distance. Giving me the smallest glimpse of hope and showing me his need for *us*, only to remind me in whatever way that we couldn't be together.

"Mom, I have to go." The words came out soft as a breath and slightly shaky as I watched Diggs clear the space between us with long, sure strides.

"What about this boy?" she asked, sounding taken aback by my abrupt change in tone and urgency.

"Later," I promised her. "I just—someone from school's calling. I'll talk to you later. Love you."

I hung up before she could argue and felt my excitement deflate when Diggs stopped a noticeable distance away, studying his feet and then mine for a moment as if he were gauging the distance. As if he needed it.

"We need to talk."

A defeated sound left me at those simple yet telling words.

Lowering my head so he wouldn't see how much they bothered me, I started moving in his direction and then past him, letting my phone fall to the couch as I did. "Since when do you use the front door?"

"Someone's more likely to see me climbing in here in the early evening than the middle of the night. I don't need cops coming after me right now."

"Just right now?" I challenged gently, earning an uneasy laugh from him. When I reached the front door, I turned to lean against it in time to see Diggs rubbing at his jaw, the same noticeable distance away from me as before.

"Sounds like you talked to Aurora."

"Rorie? No," I said with a shrug, then unlocked the deadbolt he'd just latched. "Just trying to figure you out."

His gray stare inspected the door before snapping back to me and narrowing in obvious worry and question. "If you're trying to tell me something, I'd rather you just say it, Tree."

"I said what I needed to this morning," I reminded him. "Now you're here

to *talk*, which is never good for any relationship—even one as unconventional as ours. So, I’m just preparing for when you leave again.”

His head shook as he took the last remaining steps toward me. Towering over me as he reached out and grasped the deadbolt, sending it home with a resounding *click*. “I’m here because I can’t seem to stay away from you. I’m here to *talk* to see if you can handle who I am.”

A heaving breath rushed from me at the confession. “I can,” I said confidently. “I don’t know who or what you are, but I know *you*.”

“You don’t,” he argued over me. “And the thing is, I don’t want you to because I don’t want you to stop looking at me the way you—” In an instant, everything about Diggs changed.

His body stilled and eyes glazed over, but for as blank as his expression was, it was fascinating to see how the subtle differences changed him completely.

The calculative look behind his faraway stare. The rage beneath his firm jaw. The intrigue overwhelming it all in the slightest tilt of his head.

And then he was moving. Snapping his head back toward me as his eyes flared. “Someone here?”

“What?” I asked on a delay, so taken aback by everything that had happened in less than a few seconds.

“Is someone here?” he ground out, the question sounding more like an infuriated accusation.

“Are you serious?” I shoved at his chest when he began looking around, all while his body continued blocking my path from the door. “Despite how we started, I’m not the kind of girl who sleeps with random people I meet, and I’m not the kind of girl who moves on quickly.”

“Answer me, Tree,” he demanded on a growl, only that time, I heard it . . . the underlying panic and *fear* in his voice.

I went still against the door as flashes of men in neon masks flooded every thought until I was there . . . transported to that night a year ago. Shaking and *shaking* as my world fell apart right in front of me.

“*Willow*.”

“N-no,” I finally said when large hands wrapped around my upper arms, grounding me in the present.

In *him*.

“There’s no one.” The words were a hoarse confession scraping up my throat as I locked onto those commanding eyes.

“Stay here. *Right* here,” Diggs added quickly, pressing me against the door for emphasis. “Don’t move. Don’t say a word.”

“But—”

“*Stay*,” he begged over me. “Tell me you understand.”

“I understand,” I mumbled numbly, that time without hesitation, and nearly buckled under the intensity of everything that was Diggs and us when he crushed his mouth to mine in a short, searing kiss.

But then he was gone, stalking toward my kitchen in a way that shouted he’d done this before—all stealth and danger in a calm so eerie that it was almost fascinating to watch. And as much as I wanted to follow him, to be right by his side so he could chase away the nightmares slowly creeping in, I kept my back firmly against the door as small tremors pulsed through my body.

“Has anyone been here today? Friend, family, maintenance . . . anyone,” he said as he came back from the other side of my apartment, near my room. The gun in his hand momentarily distracting me from the fury and fear clinging to him like a second skin.

“No,” I answered slowly, head shaking the same. “No, I’ve been gone all day. I just got back a couple hours ago.”

Diggs’ head moved in sharp nods before he grabbed my hand and started towing me through the apartment. “We’re leaving. I need you to pack.”

“Wait, what?” I asked dully, tearing my hand from his and stopping in the middle of my living room. “What do you mean we’re *leaving*?”

Diggs reached for me again and began dragging me in the direction of my room. “Exactly what I said. Either you pack, or I do it for you. But we’re leaving this apartment in the next five minutes.”

Instead of tearing into action once we were in my room, I just stood there, staring at him as if he’d grown another head while he placed his gun in the waistband of his jeans.

“Damn it, Tree, *pack*,” he nearly begged, grabbing my hand and pulling me close to cradle my cheek with his free hand. “Someone was here. While you were gone. Everything I have been trying to protect you from was in your apartment, and I need to get you away from it, do you understand?” His hand shook against me as he said, “You’re in danger because of me, and now I need to get you out of here. So *pack*.”

I moved then.

Nearly stumbling as I tried rushing through my room on weak knees

because I knew . . . I *knew* who had been in my apartment. Just as I knew I wasn't in danger because of whoever Diggs truly was.

The man this morning had really been wearing a neon mask.

They'd followed me to North Carolina.

And now Diggs and everyone else in this adorable town were in danger because of *me*.

"I have to go," I said as I finished zipping my suitcase, the words a strained breath.

"Ready?" Diggs asked from where he'd been standing guard at the door to my bedroom.

My head shook wildly as I tried shouldering past him. "I have to go."

Wrapping an arm around my waist, he pulled me close and tipped my chin up, forcing me to meet his worried stare. Eyes taking me in for long seconds we didn't have before he whispered, "This is why I kept my distance."

"You don't understand," I said as I pulled my head from his grasp. "I have to go."

"With me."

"Diggs—"

"Until I know you're safe, you're not going anywhere," he said resolutely, then effortlessly took my suitcase before leading me through my apartment. The entire way to my car, he kept his hand on me in one way or another. But rather than controlling, the touch felt like a reassuring connection. As if to let me know he had me, would protect me, no matter what.

I was so wrapped up in his comforting presence and touch that it wasn't until we were standing at the passenger side of my car that I remembered what we were doing. *Why* we were doing it. It wasn't until Diggs was reaching for the handle of the door that my fear came flooding back and had me uncontrollably shaking.

"I've got you," he whispered as I looked wildly around, waiting to see neon popping out against the cloudy evening sky.

"Wait, you—no, this is my car," I stammered as I began stepping inside it.

"You don't know where we're going," he said as if that were the only answer I needed to continue sliding into the passenger seat. As if that alone should be enough to placate me, even after everything he'd said in the past

ten minutes.

The rational part of my brain was screaming that Diggs was sure someone had been in my apartment because of *him*. That I was also in danger because of him. That he'd been holding a gun as if it were an extension of him.

But I'd let Diggs take me anywhere if it got us far from the men who covered their faces to get away with their macabre sins.

Besides, I wasn't sure I knew how to react rationally when it came to Diggs. Every decision I'd made with him since that first night in the bar had been crazy and reckless. Probably a little risky.

And I was sure I'd make them all again, so long as they were with him.

"How'd you know?" I asked once Diggs was tearing out of the parking lot in a way I wasn't sure my car could survive. When he slowly looked at me, eyebrows drawn together in bemusement, I clarified, "That someone had been in my apartment."

"That's your first question?" he asked with a perplexed huff. "Not where we're going or what kind of danger you're in?"

I knew what kind of danger I was in.

Twisting in my seat to better face him, I gripped my seatbelt tightly and said, "Answer that first."

"I've told you." One of his shoulders lifted as he straightened the car from the too-fast turn. "I'm a bloodhound."

I resisted the urge to look at the chills that always rose on my arms whenever he said that word. That *claim* that seemed so unnerving rather than amusing. "You really mean that," I said softly.

His head dipped slowly. "I track things. People." He spared another look at me when he added, "That's how I knew your car was safe to get into."

My mouth fell open when I realized I'd blindly gotten into my car without ever checking to see if someone had messed with it or tagged it.

It'd never been a thought.

But throughout all of this, my thoughts had been on a spiral. Diggs had remained my strength, pushing me to continue going through each step, even when that whisper of fear had leaked into his words.

A shuddering breath escaped me when I was hit with the memory of Diggs' large hands gripping me tight as he'd said my name during one of my spirals. *Pleaded* it to bring me back to him.

"You know my name," I realized dully.

Hesitation billowed from Diggs before he finally acknowledged, "Zara's

supposed to keep me updated on everyone who works in the school. She finally gave me the files on the new staff last week.”

“What, and you’re someone who’s allowed to know things like that?” I asked with a laugh that bordered on desperate. When he stayed focused on the road, jaw twitching with his unease, I took a moment to digest that as my mind raced and mixed with Rorie’s warnings.

Before I could ask one of the dozens of questions gathered on my tongue, he said, “Saw the name *Bennett* and went past your file without opening it. I’d already seen your name though.”

“Pull over.”

“Tree—”

“Pull over,” I repeated, practically begging him.

“We’re almost there.”

“I’m not going wherever you’d planned on taking me,” I snapped, though the words were a strained whisper. “Now—”

“Jesus Christ, they’re going to kill you,” he shouted over me, his voice that same contradicting mixture of bravery and fear as before. “Do you get that?”

“I know that,” I yelled back. “I’ve seen what they can do!”

“You don’t—” Diggs’ head slanted a second before he abruptly jerked the car to the side of the road and slammed the gear into park. Just as quickly, he turned to face me, leaving one arm draped over the steering wheel as he eyed me with intrigue. “Come again?”

My chest shook with the force of my next exhale as I relaxed against the seat. In an instant, all my fear and adrenaline fled from me, leaving me exhausted. “I don’t know who or what you are, Diggs, but whoever was in my apartment . . . they were there for me. *Because* of me.”

He looked like he was about to deny what I’d said but instead demanded, “Explain.”

“You first.”

He searched my face for long moments, contemplating, before carefully saying, “That wouldn’t be the smartest thing I’ve ever done.”

“I wanna know you.”

“You’re also trying to get away from me,” he said, the words coming out on a breath of laughter and filled with the confidence he so easily carried.

“To protect you,” I informed him, my head subtly shaking as flashes of nightmares assaulted me. “I told you, I’ve seen what they can do, and I won’t

let them do that to you.”

At that, he laughed, loud and free, before leaning over my center console to pull me into a kiss that was soft and slow and had me melting into him.

All sinful passes of his lips and teasing brushes of his tongue until I'd forgotten everything but him. That moment. That kiss.

“Funniest fucking thing, hearing you say you're protecting *me*,” he muttered against my lips before pressing another soft kiss there and leaning away only far enough to look at me when he added, “Tree, that's my job.”

“Tell me who you are,” I pleaded as I gripped his shirt, pulling him closer. When he hesitated, I reminded him, “You said you were at my apartment to talk . . . to see if I could handle who you are.”

His head slanted in acknowledgment, contradicting his next somber words. “But I have a feeling the moment I tell you is the moment you'll leave. I'm not ready for that. Besides, who I am doesn't matter if you don't plan on letting me take you where I need to. If you don't plan on letting me protect you.”

I studied the lines of Diggs' handsome face as every night with him burst through my mind in rapid flashes. The way I always felt comforted and safe, even when he was breaking into my apartment. The way I sensed that danger vibrating just beneath his skin and knew it wasn't something to run from.

“I know you can . . . protect me, that is,” I admitted softly. “That's weird to be so sure of when I hardly know you, isn't it?”

“We wouldn't be here if that were the case.”

An acknowledging hum rose in my throat, even as I pointedly said, “But there's so much about you I don't know.” When he just held my stare, warring over the same battle that had raged in his eyes the last couple of times I'd seen him, I released a breath that was weighed down with every one of my fears and confessed, “These people murdered my boyfriend a year ago. Actually, it was a year the night I met you.”

Diggs' body tensed against my hand and his brows drew low over his eyes. “What people?”

I swallowed the knot of fear and emotion that so easily rose and unsteadily explained, “They're a—I don't know. Some street gang or something. They're violent and ruthless and unpredictable. They killed my boyfriend just because we happened to be in the same place as them after a date.”

It wasn't until Diggs drew my face into his hands that I realized I was

crying, my body violently shaking as I rushed to go on.

“We didn’t know they were there—I didn’t know they existed at all. My boyfriend was going around to get into the driver’s side of the car when they just appeared. And he—th-they—” My head shook fiercely against Diggs’ hold as I remembered the savage way the men in the neon masks had murdered Mike.

The way they’d dropped his lifeless, mangled body in the street before turning to where I’d been screaming in the car.

I’d crawled across the console and been halfway into the driver’s seat, reaching for the handle as if I could’ve done something—stopped the nightmare unfolding in front of me. I hadn’t reacted until the door had given out from beneath my hands when one of them opened it as I stared at Mike in horror.

And then I’d fought like hell.

I’d caught one man in the throat as he pulled me from the car while my stilettoed feet connected with another’s groin just before I’d fallen to the ground, nearly knocking the air from my lungs. The man who dropped me had gasped over wheezed breaths and curses while I clawed and tore at his arm until his blood had covered my hands and wrists, and the machete he’d been holding clattered beside me. And then I’d grabbed it and swung.

I’d missed.

I’d clipped the car.

But they’d still stepped back, laughing as if my attempts amused them as I swung again and again while struggling to get to my knees and then my feet. Nearly falling back to the road as my body had betrayed me.

It wasn’t until the third man—who had been standing back, watching the entire thing as if we’d been his entertainment for the night—stepped up and began testing the weight of the bat in his hands, that I’d known there was no escaping that night.

No escaping them.

And then sirens had sounded in the distance.

The men hadn’t waited to see if the sirens were for us, and they hadn’t rushed to end the game they’d clearly been playing with me. They’d just turned and slowly, casually walked down the street. Away from me and the approaching sirens as if they hadn’t just left a dead man in the middle of the

road.

Diggs stayed silent as I reluctantly recalled that night through strained sobs and trembling breaths, all while brushing away my tears as fast as they came. Once I'd lowered my head to his with a depleted sigh, he demanded, "Give me a way to find them." The threat in his voice low and clear.

"They're already here."

His head slanted against mine as he gave another gentle brush against my cheekbone. "Person in your apartment is here for my family," he said softly, apologetically. "They're after you because I couldn't let you go."

"No, I saw them," I argued as I leaned back, then corrected, "*One*. One of them. It's—God, it's complicated." I dragged one of my hands across my face and tried ignoring the feel of smeared mascara beneath my fingers.

"I moved from Virginia because I couldn't escape it," I explained, embarrassment creeping up my neck and into my cheeks as I went on. "Everywhere I looked, I thought I saw one of them . . . except they were never actually there."

"That's normal after what you went through."

My chest pitched with the force of my next breath. "Yeah, well, I needed to get away. None of those people were ever found, the detectives were closing the investigation, and I couldn't escape these horrific flashbacks. So, I came here." I waved my hand toward the windshield. "To a small town so opposite of Richmond, thinking it would help me heal from everything. And it did," I quickly added. "I haven't had a flashback since moving here . . . until this morning."

Diggs' eyes bounced quickly as he took in my face. "You'd been crying when I saw you this morning," he mumbled as if to himself. "Is that what happened?" When I nodded, he said, "Tell me what you saw."

"One of them," I repeated.

"But how do you know it was one of them?" he asked urgently.

"Because they wear these—" I gestured wildly to my face as I struggled to find the words I knew so well. "Masks. These neon masks. And I bumped into him right outside my apartment, but I thought—"

"Wait, wait, stop," he ground out, hand in the air and *trembling* as he sat back, face a beautiful mask of rage and wrath before he slammed his hand against my steering wheel. "*Fuck*."

“Jesus, what?” I cried out, but he hurriedly grabbed his phone and had a call going through within seconds. “Talk to me,” I begged when he forced my car into drive and whipped out onto the road.

“You said they killed your boyfriend *savagely*?” Diggs asked in clarification before barking, “Would a Borello go to Keane Street?” into the phone. His head moved in tight jerks as he hurried to add, “I know, I know, but think about it. Think about the way they’ve been leaving—” Wild, worried eyes met mine for a moment before snapping back to the road. “Think about it. I’m almost there.”

“Diggs, what is going on?” I demanded when he ended the call and curled his hand tightly around his phone, looking like he’d crush it if he could.

“I’m supposed to bring you into this so fucking slowly—over days and weeks and months, not a crash course of a conversation after everything you just told me,” he said, words harsh and agitated as he took a sharp turn and came to a screeching halt in front of a gated drive. Pulling out his phone, he tapped out a quick message as he continued. “But I think you’re right. I think the person in your apartment was one of the people who killed your boyfriend. Or, at least, is associated with them. Problem is, I think they’re the same people who are after us.”

That same chill I’d become so accustomed to had burst through my veins at his affirmation and was quickly overpowered by doubt and confusion. “What? No. No, why would they be—they’re a gang from Virginia. How would they even know you?”

He looked at me just as the gate began opening, voice dropping low and hands twitching restlessly against the steering wheel as he studied me. Head already shaking when he asked, “You wanna know me? You think you can handle who I am?”

“I know I can,” I said, the confidence I felt in my soul masked by my fear of this night.

“Over the past week, people with loose connections to us have been ruthlessly, savagely killed by people who are ghosts, even to *me*,” Diggs said softly, slowly. His eyes never once leaving mine as he gauged my reaction to the gravity of what he was saying—as I realized he had truly been trying to keep his distance for a reason. “There are people in Virginia who murder that way—the Keane Street Gang. They’re your neon masks.”

“Oh my God,” I breathed as the weight of my nightmares settled on my chest.

A year of investigations that had gotten nowhere and with no leads, and Diggs had just tossed out the suspects' gang name as if it were a commonly known thing.

"How do you just know that and why do you think we're talking about the same group? Because you didn't think it was them before. And why are they killing people who are connected to you?"

Diggs waited to see if I would continue throwing questions at him. When I fell silent, he said, "Short answer: I didn't think it was them because they're Irish, and what we're dealing with is a family matter of sorts."

A sharp, bemused laugh left me. "What?"

"You think you can handle me?" he asked, echoing his earlier question on a breath. When I just stared at him, he said, "Tree, I'm mafia."



WILLOW

I wasn't sure how long we sat there, watching each other in the idling car, in front of the open gates, as my mind refused to acknowledge what he told me.

There was just no grasping that the man in front of me could truly be *that kind* of dangerous. It wasn't that I didn't think he could do unthinkable things to protect me—I knew he could. I felt that he could. But I hadn't once considered this path when I'd thought about all the different types of dangerous Diggs could be.

His family had a wild reputation? Maybe.

The people he was *associated with*, as Rorie had said, had an unlawful way of doing their good deeds? Probable, considering the minimal things she'd told me.

He had a bad boy side? Most definitely.

But to know Diggs lived the same lifestyle as the people who destroyed my world less than fourteen months ago? To know he was involved in the same depravity that fueled the fears threatening to consume me?

I didn't know how to understand or accept it.

"Please tell me you're joking," I finally whispered.

"You already know I'm not."

My body sagged as every ounce of air fled from my body on a rush.

"No," I wheezed, head shaking wildly as I continued refusing to accept this new reality I'd been thrown into. "No, because Rorie . . . Rorie said her husband lets y'all into their home. She said you *weren't* in a gang. She said you were good people."

"The best," he said without a hint of that confidence that could so easily slip from him. "I know what it sounds like, especially right now. But if you were ever to have a mafia family on your side, we're who you want."

"I don't want a mafia family on my side," I said on a disbelieving laugh and dragged my hands over my face. "This isn't happening."

Letting my hands fall to my lap, I sat back and felt my stomach drop at the emotionless expression Diggs was clearly forcing.

"Diggs—"

“Whether or not you want it to be happening, someone was in your apartment,” he said over me, tone cold and unaffected and not at all *him*. “So, for now, I’m taking you into this house and keeping you there until I know you’re safe.”

My mouth parted to beg him to just talk to me, to understand where I was coming from, but I wasn’t sure I knew what to say to him.

Not right then, anyway.

So, I just pressed my lips tightly together and tried focusing on where we were and where he was taking me, all while I tried figuring out how to get out of this. To get away.

“Running’s pointless,” he muttered as if he’d heard every one of my thoughts. But I was too stunned by the unbelievably huge mansion we’d just parked in front of to worry about him knowing what I’d been thinking.

Oh my God.

Turning off my car, he twisted to look at me and tapped my wrist. “I’ll find you.”

“What?” I breathed as a tendril of heat wove through my stomach at the touch and the reminder, betraying every one of my thoughts and sending me right back to my desperate need for the man next to me.

“If you run,” he clarified.

“Oh,” I said dully as that heat faded. “Right. Bloodhound.” But just as I began climbing out of the car, a thought hit me . . . a memory. Of being so transfixed by a veiled face and *screaming* when a giant dog had startled me.

“You can really smell anything?” I asked once I shut the door behind me.

“And track it,” Diggs confirmed with a sharp nod.

I thought of this morning as I paused beside my car, trying to just *breathe* when everything felt so heavy. This night. My new reality. The air from the approaching storm . . .

“What if I’m wrong?” My head bounced awkwardly as I hurried to clarify, “I’d been seeing those neon masks on people who hadn’t actually been wearing one. I can’t be sure I saw someone wearing one this morning.”

Diggs rubbed at his jaw, seeming to contemplate what all he should tell me. “KSG don’t have a reason to come after us *this way* because, like I said, it’s a family matter, and they are the furthest thing from family,” he finally admitted as he rounded the car.

Each step closer incited fluttering wings in my stomach until I was nearly breathless and silently begging him to pull me into his arms. And part of me

hated that I still wanted him to.

“But it’s their style, and they live close enough that they wouldn’t need to hang around town,” Diggs went on. “They could disappear after each hit the way our ghosts have been. Now, explain exactly what you saw this morning.”

I sucked in a shallow breath when he stopped directly in front of me. His nearness wreaking havoc on my body and mind and heart, and I knew in that moment that his confession hadn’t changed a thing.

My need for him was just as great. Even with the indifference he was forcing, I felt safe and protected just being near him. And I would’ve given anything to be tangled up in my bed, peppering him with questions and answering all of his.

“I think . . .” I began hesitantly, then continued more assertively, “I think hearing what *you* got from my apartment will be enough to know if what I saw was real.”

One of his eyebrows twitched, just enough to crack his façade and show a whisper of his amusement. “You testing me, Tree?”

“No,” I said honestly, then let him hear every ounce of my fear when I said, “I desperately want to be wrong.”

His mask broke.

His expression fell and one of his arms reached for me before he managed to force it back to his side.

“Are we back to that?” I asked with a defeated laugh. “Pretending we’re okay with keeping our distance from each other?”

He gestured to my car, his chest pitching as he challenged, “After your reaction?”

“I’m allowed that reaction,” I said firmly. “I’m allowed to want you to be *anything* other than the nightmare that haunts me. But as much as I am scared to find out more, and as much as I hate what I already know, I know you aren’t *them*.”

A strained breath fell from my lips when I reached for him and he pulled me against him without hesitation, holding me close and cradling my neck in his large hand. Gray eyes searching my face as an indescribable hope and need swirled there.

“I’m not your nightmare,” he assured me. “My family isn’t.”

My head bobbed shakily as I accepted the honesty in his words. “I’ve experienced true fear. I’ve gone through the worst thing a person should ever have to. And even after that, I felt that danger radiating from you and knew I

was safe with you. Knew you would use that danger to protect me if it came down to it.”

“Fucking hell, Willow,” Diggs whispered as he lowered his forehead to mine. “Protecting you?” He swept his mouth across mine, stealing my breath and a piece of my heart. “Told you, that’s my job.”

I pushed onto my toes, accepting the next kiss greedily.

Slow. Deep. And so achingly sweet as he took his time embedding his name in my soul. Fingers trailing down my back and pulling me closer as the hand around my neck tightened.

A subtle claim that had me trembling and aching for something he couldn’t give me right there.

“I can handle you,” I maintained when the kiss ended with an adoring brush of his lips against my forehead.

“What about my family?”

I inhaled slowly, a little shakily, and exhaled with an unsteady laugh when amusement vibrated in Diggs’ chest. “No promises.”

“Well, you’re about to meet them,” he said on a sigh, then held me at arms’ length to search my face. His was set in feigned worry that was pure Diggs charm. “All of them.”

“Right now?” I asked as he began walking backward, pulling me with him. “In that massive house?”

“Right now,” he confirmed, then effortlessly twirled me into his body and turned us so we were walking toward the house. Easily slipping into that carefree confidence as if the events of this evening hadn’t happened.

As if I wasn’t about to enter a house full of mobsters.

“Thought you got a dog,” he said as we neared the porch.

“What?” I asked, head shaking as I tried keeping up with the change in conversation.

“I smelled a dog,” he began, then listed his head toward me. “You asked what I got from your apartment. I’d been about to ask if you’d really bought a fucking dog to get rid of me, and then I smelled cologne.”

I wasn’t seeing the porch or the massive doors we’d been walking up to. I wasn’t sure I was even breathing.

Because I’d truly been feet from a man in a neon mask.

No illusion.

No flashback.

Just me and my nightmare.



WILLOW

“The scent wasn’t strong,” Diggs went on, “but that doesn’t mean it’d been a long time since they’d been in there. They might’ve not been wearing a lot, or they could’ve put it on long before.”

“It was the same guy,” I murmured as my lightheadedness increased. “He had a dog—a giant wolfhound.” I gestured vaguely to my chest and let my arm fall heavily. “Its head came up to my chest.”

Diggs’ arm curled tighter around me, his tone dropping gravely when he asked, “And he was wearing a neon mask?”

Apparently.

Even worse? I knew that specific mask. I had nightmares of it. And from the man’s reaction to me—the slant of his head that had been at once menacing and oh-so telling—I had a sinking feeling he remembered me too.

“Until this is over, you won’t be alone,” Diggs promised when I couldn’t outwardly respond.

I nodded numbly as he began leading me through the doors, then brought us both to an abrupt stop. “I have—my students. I can’t miss work.” I barely noticed the massive room the house opened to as I looked wildly around and then focused on him. “You can’t keep me here.”

Diggs fought a smile even as he tried giving me a reassuring look. “You’re not a hostage, Tree. You can still go to work. Lexi was in class today, right?” When I just stared at him in confusion, he added, “One of us was in the school, just in case anything happened, ready to protect her or get her out. One of us will be there every day, ready to do the same for both of you.”

My mouth fell open as I realized a mobster had been in the school. “What do you mean one of you was *in the school*?” I demanded on a hushed breath.

That smirk of his finally took over, stealing my entire focus for a moment. “Baby, you saw me in the school just this morning.” Just as I began wondering if *he’d* been in the school all day, he added, “Not me. Zara knows though. That’s why I was there.”

Shock slammed into me and had me questioning my entire life. “Zara—wait, is Zara—”

Diggs' sharp laugh cut me off, his head tipped back with amusement before he looked at me with so much adoration and curled his hands around my heated cheeks.

"Fuck, you're cute." He pressed a quick, chaste kiss to my lips, then pulled me against his side again and began leading me through the massive room. "Zara isn't in the mafia and only suspects that we are. But she's afraid enough of me to do what I tell her."

"Because you're dangerous," I mumbled lamely, once again trying to wrap my head around the way my world had tilted onto its side in such a short time.

"Not to you," was all Diggs said as we rounded the corner into a wide hall and were met with his mirror image, arms folded over his chest as he watched us.

Maverick.

Crazy how just a week ago, I'd been feet away from that man. I'd seen him with his wife and child and hadn't had a worry other than the betrayal I'd thought accompanied the entire situation.

And now I was genuinely afraid to get closer to him than I already was.

"Finally," Maverick muttered, earning a scoffed "Fuck off," from Diggs.

Maverick's stare narrowed on me as we approached him, a smile crossing his face that was so unlike Diggs' wicked smirk.

It was gentle and calming, and so opposite of his brother, that I wondered how I hadn't noticed their differences that day at the coffee shop.

"Been waiting to meet you," he said, tipping his head in my direction. "For so many reasons you might never understand, I'm glad *this one* decided to figure out his shit."

My eyebrows lifted as I slowly glanced at Diggs in question, but he just met my stare as he answered his brother, "She already understands."

Silence filled the hall for long seconds before Maverick asked, "That right?"

"More than I wanted her to at this point," Diggs said, his voice a somber breath as his fingers made that familiar path down my forearm, ending on my wrist. Facing his brother again, Diggs added, "Not everything, but more than enough. She's actually why I called Dare about KSG."

Shock colored Maverick's features before he gave me a curious look.

"Which means she's coming with us into that room," Diggs said unquestionably.

“Understood,” Maverick murmured, then took a step back once Diggs began leading us in his direction again. “I’m Maverick.”

“I know,” I said as I automatically reached my hand out to shake his, horror ripping through me when I realized I’d touched a mobster without thinking. It didn’t matter how ridiculous that thought was, considering I was clinging to Diggs like a lifeline.

Something deep inside me knew and trusted him wholeheartedly.

I didn’t know the rest of the people in this house—Diggs’ identical twin included.

“U-um,” I stammered, my tongue darting out to wet my lips when I ripped my hand away from his. “I’ve actually seen you before.”

“Last week,” he said with a nod. “Diggs told me.”

“Right,” I whispered when he fell into step beside me. “My, uh . . . my name’s Willow.”

At that, a mixture of genuine shock stole across Maverick’s expression as he glanced at Diggs. “Did I find that out before you?”

I elbowed Diggs in the side before he could answer, forcing a heaving breath from him. “Did you tell him what you call me?” I asked as mortification rose in my cheeks.

“That was all I knew you as,” he said defensively, grabbing my hand in his again as he told Maverick, “I’ve known her name since last week.”

“I can’t believe you told him that.”

“Tree,” Diggs murmured apologetically, and Maverick barked out a laugh when I shoved Diggs away.

“Nearly everyone in this house goes by nicknames, Willow,” Maverick said as he led us to a closed door. “I don’t think *Tree*—”

“No one else calls her that,” Diggs said, laying claim to the name and me in that simple sentence.

Maverick just fought a smile as he looked between us. Once his stare settled on me, he repeated, “Glad he decided to figure out his shit,” as he opened the door, revealing a conference-style room that stunned me with the size of it.

It also had a very *mob-like* feel to it.

Not the room itself. From the light wood planks on the floors to the soft gray color on the walls to the extra-large wooden table and the bright lighting fixtures hanging above it, it was actually pretty modern.

But there was a heavy darkness that began seeping out of the room as

soon as Maverick opened the door. Reaching out and whispering of past sins and pains and malice.

It had warning chills rising on my arms as Diggs led me across the threshold and toward the small group of people seated at the far end of the table.

Diggs turned his head, brushing his lips against my jaw and whispering, “You’re safe,” in my ear as if he’d felt my resistance.

I didn’t respond.

I just let my gaze move from person to person, carefully taking them in and noticing the way they were watching me.

Some with careful inspection. Others with excited anticipation.

And then I met a glare so cold and cruel, I staggered to a stop as that warning exploded in my veins.

“Hey—” Diggs began, alarm crossing his expression as he took in my own, and then his head whipped around. Immediately searching for what could’ve had me wanting to run. “Fuck, Kieran, stop.”

“She shouldn’t be in here,” the man with the chilling green eyes said.

“She should. She is,” Diggs said firmly as I breathed, “I’ll leave.”

“No,” Diggs whispered, though I was sure the rest of his family heard. “You’re in this with me. Not only that, you have information we probably need.”

“What information?” a girl asked, then lifted her head from a laptop long enough for me to realize it was the same woman I’d seen at the café with Maverick—his wife.

“Once Kieran stops Nightshade-ing out on Tree, I’ll explain,” Diggs said meaningfully, then turned to me, pointing at people as he spoke about them. “Kieran. He’s scary as shit but harmless to you. He’s married to Jess—you’ve heard about her. She’s Rorie’s sister-in-law.”

My eyes widened as I took in the woman who had just relaxed into Kieran’s arms. Her smile was provocative and teasing, but somehow wholly welcoming and approving, as she waved at me.

And as I took in the wildness in her eyes, I absently wondered what Rorie’s husband was like if this was his sister. Because Rorie was sweet and wholesome, and the girl standing half a dozen feet away looked like she fit there, in her terrifying husband’s arms.

She looked like she fit in this room, with its heavy darkness.

“You met my brother,” Diggs went on. “Behind the many laptops is my

sister-in-law, Einstein.”

“Still waiting on info,” Einstein muttered irritably. “You can do intros later.”

Diggs drew in a slow breath and gave me a look as if to say not to worry about Einstein. “And that’s Dare,” he finished, gesturing to the other man who’d been standing behind Einstein. Meeting my stare, Diggs dropped his tone low to make sure I understood the significance when he said, “He’s our boss.”

My attention slowly shifted to the man in question, taking him in again with the new information I had.

He’d been in the same position since I’d entered: Arms folded over his chest, watching me with subtle contemplation. But there was nothing about him that shouted he was a *mafia boss*.

I could pass him on a street and never think twice.

When everyone seemed to be waiting for my reaction, I softly asked Diggs, “So, this is your ‘family?’”

“Most of them.”

“The others are with the kids, and I’m still waiting,” Einstein added, her tone leaking exasperation.

“You’re sure about this?”

My head shifted back at Dare’s question because his eyes had been locked on me, and I didn’t know how to answer him. I didn’t even know what he was talking about.

But before I could ask, Diggs answered, “I’m sure about her.”

Electricity danced up my spine and sent tingling sensations of warmth through me when I realized the question hadn’t been directed at me at all. When I realized Diggs was, once again, claiming me.

“You know what this means,” Dare said meaningfully.

“Heard you before,” Diggs acknowledged. “But she needs to be ready for us because what’s happening directly involves her. I’m sure of it.”

At that, Dare spared a glance at Diggs before focusing on me again for long moments. “Then, let’s hear it,” he said with a dip of his head. “Why do you think Keane Street’s involved?”

“It’s their way. Brutal and with no concern about the public fallout,” Diggs said as he sat on the table and shifted one of the chairs for me to sit in. Once I was seated, he pulled me close and made soothing passes down my back as the conversation continued around me.

Dare's head slanted, but his voice was filled with doubt when he argued, "They're Irish."

"Wouldn't be the first time Irish and Italians got together," Kieran said pointedly from where he was now leaning up against the wall, with Jess still in his arms.

Dare turned his hardened stare on Kieran before focusing on Diggs again, and I knew I'd been so wrong in my earlier assessment of him because Dare absolutely gave mafia boss vibes.

There was an energy that rippled out and made you feel infinitely inferior to him when he spoke. When he wasn't letting others control the conversation, there was a commanding air that was undeniably noticeable.

Kieran gave off the energy of a hungry predator, but Dare was terrifying in his own right. I wondered if that made him more dangerous . . . because he could so easily slip into a crowd undetected.

And then I realized Diggs had done the same. So had his sister-in-law and brother.

I would've never known what kind of people they truly were just by looking at them. Even after spending long, intimate hours with one of them.

I wasn't sure how to feel knowing they could so easily blend in. Either they were horribly manipulative and deceptive, or somehow . . . somehow, Rorie had been right.

Down to their core, these mobsters were truly *good* people.

"Einstein hasn't found any Borellos that went to Keane Street yet," Dare went on. "And we're in agreement this is old Borellos, calling us out as traitors for creating a family with Holloway members. With the *Irish*." The last was an irritated, drawn-out statement made at Kieran.

"Irish or not, our history alone is a betrayal to the people you released," Kieran said easily. "You weren't enemies with KSG—Borellos could've taken up with them."

"They're also close," Diggs added. "It might not seem fathomable, but everything else fits. On top of that . . ."—he glanced at me, his fingers clutching at my back reassuringly—"Willow saw one of them this morning."

"How'd you—" Dare's head listed and his eyes narrowed on me. "Sorry, what'd he say your name was?"

"Willow," Einstein answered for me, having popped her head up again to study me curiously.

"Yeah," I said softly, drawing the word out as I quickly took in the way

they were all watching me again.

Surprisingly, Kieran wasn't the one I was worried about at that moment because he seemed just as taken aback by Dare's reaction as I was.

"I guess it isn't super common," I added uneasily, then shrugged. "It's a family name though."

"Dare," Diggs whispered pleadingly when Dare's eyebrows shot up in interest at my explanation, but Dare didn't look away from me.

"When you say *family name*," Einstein began, only to never continue.

"Um . . ." A nervous laugh left me, and I pressed my hands firmly together to hide how badly I was shaking. "I'm not sure why it's relevant," I finally said, then licked at my dry lips. "But a woman from each generation has had it as her first or middle name for a hundred years, or something like that."

"Are you Italian?" Dare asked me and shot a warning look at Diggs when he started speaking.

"No—I mean, um, not that I know of?" I said, making it sound like a question.

"And what does the name 'Borello' mean to you?"

A sharp laugh left me as I wondered how this had turned into me being interrogated because of my *name*. "Nothing. N-nothing, except that you were just saying it."

"What about 'Moretti?'" Einstein asked. At that, Kieran's head slowly shifted my way again as if he finally understood what had set them off. But instead of the earlier lethality, he looked equally surprised and intrigued.

Jess and Maverick were looking between Diggs and me, waiting to see how this would play out. And I realized then that Diggs had known this would happen because he'd tried to stop Dare from questioning me.

I looked at Diggs, my jaw hardening when I saw the apology lining his expression. "What is happening?"

"Your name . . ." He exhaled roughly, his eyes rolling when Einstein repeated her Moretti question. "Your name is significant to our family."

Surprise stole through me and had another nervous laugh bubbling past my lips. "What?"

Before he could answer, Einstein groaned loudly and said, "Need answers here. Psychotic people still on the loose," and I snapped.

"Oh my God, I don't know what Moretti means," I yelled as I twisted in the chair to look at her. "My name is Bennett—Willow Bennett. I'm not

Italian. I don't know who the Borellos are. I have no idea why my name would be significant to any of you, and I kind of hate that it is."

"And they all died," Diggs said to Dare, his voice dripping with meaning.

Dare studied me for so long that my hands began shaking with nervous energy all over again. "Supposedly," he finally said, then asked, "How sure are you that you saw someone from Keane Street this morning?"

"I saw someone with a neon mask when I was leaving my apartment," I informed him, then lifted my trembling hands. "If that's who they are . . ."

"That doesn't automatically make them KSG," he told Diggs, irritation leaking into his expression.

"She's seen them before," Diggs said gently as his large hand splayed protectively against my back. "She's from Richmond. They murdered her boyfriend and almost got her a year ago."

Dare placed a hand on Einstein's shoulder to stop her when she began responding and demanded, "Find Borellos who joined them." Once her head was hidden behind the screens in front of her again, he looked at us and said, "All right. KSG don't go after people who slip away from them, so they're here for us."

"Willow was the next victim," Diggs said tightly, "I'm sure of it. Someone was in her apartment today. And if they aren't going after Willow for getting away, then they're following *us* and have followed me there."

"Or they recognized her," Kieran added. "They might not go after people, but if she fell into their laps . . ."

"Regardless, we know who we're looking for now," Dare said dismissively. "And now we know how they're getting away if they aren't staying in town after they're done."

"Which means they're about to hit again if at least one of them was in town this morning," Maverick said solemnly.

An eerie silence fell over the room, filled with worry and a bitter rage I was sure I could taste.

"One . . . maybe two left, and then they're coming for you," Kieran finally muttered.

"I'm aware," Dare said on a sigh, then looked at Einstein. "Anything yet?"

"On which side of things?"

"All."

"No one's missing, and I'm not seeing any—shit." Horror and a deep-

rooted pain filled her eyes as she backed away from the table, looking first at Maverick and then at Dare.

Neither asked, they both just leaned in to see what she had.

Dare was the first to react. A disbelieving curse leaving him and filling the room with its pain.

Maverick just looked at Einstein again, watching her. Taking in her reactions as she stared wide-eyed at the screen.

Diggs had half-stood, keeping his hand on me as he waited to find out what was happening.

“Dare,” Kieran finally murmured, a question and a demand.

When Dare twisted to look at him, there was a soul-deep grief and anger burning in his eyes as he raked his hands through his hair and explained, “Johnny . . . it’s Johnny’s dad and uncle.”

Kieran’s expression shifted into an emotionless mask.

Diggs practically fell when he went to sit on the table again.

I met Jessica’s worried stare, then looked at Diggs. “What’s happening?” I asked under my breath as I stood, placing myself between his legs. “What does that mean?”

He searched my face for a long while, his head bobbing as hopelessness entered his gray eyes. “Means we’re fucked.”



DIGGS

We'd stayed in the conference room for another few hours, going over possibilities and suspicions and worries now that we knew *who* was behind everything.

Now that we knew *why* this was happening . . .

Johnny Guerra had been Dare's best friend and right-hand man from the time they could walk. He'd also been an unhinged maniac who had somehow stolen Einstein's heart until his monstrous side started winning out before Maverick and I entered the picture. He'd also been old school—wanting Dare to keep the Borellos deep in gunrunning and extortion when Dare had been determined to get us out.

The entire Guerra family had been of the same, corrupt mindset.

Then Dare had killed Johnny to save Lily—the Holloway princess—and the rest of the Guerras had eagerly run, looking for a new family when Dare had disbanded ours.

Now that we had all the pieces of this massacre, it was laughable that we hadn't put them together before. But as I'd told Tree, we were truly fucked. In the Guerras' eyes, Dare had betrayed them in so many ways. And I got it . . . from their rage-filled perspective, I did.

But Johnny should've been put in the ground long before he had been. He'd been nothing more than an uncontrollable liability, and his family had known that. And as for our new Rebel family, we'd only formed out of necessity because old enemies had continued coming at us, pulling us back into this dark life we all knew so well. That didn't mean we thrived in it or craved it the way others did. That didn't mean Dare had disbanded the Borellos *for* Holloway members.

But the Guerras didn't see that.

Again, I got it.

Didn't mean we were going to let them continue killing innocent people or live . . .

"I have questions," Tree said as soon as I shut the door of the bedroom we were staying in, her voice soft with hesitation and her eyes filled with uncertainty.

And that was the wildest part of this night. *Her.*

She'd stayed in the conference room and by my side the entire time. Letting me touch her and reaching for me if my hands ever left her for a second. Never letting the fear or shock I knew she felt show as we talked about detailed deaths and murdering people. Never running from the Holloway Estate, screaming for help, as I'd expected her to. And when I'd told her I wanted to take her to bed, she'd simply said *please*.

Full trust.

Full want.

This goddamn girl who was shaking me in ways I still wanted to fight against. And yet, there she was. Standing in front of me, in our current safe house, waiting for me to explain this crazed world to her.

"I expected you to have more than questions," I said as I twisted the lock on the door and stepped close enough to curl my hand around her waist. Bringing her flush to my body as I walked her backward until we reached the bed. "Ask your questions, Tree."

"You don't live here."

"Not a question," I muttered as I lowered her onto the bed, my head slanted as I followed her down, keeping my upper body hovering over her. "But, no. It feels wrong even staying here."

Her eyelids briefly fluttered shut when I settled between her legs before those green eyes were locked on me again, all fire and need as her knees slowly hitched around my hips. "Because it's . . . Holloway?"

"Technically. Most of the members of Henley live here now, but the estate is still called Holloway."

She quickly blinked, some of her need fading to outright shock when she asked, "Wait, really? Henley, the band?"

"Don't need you getting excited about rockstars when I'm on top of you, Tree."

A slow, unrestrained smile pulled at her mouth at the blatant possessiveness in my voice. "You already know I'm not big on rock or rockstars," she whispered as she studied me, heat creeping up her neck and into her cheeks. "Was just surprised, is all."

A grunt sounded in my chest before I explained, "They're from here—their bassist is married to Dare's sister. The rest of the band doesn't know what we are."

Disbelief coated her expression and had that smile falling into a perfect,

pouty O as she stared, unseeing for a while. “Such a crazy world you live in —” Her eyes snapped back to me and her brow furrowed. “What’s your name?”

“Diggs.”

“No,” she whispered, disappointment coating that small word and bleeding from her. “What’s your *name*?”

I thought for a while before saying, “*Diggs* has been my identity for fourteen years. I almost don’t recognize my name anymore.” Her head moved in a subtle nod, but her disappointment deepened, prompting me to add, “Evan. My name’s Evan.”

“Evan,” she whispered so low that she almost just mouthed the name, wonder lighting her eyes. “Evan what?”

“Can’t tell you that.” When hurt and confusion started forming on her features, I said, “I refuse to lie to you, and the name on all my government documents is a lie. But I *can’t* tell you who I used to be.”

“Used to—” Confusion flared from her as she looked away, her tongue darting out to wet her lips before she met my stare again. “Why would the person you ‘used to be’ need to be a secret? Is there something worse than the mafia?”

A self-deprecating laugh worked through me. “Depends on how you look at each situation.” I rested on my forearm and curled my hand against her cheek with the other, hurrying to swipe my thumb across her lips when she started arguing. “Let it be enough that I gave you those parts of me.”

She softened under me in an instant as if she’d heard in my tone and words that, what I’d given her, I’d never given anyone else before.

Her head dipped subtly and she slanted her head to press those lips to my palm. A heavy breath escaping her when she said, “Then tell me what *my name* has to do with your family and why you didn’t warn me.”

“Willow,” I said slowly, almost phrasing her name like a question before I dipped down to steal a kiss. Feather-soft brushes of our lips and unhurried teases of our tongues until I was aching to sink into her.

But she had questions. Questions we needed to get through before we went further.

The fact that she was here with me at all was a miracle. I owed her answers.

Taking her bottom lip between my teeth, I gave a quick bite before pulling away and getting off the bed completely. “It’s where Dare’s family

came from.”

Grabbing my gun from its spot in my waistband, I went to set it on the nightstand as my mouth opened to continue explaining, but Tree spoke before I could.

“You’ve never had a gun on you before.” When I looked at her, she was propped up on her elbows, her eyes rolling. “I mean, of course you have one . . . considering, you know . . . *you*. But why didn’t you have it on you any of the other nights?”

I let the ‘one’ slide because I had much more than *one* gun, but I just fought a smile as I set the handgun down and started taking off my shoes and socks. “I did,” I maintained. “I’ve always stashed it right outside your bedroom.”

When her shock stunned her into silence, I told her, “The Borellos, Morettis, and a third family made up The Willow Gang in Chicago back over a hundred years ago. There was a rebellion against the Morettis, but according to the stories, of the two rebelling families, only the Borello brothers made it out alive.”

“So, Dare thinks . . .” Tree’s brows drew close as she pushed into even more of a sitting position. “He thinks I’m from the third family, even though they all died?”

“They’re just stories.” I lifted a shoulder and moved to lay on my back beside her. “Also not crazy to imagine people from that third family survived grave injuries. You’d be surprised what you can survive.” The last was said on a frustrated whisper as I drew my hand over my face.

“I don’t—my family isn’t—” She gave a harsh shake of her head as a disbelieving laugh tumbled past her lips. “I just don’t see this being my family’s history.”

“I don’t think it is,” I assured her. “I’m sure Dare knows who the third family was, so Einstein can find out. But if they survived and went to the trouble of wanting enemies and allies to think they were dead, they wouldn’t have kept the name *Willow* in their family.”

“Right . . . right,” she said resolutely, then focused on me when I wrapped my arm around her back and drew her close.

“Not that we had a lot of time to get through everything tonight before you were thrown into the thick of it with my family, but I hadn’t expected Dare to react to your name.” I gripped her tighter, trying to apologize with my touch alone. “If we weren’t facing what we are, I don’t think he

would've. But he's on high alert."

"Understood," she said on a sigh as she leaned into me, hundreds of questions swirling in her eyes as she stared just past me.

"Out with it." When she looked at me curiously, I said, "I see those questions begging to be asked. Ask them so I can ask mine."

Amusement played at the corner of her lip. "What're yours?"

"If you'll still let me find you with what you know."

Her reaction alone was answer enough. The stilted breath that escaped her and the desire and adoration that swept across her beautiful face told me all I needed to know.

Then . . .

But she still didn't know everything.

"Ask me, Tree," I prompted before she could respond.

Drawing in a slow breath, she nodded firmly before shaking her head. Her fingers pressing to her temple as if she were trying to focus or remember all the questions she'd just been thinking before she said, "This house—mansion," the word tumbled free on a laugh as she looked at me again. "You're using it to hide from the neon mask people."

"Keane Street Gang."

A shudder ripped through her, dimming every part of her before she was able to push it away. "Right. But if you're using this house to hide from them and the Guerra family . . . is that right?" When I nodded, she asked, "Why do y'all have your cars in plain sight?"

"Because we're only hiding the kids, not us," I said easily. "When there's a threat, we gather in one place so when the threat finally comes for us, we'll be together. Ready to take them on. Our house isn't safe because these are old Borellos, so they know our house. Granted, Borellos know this house because we attacked it enough times, but they don't know everything about it. They don't know where we're keeping the kids, and they won't be able to find them."

"So, you want them to come here," she assumed with a nod.

"I'll keep you safe."

"That wasn't what I was getting at." She watched as one of her hands gently moved across my chest, tracing the softest patterns for long moments before she laid her hand flat and fixed her worried stare on me. "Have you ever killed anyone?"

There it was.

I'd been shocked when she hadn't taken off running throughout our entire meeting, but the longer she'd stayed by my side, I'd had a feeling it was because she hadn't fully understood.

Yet.

"I refuse to lie to you," I repeated and realized just how deep this girl had gotten under my skin and into my heart when I almost started choking on my fear of losing her. My head shifted in a mixture of subtle nods and shakes as I struggled to continue. "So, tell me if you really want me to answer that."

"You just did," she said on a disheartened breath, her body sagging against mine.

But she didn't move away. She didn't rush for the door and her car.

She stayed there, weight fully resting against me and hand splayed over my chest, just above the chaotic pounding of my heart.

"Do you enjoy it?"

"That's complicated." I cleared my throat and wondered if you could die from the absolute fear of losing someone. Because that's what it felt like. I was sure my heart was going to escape the confines of my ribs as I watched Tree's reactions while I stumbled over my next answers.

"I don't enjoy watching the light leave their eyes. I don't enjoy knowing I took someone's life. But I do take pride in protecting my family and other people, in whatever way." Just as she began nodding, I added, "I also have to focus."

"Focus . . ." Tree's head tilted and her brow furrowed. "I don't understand."

My fingers trembled against her back as I explained, "I've always been the easygoing one—the one who turned life into one big joke. It was easier that way growing up because I always felt like I was failing my parents, and then it just stuck."

"Diggs," she said under her breath, her other hand reaching for my face, but I grabbed her hand before she could get there and placed it on top of her other one.

"Turning bad situations into a joke is how I focus. Turning threats into a joke is how I focus."

Felt like she took a knife to my heart when a whisper of disgust wove through those eyes that had been tormenting me for nearly two months. "Turning murder into a joke is how you *focus*?"

"It's how I keep my family and myself alive," I corrected gently. "But

I've never enjoyed it. I can't promise I one day won't though." At her blatant horror, I clutched her tightly so she would feel the depth of my feelings for her and the meaning in my words when I said, "The day I come face-to-face with the KSGs that tried to kill you, I promise you, I'll enjoy it."

At my confession, the swarm of questions vanished from her eyes. The emotions faded. All that remained was a worrying mask of *nothing* as minutes passed in excruciating silence.



DIGGS

“Your keys are in my pocket if you wanna leave,” I finally said when the silence became too much. “You won’t ever be alone. You’ll be safe.”

Her brow had furrowed as soon as I’d started speaking, and when she began nodding, I struggled to stop myself from begging her to stay. “Your life terrifies me, and I don’t know how to begin to understand everything you’ve said tonight,” she breathed, then leaned closer until her mouth was inches from mine. “But I can handle you.”

God damn.

I crushed my mouth to hers, drinking from her in a punishing kiss as I sat up and twisted until we were back where we’d begun when we first entered the room: Tree’s spine kissing the bed as I once again settled between her legs.

Only this time, the hard questions were done. This time, I planned on reminding her exactly *why* she thought she could handle me.

“You’re in my head. You’re in every breath,” I said against her lips, the words a rough confession as I grabbed the back of my shirt and pulled it over my head. “For so many reasons, I wanna keep you far from my life, but I can’t stay away from you.”

“Then stop trying,” she whispered as she pulled me back to her. The tips of her fingers sliding from my jaw to grip my hair as she let me deepen the kiss.

Take control of it.

But I took my time with it and with her as I finished undressing us both. Following the same path as her clothes with licks and bites and kisses that had her gasping and trembling and arching toward me as I slowly stripped her bare. Until her chest was heaving and her skin was lined with chills in anticipation of what was to come, and all we’d done was kiss.

I stood on the side of the bed, my stare raking over her beautifully curved body and taking in this moment as I rolled a condom on. The way she didn’t shy away from me or try to cover herself. The way she watched me beneath hooded eyelids. The way her body subtly moved, silently begging mine to return to her. All wrapped up in the energy that had always pulsed between

us, even from that first night. Charged and powerful and intoxicating, making the anticipation that much sweeter.

I gripped her hips tightly, feeling them beneath my palms and watching as her eyes flared before I flipped her onto her stomach without warning. Her shocked gasp faded into a laugh that had my chest warming and doing all kinds of crazy things, but then I pulled her onto her knees so her ass was in the air and she was bared to me, and the air in the room shifted. Thickened.

The silence as she waited for what I would do next made me want to draw this out until she was begging me for *something*, but I needed her.

It'd been a long fucking week of keeping myself from her.

I leaned forward to get the smallest taste of where she was already wet and nearly groaned when she shuddered against me. But it was the sound of my name leaving her on a whispered prayer that had me curling my hands around her thighs and setting my mouth on her. Long, slow licks from her clit to entrance that turned into hard flicks against that bundle of nerves before I drew it into my mouth until she was crying out, only to repeat it all again.

Devouring her the way I'd been aching to for days and pressing her harder against me when her muffled moans turned to pleased cries as she fell apart. Licking and sucking and drawing out her orgasm until her legs were shaking against me.

With an unhurried kiss to her swollen clit that had Tree shuddering and whimpering, I started moving. Kissing her thigh and then nipping just below the globe of her ass as I slipped two of my fingers inside her, pumping her slowly. Building her up all over again as I moved higher still.

But the soft laugh that started leaving her when I kissed one of her rounded cheeks turned into a sharp, reprovng gasp when I drew my tongue up the crease of her ass and over that tight hole.

“Oh my—what are—*what?*” she choked out as she began shifting away from me until I curled my fingers inside her, and then she nearly collapsed against the bed with the force of her full-body shudder.

“What was that?” I asked as I hit that spot inside her, pulling a moan from those pouty lips.

She turned her head to weakly glare at me before her eyelids fluttered shut as her mouth opened on another silent moan.

“Welcome to my world, Tree,” I whispered as I kissed my way up her spine, slowly removing my fingers from her wet heat with each tiny tremor that pulsed through her and passed to me. “Where we fuck our women based

on pleasure, not what society deems acceptable.”

“Oh—” Her body tensed beneath mine when I slid my fingers up the same path my tongue had taken and pressed the tip of one of them against that hole she’d just shied away from. “*Diggs.*”

“And I can promise you, you will never come as hard as when you let yourself take what your body wants.”

“I don’t—I can’t. I-it—” she stammered between shuddering breaths, her hands clutching the comforter beneath her.

I pressed a soothing kiss to her shoulder and moved to kneel behind her as my finger lazily circled a place I was going to claim . . . one day. “I’ve got you,” I assured her and felt my blood pound when her hands flexed against the bed before gripping the same place she’d just been grasping.

One out of fear and uncertainty, the other rooted in pleasure.

And I wanted it . . . her pleasure. I wanted her to be comfortable enough to *take* it so long as I was the one pushing her to highs she’d never known existed.

Moving my hands back to her hips, I lined my cock up with her entrance. Giving her time to know what I was doing and letting her know how this was about to go. Because I intended on giving her an experience she would never forget—one she would crave after tonight. But I wouldn’t rush it.

But fuck, I thought I would lose my goddamn mind as I took my time inching into her heat. Feeling her stretch and flutter around me and practically begging me to slam home. To take what I’d been missing.

And the needy sound she made once I was fully seated?

Damn.

Pulling out, I took my time taking her again and again before finding a steady rhythm. Once she was meeting me thrust for thrust, I dipped my hand to the place we were joined, teasing her clit just long enough to coat my fingers with *her* before I made the same path as before.

Slow and deliberate, so she’d know what was coming. But instead of pulling away, she trembled against me as my fingers moved up the crease of her ass and swirled around her.

“Oh God, oh God, oh *God,*” she whispered, then cried out a curse when I began pressing my finger inside.

“Tell me to stop,” I offered, the vow in my words clear as I studied how tense her body had become.

One word from her, and I would be on the other side of the room.

A reluctant-sounding moan tumbled from her lips before she said, “I can’t . . . I can’t think.”

“Not supposed to be thinking, Tree. Just feeling.”

Her head bobbed lazily, and then another moan left her when she rocked back against my cock and finger.

Fuck me, this girl . . .

My blood was on fire as I struggled to keep that same, steady pace, all while I gently worked my finger in and out of her tight ass. As I listened to her whimpers and moans and watched her arch as if she couldn’t decide if she wanted to get away from the intrusion or if she wanted more. As I watched her *trust me*.

But as I felt her clench tighter around my cock and heard her breathing change, I let that restraint snap.

I drove into her harder, relishing the gasp that tore through the room as I pushed her closer to the edge. Working her with my fingers and my cock as I lost myself in her just enough that she would never forget *this*. Until her cries were pure, uninhibited pleasure as I fucked her, and she was meeting each thrust, chasing her bliss.

She shattered with a shouted curse, barely muffled by her hand and the comforter. And I nearly fell over the edge with her as her walls clamped down around me, pulsing and vibrating as she melted, body going limp against the bed in a way that had pride pounding through my veins as I pushed her through.

And then she whispered the words, “Evan, please,” and I thought my heart would give out right there.

I hadn’t associated with that name in so long. I’d felt like I was in someone else’s skin on the rare occasions I *had* been called it over the years. But with how my entire world stopped the instant those words left her mouth, I knew I would be him . . .

Evan. Diggs. Tracker. Bloodhound. Rebel.

Whoever Willow Bennett needed me to be, I’d be him because I’d never wanted to be someone so badly until I’d heard her say my name.

“I need you.”

Her breathy plea twisted around my torrent of thoughts and broke something inside me. Next thing I knew, I had her on her back and was slamming into her again. Wondering how I’d ever kept myself away from her when nothing had felt like this before. When having Willow clench and

shudder around me and listening to her moans fill my head was my version of Heaven.

Keeping one of my hands on her thighs, I leaned over her. My hand racing up her body and over the swell of her breasts until I was at her harshly-pitching chest and then her slender neck.

Her satisfied eyes flared with sensual alarm when I slowly curled my fingers around her neck as my hip's movements lost all sense of rhythm. As I began fucking her wildly. Savagely.

Her full lips opened on a stuttered breath when my grip tightened, and her head fell back just enough to break our eye contact as she reached behind her, grabbing the comforter for something to hold onto.

But I wanted those pale green eyes on me. I wanted to see the exhilaration that overwhelmed the fear as she struggled to take a deep enough breath. I wanted to see the trust and adoration that overpowered everything else.

Turning my hand, I put just enough pressure against her throat with my palm and tightly gripped her jaw, forcing her to watch as I gave her all of me.

My heart. My soul.

Cutting myself open and baring myself as I claimed her because this girl was *mine*.

I came with a low curse, my body shaking as I held myself above her and relaxed my hand against her neck until I was spent. Until all I wanted was to roll onto the bed and pull her against me, but I forced myself to focus on her. Quickly taking in the way she was breathing and reaching for me—the way she was looking at me.

Once that adoration and trust assured me she was okay, I dropped my forehead against hers as I rolled off her and to the side, all while my fingers made soothing passes along the red marks already forming on her neck and jaw. “You need me? I’ve got you. Always.”

She nodded lazily as a soft, stunning smile tugged at her mouth. “I couldn’t have imagined it could get better with you.”

I grinned wickedly in response. “Just wait until you’re begging for it.”

At that, a deep blush rushed up her neck and over her cheeks before she managed to cover her face. “That’s embarrassing.”

“Your pleasure?” I argued. “You not being able to hold back because of how fucking good it feels?” I pressed my mouth to where her hands were still hiding her face. “Nothing embarrassing about that, Tree.”

The only thing that could’ve pulled me from her then was the knowledge

that, for the first time, I wouldn't be leaving her in a few minutes or hours. So I pushed from the bed and headed for the attached bathroom, my stare drifting over her body. Flushed, covered in a sheen of sweat, and still gently trembling from the aftereffects of her orgasms.

Beautiful.

Just before I turned the corner, I caught sight of her head tipped back so she could watch me.

The softness and pureness in those eyes begging me to turn right back around and wrap her up in my arms. Hold her forever. This girl who was so far removed from my world but was brave enough to step into it.

Gripping the doorframe as I wavered, I studied her for a second longer before forcing myself into the bathroom to dispose of the condom and clean up. All the while, I fought the thoughts and fears that rose so easily once she was out of my sight.

The deep-rooted instinct to protect her from my life, even though she was already in it. To never have collateral damage waiting beside me. To never let anyone steal my focus again.

I wondered if there would ever be a day when those fears stopped trying to overwhelm and sway me.

But then I stepped out of the bathroom and found her there, blonde hair spilled out across the pillows and body covered in my shirt, and I knew it didn't matter. Because Dare had been right: My world didn't exist without her.

Moving through the room, I found and pulled on my boxer briefs, then knelt on the bed again. When she reached for me, I curled my hand around hers and drew my nose along her forearm until I reached the spot on her wrist that always smelled the sweetest. The heady combination of lavender and vanilla so damn strong right then.

"Fucking addicting," I murmured before nipping the same spot and releasing her hand.

That gorgeous blush darkened her cheeks all over again. "It's funny . . ." she began as she watched me settle in beside her. "I considered the real possibility that you were a vampire because of all this smelling business."

A sharp laugh had left me as soon as the word *vampire* left her, and then I was pressing my mouth to hers for a quick, tender kiss. "You're fucking adorable."

"You kept saying you could find me by my scent," she defended.

“I told you I was a bloodhound.”

She lifted a hand before letting it fall against my chest as she curled against me. “You can’t blame me.”

“I can when you think I’m a vampire,” I said dully, even as a smile tugged at the corner of my mouth. “Real world here, Tree.”

Her eyebrows rose and her stare drifted before she admitted, “This doesn’t seem like it.” Once her gaze settled on me again, her fingers skated across my torso to trace the large tattoo on my side. “Bloodhound. You said that to me the first night when I asked about this.” Tapping her fingers against my side, she said, “So, then this means . . . this means something more.”

“Still who I am,” I reasoned, then conceded, “But that’s the symbol the Borellos have always used. Broken down though, it was a code they used to talk to and about each other when they were rebelling against the Morettis. So it’s our rebel symbol now.”

“And people who aren’t in gangs know that?” she asked, then hurried to add, “You said people know who they’re dealing with when they see it.”

“Not exactly. But people who have done any kind of business with us, legal or otherwise, know that symbol. And I think most of the people in this town have an idea that we’re . . . something.”

Her eyebrows drew close as she leaned in to whisper, “Like vampires?” The laugh that burst from her when I dug my fingers into her sides was bright and free of the weight that had been pressing on her all day and so fucking beautiful that I stopped to just watch her.

Watch the light in her eyes dance as they focused on me. Watch the pure joy slowly ease into contentment as her head settled on the pillows again. Watch those perfect lips twitch and tip up at the corner as she fought the remnants of the giggle in her chest.

And I knew in the way it felt like her joy was the direct source behind each wild beat of my heart that I was done. Forever ruined.

I would raze continents to find her. I would destroy entire worlds for her.

I would die for her.

Gladly.

“Handle me.”

A line of confusion creased between her eyebrows. “What?”

I cupped her neck, my thumb gently trailing along her jaw as I softly pled, “Tell me you can handle me. Tell me you will.”

“I can handle you,” she said confidently, but that crease still hadn’t disappeared. Only now, she looked worried. “Why?”

“Because I want you so fucking far from my world, even though I can’t stand the thought of you being farther than you are right now,” I admitted. “I’ll keep pushing you away because I want you safe, even though you’re safest with me. So, I need to know you can handle me.”

Understanding and admiration fell over her features when she said, “Now that I know why you’ve been keeping me at arm’s length while still breaking in, I can handle your back-and-forth tendencies.” At the amused tick of her eyebrow, a breathless laugh left me.

“I can handle your deepest secrets and darkest sins and this scary life,” she added, lifting her hand to trail her fingers along my jaw when my eyes bored into hers. Tilting her head up, she pressed her lips to mine and whispered, “I can handle every part of you.”

I deepened the kiss for only a moment before resting my forehead against hers. Breathing her in and feeling her in my arms as sleep pressed closer and closer.

Just before I let my eyelids shut, I gripped her tighter and whispered, “The scariest part of my life is you.”



WILLOW

I stared blankly ahead the next morning, struggling to wrap my head around what I was watching. Some odd mixture of shock and disbelief and disturbed fascination twisted through my chest and settled in my stomach as the scene continued playing out in front of me.

“This is normal.”

The unexpected voice sent a jolt through my body and, thankfully, pulled my focus away from the chaos in front of me.

A questioning hum left me as I looked at the familiar blonde sliding onto the barstool next to me with a cup of coffee in her hands. “I’m sorry? Oh my God, you’re Alexis’ mom!” I said, nearly choking over the words when I recognized her from the school’s *meet-the-teacher* night.

I’d known Alexis was someone Diggs considered family for reasons I now understood. I’d known she was being watched—protected—because of the threat they were now facing. But it was wild for the woman I’d had a completely normal conversation with to sit next to me in a mafia house.

“You remembered.” A blinding smile stretched across her face before she graciously added, “I’m Sutton. Lex adores you, by the way, and she’s extremely picky about people.”

“That’s putting it mildly,” a gruff, masculine voice said as a tattooed, giant of a man stepped up behind Alexis’ mom and placed his hand lovingly on her shoulder. “Fucking hell,” he muttered before yelling, “We have more scones.”

“Right,” Alexis’ mom said as if just remembering something, then waved a dismissive hand toward the all-out brawl that had been happening in front of me. “Scones. Apparently, it’s a thing between Einstein and Diggs—I don’t know if you knew that.”

“Scones,” I echoed dully, then looked at where Einstein was still attempting to kick Diggs as Maverick pulled her away.

They’d knocked over two barstools on my other side and had landed near the large bar cart after Diggs had crashed into—and most likely broken—it.

“Mini blueberry scones,” the giant corrected. “They fight dirty over those.”

“You *bastard*,” Einstein snapped when Diggs threw a white box at her. “Those were mine!”

“And they’re delicious,” Diggs said with one of those wicked grins.

I shook my head, then turned on the barstool to face the couple beside me. “*That is normal?*” When they both began nodding, I made a bemused sound just as the giant held a hand toward me.

“I’m Conor.”

“Oh,” Sutton said as she hurriedly took a sip from her mug, then gestured between us with her free hand, “that’s right, y’all haven’t met. This is my husband, Conor. Babe, this is Lexi’s teacher, Ms. Bennett.”

From the way her husband’s expression remained steady, he’d already been fully aware of that, despite never having met me before then.

But now . . . now I knew who he was because I’d learned so much last night.

Conor was a Holloway before their new *Rebel family* had formed.

According to what I’d heard in their conversations and from Diggs, he was everyone’s favorite. From how scared I was to just be in his presence, I couldn’t imagine why.

“You obviously know Lexi, who is . . . somewhere . . .” Sutton went on, bemusement and wonder touching her face for only a moment before she continued, but the lack of concern made me realize just how safe this mansion made them all feel if she wasn’t worried about her daughter’s whereabouts. “And we have another daughter, who’s almost a year, but she’s still sleeping.”

Before I could respond, a couple of scones were placed in front of me just before Diggs fell against the counter with a satisfied sigh.

I glanced between the marginally crumbled scones and him a couple times before looking around for Einstein. “You do realize you were just in a full-on fight with Einstein over these?” I asked bluntly.

Diggs shrugged as if he didn’t understand the issue. “She started it.”

“She—oh my God,” I muttered before dragging my hands over my face. “Why do the scones even matter? You just inhaled enough food to feed an entire army.”

“Blueberry scones are grounds for war around here. Besides,”—he tipped his chin at me—“I wasn’t getting them for me.”

“Say that again?” Conor asked, sounding dumbfounded.

When Diggs just shrugged, I reasoned, “But if they’re Einstein’s—”

“No, no. They aren’t,” Sutton said over me, cutting in and placing a hand on my arm as she leaned close. “Diggs and Einstein just always claim them and fight to the death for them. But I don’t think you understand the significance of what’s happening right now.” Her eyes drifted to where the scones sat untouched in front of me. “Diggs doesn’t share mini blueberry scones. Ever. This is like a caveman offering a woman shelter.”

“I dunno if I should be offended right now,” Diggs said from beside me.

“We’re witnessing a miracle, hush,” she said, waving him off.

A startled laugh forced from my lungs as I took in her and Conor’s genuine shock at what was unfolding in front of them.

I didn’t tell them that it wasn’t the first time Diggs had given me blueberry scones, and I didn’t ask *why* blueberry scones. I just looked into gray eyes, still bright with adrenaline from his completely absurd fight, and asked him, “You like me or something?”

The corner of Diggs’ mouth twitched in the beginnings of a smirk. “Or something.”

Amusement and adoration pulsed through me as I fought the smile and blush threatening to show every one of my cards because I still didn’t know how to handle this high I was on.

But I knew I’d fallen when I least expected it or wanted to. I knew I was in so deep with a guy I hardly knew.

A guy who embraced and lived in my nightmares . . .

Wasn’t life a funny bitch.

“On that note,” I began as I turned in the barstool to stand, “I have to get to work. But it was great getting another chance to meet y’all.”

“We’ll see you again,” Sutton said with a knowing smile, even as a tinge of worry lined her eyes that hadn’t been there earlier.

“Right,” I said as an uneasy laugh danced across my lips, my head bobbing quickly. “Right, I guess I’ll see you tonight. Will Alexis be at school today?” I’d directed the last to Sutton but tipped my head back to meet her decidedly handsome husband’s gaze when he responded for her.

“You wouldn’t be going if Lexi wasn’t.”

I glanced in the direction he’d nodded in and found Kieran and his wife at a table with their young kids, talking in hushed tones.

“Jess will be there,” Diggs reminded me softly, then placed his hand on the small of my back to lead me away.

My gaze caught on the woman who somehow looked wildly seductive,

even with her head tipped close to her husband as she held her baby close. Wondering how she managed to stay hidden in the school yesterday and how she planned to do it again today.

“*She has ways,*” Diggs had told me this morning. “*Same as I can get into your apartment. Kieran, Jess, and I have that in common. Hard to keep us out of places. All you need to know is you’ll be safe.*”

“Crazy,” I said under my breath, my head shaking as Diggs led me out of the large, industrial-sized kitchen that was tucked away on the far side of the mansion. “This is all so crazy. Everything felt normal in there. People are just eating with their children.”

“What do you want them to do, Tree?” Diggs asked as he held up his other hand, showing the two scones from before. “Stay hidden away in fear the entire time?”

My eyes rolled as I took one of the pastries from him. “I dunno, it’s just . . .”

“Crazy?” he offered when I didn’t go on.

“Yeah. Speaking of . . . *this.*” I held up the scone. “Honestly, what the hell?”

One of those wicked smirks that had the power to undo me slowly curled at his mouth. His eyes dancing with mischief as he wove us through the long halls. “I don’t even remember how it started; it’s just always been that way when it comes to those scones. Always intense. Always over-the-top. When Einstein was pregnant, she pulled one of Mav’s guns on me when she realized I had a box.”

I stopped walking so abruptly that Diggs staggered forward a couple of steps without me.

A rasping laugh left him when he came back for me, his large hand pressing against my back and urging me forward as he repeated, “Intense.”

“You’re serious, aren’t you?”

His head slanted in acknowledgment and then lifted in hesitant greeting when we turned a corner and found Dare coming our way with a toddler. “You’re not at Brooks Street with Lily?”

“Maverick is,” Dare answered as he set the boy down, letting him run over to me.

In the second before Diggs responded, I felt the shift in him.

The worry that bled from him and into me as his grip on me tightened. The alertness and intensity that made the wide hallway feel so small and

suffocating.

From the darkness that passed over Dare's face, he felt it too.

"Maverick's here."

Dare's jaw flexed as he reached into his pocket and took a few steps away, pointing at the boy I assumed was his son as he did, as if in command.

From the way Diggs immediately reached for the boy, I presumed it was.

"Who's Lily?" I asked as I forced a smile at the boy since he was watching me with the cheesiest smile.

"His wife," Diggs said under his breath. "She manages the diner we own and likes to be there in the mornings."

I spared a glance at Diggs, long enough to take in the worry and wrath filling his eyes, and guessed, "And someone should've been there with her?"

"We're not alone when there're threats," he reminded me just as Dare came stalking toward us, clearly trying to calm himself.

"Libby's with her." He released a harsh sigh, then reached for his son. "She was supposed to take Mav."

"Then send him over there," Diggs said as if that should've been obvious.

Dare's eyebrows rose before another short, irritated breath left him. "I'd never hear the end of it from either of those girls if I did."

"It isn't up to them."

At that, Dare smiled. Bright and full of amusement as he looked between us. "Do something against this one's wishes," he challenged as he nodded at me, "then come back and tell me that."

Diggs looked at me, studying me intently before his head subtly shook as he focused on Dare again. "This is about keeping everyone safe. It isn't up to them."

"Have fun with that," Dare said to me, his smile widening as he started past us. Calling out, "Lily said they were heading back soon anyway," to Diggs as he did.

In any other situation, I would've applauded Dare and been on his side. But I didn't understand this situation. I didn't understand this *life* where there were actual threats on families and legitimate needs to keep them in houses that weren't their own just so they would be *safe*.

I didn't understand the mafia.

So, I just kept my lips in a firm line and watched as Diggs wavered. Hands clenching into fists the way they often did as he fought with himself before he made his decision.

Jaw clenched tight. Hand on my back. Leading me to the room we were occupying so we could finish getting ready. But by the time we were headed to my apartment, since I'd left all my school things in our rush to leave the night before, we still hadn't spoken a word to each other.

"Will you go?" I asked when I was turning onto the rain-soaked street I lived on, finally breaking the heavy silence we'd been in for what felt like an eternity.

"Jess will be in the school," he said, blinking out of the spiral of thoughts he'd been trapped in.

"No, to—" I struggled to remember the name of the diner and finally said, "The diner. To be near Lily and Libby if they haven't left yet."

"Dare didn't ask me to, and they aren't my responsibility," he said in way of answering.

So, no.

"Where will you be?"

"Close," he said softly, reaching out to rest his hand on my thigh. "But when things happen, Dare uses me first, so I can't be stuck in the school. I need to be ready to go."

I let his words replay as I pulled into the parking lot and found a space in front of my building. Once I had the car turned off, I twisted to look at him and asked, "Why?" At his confusion, I clarified, "Why does he use you first?"

The curve of his mouth was slow and sinful and did horribly cruel things to me as he tapped the side of his nose.

Forcing away the torrent of carnal thoughts that had rushed to the surface, I asked, "Because you're a bloodhound? I get you have an uncanny ability to smell things and people, but what does that have to do with any of this?"

His eyebrows knotted together as if I was missing something so completely obvious. "I'm a tracker, Willow. I can find people and I can let my family know when people are there who shouldn't be—people Einstein's technology can't see." He lifted his shoulder, then reached behind him for the handle. "But even if I didn't have that, Dare would use me because I'm not afraid of running into the fight first."

My heart dropped when I realized what he was saying.

But before I could gather my thoughts, my door was opening, and Diggs was offering his hand to me.

"Let's go grab your stuff."

“I can run in; you don’t have to come,” I murmured offhandedly, then rushed to ask, “Have you had to do that before? Run into a fight first?”

The corners of his mouth twitched as if the question amused him, but he just shut the door once I’d stepped out into the steady drizzle and reminded me, “No one’s ever alone. Not even for this.”

“You aren’t answering.”

“I don’t plan to,” he shot back easily.

“You know that’s an answer in itself.”

He studied my face as he reached for me. Fingers trailing down my arm and intertwining with my own before he focused ahead again. “Already told you I wouldn’t lie to you, and you’re asking questions I don’t want you knowing the answers to because I don’t want those images in your head.”

“I can handle you, which means I can handle *this*,” I said as we neared my building.

When he just grunted in acknowledgment, I worried my bottom lip as another question gathered on my tongue. One that had been a hard line with him in the past weeks.

But that was before I’d learned the truth about Diggs and his family.

“Before, I thought you were deflecting because it wasn’t something you liked talking about,” I began hesitantly. “But with what I know now, I feel like I might’ve been wrong in my assumption. The scars on your back and side—”

“Tree . . .”

“Is being the first into *these* kinds of fights how you got them?”

A muscle in Diggs’ jaw was twitching when we stopped in front of my apartment door. With a look that edged between haunted and panicked, he muttered, “Also told you that isn’t something we’ll ever talk about.”

“I just—”

“Never, Tree.”

I conceded with a whispered apology and had just inserted my key into the lock when Diggs’ free hand snatched mine from my keychain faster than I imagined possible.

“What—” The words jumbled in my throat, choking me and making the pounding of my heart that much stronger when I caught sight of his expression that was equally murderous and calm.

“Come here,” he said so softly, the words almost held no weight as he shifted me so I was no longer near the door.

Grabbing my keys, he removed them and reached for the handle.

“I didn’t unlock—”

The slant of Diggs’ head was all I needed to stop talking. To swallow the questions and pleas as I watched him open the door so slowly. So quietly. And without ever having unlocked it, even though I remembered stopping in that exact place the night before because Diggs had checked the door and taken my keys afterward.

“*Shit*,” he hissed as he let the door fall shut and then hurried me away from my apartment and car while pulling out his phone and searching for Dare’s contact.

“What’s going on?” I begged as he tucked me close to his side. Holding me in a way that probably looked like he was shielding me from the light rain to anyone who might see us.

But those people wouldn’t see the death-like grip Diggs had on me, daring anyone to take me from him, or the way he was trembling with a lethal mixture of fear and rage.

“Willow’s apartment was marked,” he said into the phone, voice low and dangerous. “Same setup as the others . . . message is on the floor so it would be seen as soon as someone opened the door. But I have her with me, so I can’t check it.” His eyes made a quick sweep around us before he muttered, “Taking her to mine,” and ended the call.

“Diggs—”

“Trust me?” he asked over me.

“Yes, but—”

“Then know that I’ve got you.”

“*Evan*,” I snapped, prompting his head to whip in my direction. Once his frenzied eyes were on me, I begged, “Talk to me. Don’t leave me blind when it involves me.”

“What we’ve been dealing with,” he said after long seconds of contemplation, “the bodies . . .”

“Yeah?”

“We’ve found nearly every one of their houses and apartments like I just found yours,” he said, jerking his head behind us. “Chair facing the door. Handcuffs hanging from it. Our symbol in paint or blood on one of the interior surfaces.”

I wasn’t sure I’d ever felt as cold as I did right then.

Because I’d already witnessed this evil and had escaped it. Survived it.

And now that same evil was letting me know it was coming for me.

“I’ve got you,” Diggs repeated, but I was so caught up in the twisted flashes of nightmares—old and new—that I didn’t notice at first how different his voice sounded.

How confused.

I didn’t notice that we’d stopped walking or that Diggs had pulled me against his chest and was holding me like he’d never let me go.

I didn’t notice that he had his phone out again until he was softly seething into it. “Where are you? It’s on my bike.”

My eyelids felt heavy as I blinked, trying to orient myself again. Realizing on a delay that we were on the other side of my apartment complex, and Diggs’ motorcycle was beside us. The same symbol tattooed multiple times on his body was painted all over it—the symbols bleeding at random as if it’d been done while the bike was wet.

“I’m not going near my apartment until someone’s here with her,” he went on, voice a hard command. “So, fucking get here.”

“That’s your bike,” I said numbly. “You live here?”

“Yes, Tree, I live here,” he ground out, voice shaking with adrenaline or rage or fear, or maybe all three. “We own the complex.”

A stunned laugh left me, but it sounded flat and lifeless as I stared at the repetitive lines and circles covering the motorcycle.

“Listen carefully,” he went on as his mouth fell to my ear. “Dare, Mav, and Kieran are coming. You’ll go with Dare. I need you to know you will be safe with him.”

My fingers clenched tighter against his shirt that I’d gripped at some point, but I forced myself to nod.

“Remember who we are and what we do—we keep the reality of our lives hidden from the public. So, when they get here, it’ll just be a normal morning for them and us. Understand?”

“I understand.”

Just then, a black car came to an abrupt stop behind him, the doors opening and revealing the terrifying men I’d met just over twelve hours ago and was now expected to put my trust in.

Diggs only shifted his head enough to see who was coming up behind us before focusing on me again. His hands curled around the sides of my neck and tipped my head back to search my face as if there weren’t symbols and chairs and messages being left for us.

“You still handling me?” he asked softly.

A breathless sound that was all worry and trust bled from me as I nodded.
“I’m handling you.”

“Good.” He lowered his head, his mouth brushing mine when he whispered, “Because I love you.”



DIGGS

I reluctantly released Willow and stepped away, my mind pulling in different directions and dizzying me up.

What I'd found.

Willow . . .

What I *might* find.

Willow . . .

Johnny's family.

Willow . . .

Keane Street Gang.

Willow. Willow. Willow.

Looking up at me with those crystal-green eyes. Blinking against the rain as Dare stepped into place just behind her, ready to take her from here. The slight dip of his head was at once an order and a promise.

He wanted me to find the threat now that we knew who was behind it. He wanted me to end it.

He would keep Willow safe.

But this was why I'd tried pushing her away. This was why I'd tried making myself believe she meant nothing.

Because there was a fucking symbol on her floor. There was a chair waiting for her. And the paint on my bike was enough to let me know their reason for targeting her was *me*.

"Which apartment's hers?" Kieran asked, voice soft as he planted himself directly in front of me. Arms crossed over his chest in a stance that was anything but nonchalant, considering he was holding three knives that I could see.

"I'll show you."

"Kieran's taking it," Dare cut in and gave me a look that dared me to go against him.

But this was about me. This was about Tree. So, I kinda had an issue with him holding me back on it.

Still, when my lips parted to argue, he added, "Your head won't be clear because it's *her*. Kieran's taking it."

“We’ll check your apartment while Kieran checks Willow’s,” Maverick offered.

“I’ll get Willow to Holloway, then I’ll—”

“I have work,” Willow said over Dare, twisting to glance at him before pleadingly looking at me. “I can’t just *not* show up.”

“We’ll take care of it,” I assured her.

“There are kids who—”

“Tree, you’ve seen what they do,” I ground out, keeping my voice low. “Understand that they will follow you *into the school*.” I waited until her fear was blatant in every part of her before continuing.

Full lips falling open in horror. Eyes widening. Body trembling slightly. Skin paling.

When I did, my repeated words were soft and gentle. “We’ll take care of it.”

At Willow’s subtle nod, Dare placed a hand on her shoulder, preparing to lead her to his car. “Something doesn’t feel right about this,” he murmured. From the way he directed the hushed words at me, I had a feeling he’d already had this conversation with Maverick and Kieran on the way. “We’re short a letter—maybe *two*—but we don’t have bodies, and no one’s missing.”

“That we know of,” Maverick added, and Dare’s head listed in agreement just as his phone began ringing.

“If they did this?” Dare went on, gesturing to my motorcycle as he pulled out his phone and glanced at the screen. “They left a trap or a message. Search everything carefully.”

I didn’t bother responding.

I just met Willow’s gaze as Dare once again reached for her while answering the call.

“Lil, give me a—”

Muffled shouting and screams . . .

That was all the rest of us could hear as Dare went alarmingly still.

But from the way Kieran, Maverick, and I all shifted in unison, we were ready for whatever it could mean. Backs straightened. Heads slanted as if that might help us hear what Lily was yelling. Arms tensed at our sides, ready to grab anything to do what was needed.

And then Dare’s head whipped around, worried stare barely touching on us before he took off for his car, yelling, “Get in,” as he did.

And for a second—a *split second*—I froze.

Because there, frantically looking between us before settling on me, was Willow. And I knew from the muffled cries and Dare's panicked look that wherever we were going was somewhere she shouldn't be.

But leaving her here or alone when there was an open threat on her? That I couldn't do.

"Car," I ordered as I reached for her. As soon as I had Tree in my grasp, I ushered her toward the back seat where Kieran was already waiting, then followed her in.

I still had one foot on the pavement when Dare started driving. Tires desperately trying to find traction on the slick ground when he floored it.

"Lily, where are you?" he shouted once I had the door shut, and then choked cries filled the car when he placed the call on speaker.

"What has she said?" Kieran asked when Lily didn't answer.

"To get there, and she's sorry," Dare said through gritted teeth, then asked Lily, "Who's with you, Lil? You have to give me something."

Felt like we were all holding our breaths as we waited for a response from her. The car was thick with tension that only seemed to grow with each second that passed. Building and building, drowning out the rest of the world until there was only the sound of grief. Only the feel of Tree gripping my arm like a lifeline.

"Oh God," Lily finally forced out, her voice warped with emotion. "Oh God, Dare, I'm sorry."

The pressure in the confined space morphed into something unstable, putting every one of us on edge because, even though we didn't know anything, that pained *I'm sorry* changed everything.

Dare looked like he was going to shatter the phone with how hard he was holding it as he let the car roll to a stop. Kieran had one of his knives clenched tightly in his hand as if he were ready to use it in the next breath. And Maverick and I were in varying stages of preparation, ready to carry out whatever order came next.

He was holding one of his guns in his lap, knuckles white where they wrapped around the grip, and I was listening for every sound coming from the phone as I reached for my own.

"Sorry for what, Lily? Where are you?" Dare asked, the question filled with a whisper of apprehension and warning to whoever had made his wife sound like this.

"She wouldn't—" A strangled noise left Lily before she began rambling.

“God, I tried, but she wouldn’t come to Holloway. She wouldn’t come, and I kept calling to make sure she was okay, but she stopped answering, and then she wasn’t at Brooks. So, I came to check—”

“Who?” The question ripped from Dare on a horrifying breath as a disbelieving curse left Maverick. The soft word seeming to claw through my chest in a slow, agonizing way.

The silence after a grenade goes off near you—full and piercing and so damn disorienting—that’s what it felt like as we waited for Lily to answer.

Because there was only one of us who’d refused to go to Holloway last night, so we already knew. We could feel the loss in the weight pressing on our chests. We were just waiting for the confirmation.

“Your mom,” Lily wheezed. “They came to the main house. They—her body’s here, but she’s gone, Dare.”

Dare’s arm shook as he sat there. Glazed stare straight ahead and strained jaw shaking.

He had to clear his throat again and again before he could finally speak, and even then, his voice twisted with the grief he was struggling to keep at bay. “We’re coming, but you and Libby need to get out of there.”

“She isn’t—” Another agonizing sound left Lily. “Libby went back to Holloway. She isn’t here.”

“Are you—fucking hell, Lily, *leave*,” Dare yelled, the words coming out with a frantic kind of intensity. “You never should’ve gone near the main house, especially alone!”

“She wasn’t answering,” she cried back.

“Then you fucking call me,” he shouted as he slammed his free hand on the steering wheel. “You tell me, and I look into it. You don’t *go there* when there is a threat on our goddamn family. I need you safe. I need you alive. *Fuck*,” he yelled when Lily ended the call.

Dropping the phone, he let it fall and clatter near Maverick’s feet as Dare repeatedly dragged his hands over his face before gripping his hair. “Fuck,” he repeated, this one on a breath.

“They’ll get theirs,” Kieran muttered, but Dare just slanted his head.

“It’s on me,” Dare said as he turned the car to go in the opposite direction, toward the main Borello house. “I knew my mom was too stubborn to leave the Borello house. I should’ve been there.”

“No,” Maverick countered. “Putting us somewhere else was the right move. Especially with the Guerra’s being in on it . . . they know that house.”

More than most.

That's what Dare had said last night once we realized which Borellos had joined Keane Street because Dare and Johnny had followed in their fathers' footsteps . . .

Best friends. Boss and his right-hand man. Well, Dare's dad never killed Vinny, but maybe he just didn't live long enough to.

Still, Vinny knew all the ins and outs of the family, same as Johnny had. And before the theater room that seconded as a safe room had been built, Vinny had helped hide the younger generation in smaller, hidden parts of the main house whenever threats had come.

He knew that house . . .

"Dare," Kieran began, sounding hesitant for, I think, the first time ever, "I'm not dismissing your pain and anger, but you said it earlier: Something doesn't feel right about this."

A wounded laugh left Dare. "We were missing a letter and a body. Now we have both."

"We've been thinking they were building up to something huge after they finished spelling out either *traitor* or *traitors*. And this—"

"Killing my mom isn't huge?" Dare seethed at Kieran's unconvinced tone, one of his hands smacking his dashboard to emphasize each word. He slammed on the brakes, the car fishtailing slightly on the slick road. In the next second, Dare was turned in the seat and had Kieran's shirt in his grasp.

The fact that Kieran let him—that he didn't have a knife aimed at Dare—said a lot of the assassin. Said a lot about how far we'd all come in the past few years.

From killing each other's families to understanding and even sympathizing with each other's pain. To allowing the reactions fueled by grief.

"Going after family is unforgivable," Kieran said, voice low and threatening. "Killing family is asking for war. Clearly, or they wouldn't be retaliating. But leaving your mom in the house for us to find later when every other body was a production? Think about it, Dare. Your mom was *R*. She was the last letter but she wasn't the fallout we've been waiting for."

"It's raining," I said suddenly as Kieran's revelation had me seeing past the sorrow of losing the mother of our blended family. Shifting away from Tree, I smacked my hand on the back window and echoed, "It's raining."

"We fucking see that, Diggs," Dare ground out.

“And Kieran’s right,” I snapped back, then gestured for him to drive. “Get to the house. Call Lily.”

Dare’s glassy eyes narrowed on me for only a second before my desperation had him turning and slamming the car into drive again.

“The others were a big show they made sure we would know about—that they left obvious signs for so I could and *would* track them,” I explained as Maverick called Lily.

Curling my hand around Tree’s when I felt her still-as-stone body beside mine, I tried pouring my strength into her when I already felt like my soul was struggling. Limping just to keep going as the realizations hit harder and heavier.

“And we’ve been feeding right into it,” I added solemnly. “They knew exactly what we’d do when we found the messages in Willow’s apartment and on my bike because we’ve been showing them with all the bodies they’ve left. I track. The three of you follow after searching the houses. Einstein comes later. Clockwork.”

Maverick looked nervously at Dare and then at me when Lily’s voicemail picked up, but Dare just pressed harder on the gas.

“They’ve been thorough in everything, they’re not on a schedule, and everyone’s known this weather was coming,” I continued as my brother tried again, fear exploding inside me as I hurried to explain the rest of my theory. “They left Sofia in the house because they wanted her to be found *there*. They wanted the four of us distracted so *we* wouldn’t be the ones to find her.”

Kieran hissed a curse and smacked the back of Dare’s seat, yelling, “Drive faster,” as I finished explaining, “They chose a rainy day so I wouldn’t be able to track them.”

“Get Lily on the phone,” Dare barked when her voicemail picked up again, horns blaring as he blew through a red light and narrowly avoided oncoming traffic.

“Trying,” Maverick said tightly.

But just as the ringing once again filled the car, the morning was rocked by a loud *boom*.

In less than a heartbeat, a ball of fire and debris filled the gray sky above the neighborhood we were approaching and faded into a thick cloud of smoke.

As Dare raced down the remaining streets toward the main Borello house, the pounding of my heart reached deafening levels. With each sharp turn, the

accumulating burning debris had the iron grasp on my lungs tightening. With each strained acceleration that sent us tearing through the neighborhood, my mind screamed its denials and acceptances.

And then we made the last turn . . . and a chill as cold as death rolled down my spine.

I didn't register Dare's guttural roar when the remains of the large house that had stood tall and proud for generations came into view.

I didn't notice the wrath and pain that poured from Kieran and weighed down the car.

I didn't hear Maverick's repeated denials or Tree's horrified whispers.

All I could hear was the ringing in my ears. All I could feel was the wrenching of my soul and twisting of my stomach. Because that was Lily's car, blown onto its side on the front lawn.

This was the end we'd been preparing for and hadn't prevented. *I* hadn't prevented it because I'd let myself get distracted. I'd spent the night wrapped up in Willow instead of tracking down the people I knew were behind it all.

The past fifteen minutes would all be a nightmare if I'd just done my fucking job.

The car hadn't come to a stop before I threw open the door and rushed out, sprinting for the burning skeleton of the house with Kieran directly beside me—Maverick and Dare just behind.

But I didn't know what we were running toward . . . the house was gutted. There would be nothing left for us to find.

And from the soul-destroying sound fueling Dare's yells for his wife, he knew it too.

"*Fuck*," he roared against the crackling and groaning of the remains. "Lily, answer me! Fucking *be here*."

Nothing.

I searched faster and faster, stumbling over debris and fighting back my own grief when a strained sob ripped from Dare.

"Lily, baby, answer me," he shouted, voice twisting and sending a jagged blade through me as I searched under furniture and piles of bricks.

But there was no sign of the boss's wife. No sign of the mafia's beloved mother.

Just as sirens sounded in the distance, my phone chimed. A sound I would've ignored if it hadn't immediately gone off another three times.

Hope briefly flared as I hurried to grab my phone, even as something

whispered it wouldn't have been me that Lily reached out to. And then I opened the messages from a blocked number, and that hope and my spirit shattered.

UNKNOWN

R

S

What does that spell?

Happy hunting, Tracker.

I'd experienced death. More than I could remember. It happened in this life.

But this? Taking out two of our family in one hit? Knowing it'd been on me to find the threat, now more than ever because these fucks had *wanted* me to track them?

It made it hard to breathe. Made standing a struggle. Made it feel like I was slowly being destroyed from the inside.

It made me want to offer up my name on a bullet because I hadn't just failed my family. I'd failed my *boss*.

"Dare," I managed through the shards of glass gathering in my throat.

He whirled around, wild eyes looking all around where I stood as hope and devastation battled on his features.

"Where is she?" he demanded as he started toward me.

I tried swallowing again and again before slanting my head and holding out my phone for him to take. "They were the last letters."

"No," Dare mumbled as he came to a stop half a dozen feet away. Head violently shaking and face creasing as his grief exploded. "*No!* Find my fucking wife," he shouted, pointing a trembling finger at me as his tears quickly fell.

"I can't."

"She isn't—*fuck.*" He dragged his hands over his head, clawing at his face and his chest as another anguished sob burst from him. "I did not just lose her too," he yelled. "I refuse to believe I am in a world where Lily isn't. Find my goddamn wife."

Maverick reached for Dare's shoulder only to quickly back away, hands raised in surrender, when Dare pulled a gun on him.

"Someone killed my mom and blew up my house," he said in a low, chilling tone, all while his expression continued displaying his grief. "Get Einstein on it. I wanna know exactly who it was because they're gonna be the first to die."

Maverick dipped his head, but hesitation mixed with his own pain when he began, "Dare—"

"*Get Einstein on it,*" Dare roared, his entire body shaking as he turned his anguish-fueled rage on my brother.

Maverick started picking his way back out of the house as he pulled out his phone. Dare wavered in place for a while before following when the firetruck arrived, slipping his gun into the waistband of his pants as he did.

But just as I took a step after him, Kieran held out a hand in front of me, silently asking for my phone.

And I knew in that simple gesture how worried he was to see what I'd received because Kieran wasn't the kind of guy who usually asked.

Then again, Kieran's world had revolved around Lily for most of their lives. It had to be an entirely different kind of pain to lose someone who had once been yours to love and protect.

"I can't find her," I repeated as I handed him my phone.

He stared at the screen for long seconds before his head slowly bobbed as he gave it back. His tensed jaw trembled, and his eyes were glassy when they flashed my way before he turned and effortlessly found his way out over the piles of soggy, singed debris.

That time, I lingered.

I let the grief and my guilt consume me. Tear at my heart and threaten to pull me under because I could've prevented all of it.

"I'm sorry," I choked out to the remains before making my way to the front just as firefighters entered, already yelling at me and for me to evacuate what remained of the house that used to be our sanctuary.

Like I wanted to be there any longer, surrounded by my mistakes.

I shoved a fireman away from me when he tried ushering me toward the front lawn, ignoring his barking opinions about the remaining dangers and instability of the structure.

I already knew what caused the explosion. From the look of the house, it was obvious. But even with the rain, I could smell the remnants of it. Just as I

knew there wasn't a leak anywhere because everything KSG had done so far had been intentional.

And if the rest of the house fell on me, it honestly might be easier than facing Dare after this.

Dare, who was being held up by my brother as he finally *broke*.

Sofia and Lily—my fault.

Turning away from where the other guys stood, I ignored the gutted feeling deep in my stomach, steeled my jaw, and did what I should've from the beginning . . .

My fucking job.



DIGGS

I took stock of every single person who had gathered on the street and lawns, looking at the destruction in confusion and disbelief. Taking videos and pictures. Whispering to each other. Pointing from us to the house and then to the houses that rested on either side that had suffered their own casualties from the explosion, even if it was minor in comparison.

But they were all people who lived in the neighborhood.

They were all people in uniform.

Sofia and Lily—my fault.

I shifted my head and tried desperately to swallow past the jagged rocks in my throat, but they kept building. Choking me. The weights on my chest pressed heavier. Making it impossible to breathe.

And I fucking hated that throughout every goddamn second since I'd left the car, my soul had been reaching and *begging* for me to return to it. To *her*.

The distraction I swore I'd never have.

But I could feel her in my pulse. In every pained beat of my heart that reminded me of my failure. And with every pull I felt in her direction, I fought harder against it.

Sofia and Lily—my fault.

"I could've prevented it," I managed to say when I felt Maverick approach me, words sounding warped as they climbed out of my strained throat.

"Don't do that shit," he breathed, grief falling heavily from him.

"You know I could've," I argued as I stared at the charred hull in front of us. "If I'd just—"

"Fucking *don't*," he snapped, his voice wavering when he continued. "We had a plan. Sofia made her own decision. Lily—" An anguished sound left him. "Lily knew better than to come here."

"And I could've prevented it," I yelled as I turned to face him, pushing him back when he tried grabbing my shoulder. "We knew who it was. We knew who we were looking for."

"And *who it is* was the reason we were staying away from here," he seethed, his voice low but no less firm. "Lily knew that." He stepped back

when tears started falling, dragging his hands over his face. A hushed curse left him before he met my stare again. “Sofia knew that.”

“My job is to find the threat,” I reminded him.

“Mine is to end it,” he countered. “If it’s on you, then it’s also on me. But there were orders to stay away from this house.”

My head shook as I started looking away from him, but I forced my attention to the ground when I automatically searched out the girl whose name was a steady thrum in my veins.

“You’ll never convince me that this wasn’t on me. And if you ask Dare?” I briefly glanced in Dare’s direction before meeting my brother’s devastated gaze. “Betting he’ll say the same.”

“Diggs—”

“Has anyone called Libby?” I asked over him, my body jerking anxiously as I unlocked my phone. “Because after letting Dare know I can’t find his wife, I figure it’ll be a piece of cake telling Libby that I let her sister-in-law and mom die.”

“Evan . . .”

“So, I’ve got this,” I said before Maverick could continue, shoulders jerking up like I was fine. Like everything was fine.

And then my body betrayed me by turning toward Willow when I’d been doing everything in my power to ignore the draw to her, and I nearly crumpled at the sight of her.

Her confusion.

Her worry.

Her fear.

Forcing my back to her, my head listed like I just might lose the battle in going to her as I pleaded, “Check on Willow for me.”

Before Maverick could respond or leave, I grabbed his arm when I looked at my phone. At the messages I’d received and left open.

“They said *happy hunting*,” I muttered as my mind raced. Handing off my phone to my brother, I turned, stare darting everywhere as I looked for a thread . . . a starting point . . . *anything*.

“They said *happy hunting*,” I repeated, “but we’d already established there was nothing for me to track because of the weather. They said it *after* they blew up the house.”

Maverick’s head shook slowly. “What does this mean?”

“I don’t know,” I mumbled just as Kieran appeared beside us.

“We need to get Dare out of here,” he said softly but urgently.

“The messages Diggs—”

“I don’t know what it means yet,” I said over Maverick, snatching my phone from him and sliding it into my pocket.

Kieran’s cold glare shifted from Maverick to me, but I just looked at where Dare was delivering harsh demands into his phone. His face twisted in agony. His body visibly trembling, even from where we stood.

“I’ll stay behind,” I said, nodding as I did. “See if I can find anything.”

“And Willow?” Maverick asked as if just hearing her name didn’t cause a physical reaction in me. Making my heart wrench and my hands twitch with the need to pull her close. To feel her, whole and safe, against me.

“Get her away from this. Damn it—*gas*.” The last words left me as if they’d been forced from my body. “I could smell gas.”

Kieran’s head listed, and Maverick quickly looked around before focusing on me again. “Currently?”

“In the house—that’s how they did it. I could smell it. I can *still* smell traces of it. And even if the smell was gone, they knew I would know because it’s fucking obvious.” I gestured to what was left of the house’s structure.

Explosives didn’t do that kind of damage.

“What does that have to do with your messages?” Kieran asked as Maverick grabbed for his ringing phone.

I just shook my head because all I knew was the gas was my starting point. I could feel it in my bones.

But there wasn’t a trail of it.

“Babe,” Maverick answered the call, his voice soft and careful, but then his attention was snapping back to me and Kieran, then over to Dare as he asked Einstein, “What do you mean?”

The question had me going still as I strained to hear their conversation.

In the same breath, Kieran’s wrath started saturating the already heavy air.

“Shit. *Shit*,” Maverick hissed as he ran for Dare.

Normally, I would’ve been at my brother’s side, ready for the next piece of information. The next set of orders. Kieran would’ve been ahead of us.

But his steps were sluggish as if he were afraid to know what was being said. And my earlier guilt felt like it’d sunk its hooks into me and was pulling me down as I waited to hear who else we’d lost. Who else I’d failed.

And then Dare dropped to his knees.

Kieran fucking *stumbled* at the sight.

Before my already ruined heart could register this level of Hell we'd been thrown into, a sound wrenched from Dare that changed everything because it was rage and vengeance and pain . . .

It was *relief*.

I stood there. Swaying. My mind a jumbled mess as Maverick raced back to me.

Just before he made it to my side, Dare looked at me. Teeth clenched tightly together as he seethed, "Find her."

I numbly accepted my brother's phone when he shoved it at me and held it to my ear, listening since Einstein was already rambling about vans and cameras. "What?"

"They're trying to lose me; keep up," she shouted, voice frenzied and thick with emotion.

"I don't—E, I don't know what's happening."

A sound of irritation burst from her. "How far back do I have to go?" Before I could respond, she impatiently explained, "I lost camera feed at the main house because of the explosion, obviously. But it shows them putting Lily in a van two minutes before it happened. I'm trying to track the van through CCTV, but they were under an overpass too long, and then three identical vans left it. I'm trying to follow all of them, but I'm only me. Which, you know, is better than the rest of you."

I stared blankly ahead as she continued explaining where each van was going. All the while, those messages and the type of explosion repeatedly played out in my mind.

The gas was my clue.

With each passing second, I was more sure of it than before.

"You're sure she's still in the van?" I asked suddenly, bringing Einstein to a startled stop.

"What?"

"Lily," I said as dangerous anticipation coursed through me, making it hard to stay in place. "Could they have dumped her somewhere between the house and wherever you first picked them up on traffic cams?"

An offended breath left Einstein but was followed by a heavy silence. "I mean," she began, clearly trying to figure any way it might make sense, "if they did, it would've been somewhere in the neighborhood. They wouldn't have—"

I didn't wait to hear the rest of her doubting words. I tossed Maverick's phone at him as I took off. Racing across the driveway and past the person my soul was screaming for, ignoring the need to go to her, for even just a second. And as I sprinted down the wet street, back in the direction we'd come, I fucking prayed I wasn't wrong about this.

I ignored the ringing of my phone.

I ignored the acrid smell of smoke that lingered despite the rain.

I ignored the aggravated driver when I blindly crossed the street, pumping my legs harder and faster, taking me to the far side of the neighborhood.

I ignored every outside distraction while searching for any evidence that the path I was on was the correct one. When none appeared, I reminded myself that they were trying to goad me into tracking something, and the only clue they'd left was a gas explosion.

I was right.

I had to be.

By the time I approached the last row of houses, I'd silenced my phone and grabbed my bandana. By the time I stumbled into the field on the other side of them, I had my gun ready and every sense on high alert.

But even though I slowed, I kept my steps quick and careful as I headed toward the large, above-ground gas main for the neighborhood.

They'd waited for today.

R and S.

They'd wanted us distracted and made sure I wouldn't be able to easily find them.

Sofia and Lily.

And they weren't done.

My fault.

I missed my next step when I saw a faded black bandana tied around the gas main. Rage and worry beat a volatile combination through my veins as my gaze swept the tall, grassy area for the boss's wife . . . and came up empty.

But I forced myself to keep my steps purposeful as I moved closer. Breathing past the smoke that clung to my skin and in my nose. Breathing around the smell of damp earth. Listening for anything other than the commotion a few streets over and the rain falling on the field.

I'd been right . . . and so wrong.

Their words—their clues—they'd wanted me here. But Lily was nowhere

in sight.

And even as my panic grew knowing she'd been taken and was in a van somewhere, relief barreled through my veins because I hadn't stumbled upon her body once I'd made it to the field. I hadn't let her die too.

Taking a second to look over the old bandana to ensure there weren't any extra clues attached or dripping from it, I readjusted my grip on my gun and twisted as if I were still looking for where the threat might be waiting.

As if I hadn't marked where they were before I'd ever stopped beside the gas main.

"Well, God damn. If I'd known you were throwing a party for little ol' me, I would've gotten here earlier," I said, pretending to sound honored. "But here I am. Bandana and all. Ready to play your game.

"Now, I'm not Einstein," I went on and turned at the new scent on the breeze, my eyebrows lifting in acknowledgment when I caught the source, "but you're suddenly into sending me messages, and I like presents, so let's see if I can figure out the reason behind today's Twelve-Days-of-Fucked-Upness."

Pretending to readjust my gun, I gently tapped it twice against my palm, indicating that two people were lying in wait, even as I mocked, "Well, the bandana's super fucking ominous and symbol enough, but you and I are still alive, so we're not R and S. But *Lily*?"

I nodded, buying myself time as I continued moving through the small clearing where the gas main sat, making the same path I'd already made twice before. "I mean, she was our biggest enemy, and Dare chose her over Johnny. He *murdered* Johnny for her. I'm with you. Kill her. And Sofia was widowed for how long and *still* dismissing you?" I dramatically pressed my free hand to my chest and feigned indifference even as all that pain burned stronger than before. "Again, I'm with you. Kill her."

As soon as I saw the muted glint of light reflecting off one of Kieran's blades, I altered my path to end up directly beside where Vinny Guerra, Johnny's dad, lay in the grass.

He shifted to meet my glare, his own gun peeking out just beneath his arm, aimed off to the side.

"See, I've already worked out your fucked up reasoning for taking the people I love," I seethed and watched his wrath-filled eyes flare when I aimed at his head. "But I can't figure out why you wanted me dragged into this."

A cruel smile crept across Vinny's face. "Never could tell you boys

apart,” he said as if we were having a conversation at a table rather than with him face down in a field. “Know you’re the tracker if you’re here first. Just dunno if you’re also the one fucking my ex-daughter-in-law.”

“Was she ever actually your daughter-in-law?” I challenged darkly.

Vinny laughed a soft, grating sound. “Einstein was Johnny’s, which means she was family.”

“Touching,” I murmured. “I don’t think she saw it that way.”

His lip curled before he could fix his forced amusement. “At least I had the decency to wait a few years after my best friend was in the ground before going for his wife. You never were far from Einstein, even when Johnny was still alive. And from what I’m hearing, you still can’t keep your dick on a leash even though you’re married with a kid . . . isn’t that right?”

My smile was practically feral as I finally put together why there had been so many clues for me—why they’d singled me out—from that first body through today.

Vinny was working through all the people who’d wronged him—wronged *Johnny*—and he thought I was Maverick.

My head listed as I pretended to consider him and his words, but the movement was enough to keep Kieran from coming any closer.

“So, you create chaos and fear in the town and within Dare’s businesses, then kill his wife and mom. But not him,” I added, acknowledgment building in my chest. “Let him destroy himself over it all, yeah?”

Vinny didn’t respond, and from the way his gloating expression was slowly fading, I had a feeling he was beginning to wonder why his brother hadn’t ambushed me yet, but he was a little busy being dead.

“Then you made sure I could follow all your trails to know I’d wind up here . . . wrapped up in a shiny pink bow for you to get your revenge.” I held my hand out to the side and shrugged. “Well, minus the bow.”

“Look at you taking over as the new mastermind.” His eyebrows lifted as he nonchalantly twisted just enough so his gun was aimed at me. “Or maybe if you fuck Einstein long enough, her genius starts rubbing off on you.”

“No, I’m still plenty dumb when it comes to a lot of things, and I don’t pay attention half the time,” I began. “But if you would’ve ever paid enough attention to me, you’d know thinking like my enemy and dissecting their tactical strategy is a part of what I do. Besides, asshole, I had scones today. I’m ready to fucking go.”

Before he could respond or act in any way, I dropped my aim and fired.

Considering it was early enough in the morning that most people were still in their homes or just leaving for work, I probably should've been more concerned at the sound of the shot or Vinny's scream that followed.

But I wasn't.

I stayed wholly focused on him, watching the veins in his neck bulge as he cradled his bloodied, mangled hand and struggled to swallow his cries of pain.

"I'm gonna kill you," he seethed through tightly clenched teeth.

"No, but you clearly wanted to," I countered as I scooped up the gun he'd dropped and used it to aim at his head. When I continued, my voice was a dangerous whisper of mocking rage. "What's sad is you had more than enough chances to . . . and I'm not even the brother you want."

The only acknowledgment that he understood my meaning was the slight flaring of his eyes before they narrowed in anger and pain again.

"Don't worry," I continued, "I'll tell Mav you really meant for all this to be for him—I'm sure he'll be flattered. Just as I'll let everyone know Lily wasn't one of your letters either."

The fear that covered Vinny's face when Kieran stepped into view was instant and blatant, but he hurried to cover it and spit at Kieran. "Holloway fucks are getting yours."

"That right?" Kieran asked viciously.

"Let's see that beast inside you, Nightshade," Vinny goaded. "You gonna finish me off, do it. Your princess had that grave waiting for her."

I dropped to a crouch beside him, letting all my anger and hatred and guilt fuel my words when I countered, "If Lily had been the last letter, if she were really dead, your new *family* wouldn't be trying to confuse Einstein with the different vans. If she were dead, you would've made sure there was a way for me to track her, but there isn't. There was only a clue leading here."

A hissing laugh left Vinny, bleeding through his pain and bemusement. "Track her?" he coughed out. "That Holloway bitch is in pieces on your lot."

"Say that again," Kieran demanded as he dropped to Vinny's other side, pressing a bloodied knife against his neck and another against his ribs.

But before Vinny's fear flared across his sweaty, paling face, there was a flash of deeper confusion. A whisper of doubt. A sliver of betrayal. And it had me cutting in, voice lazy as a smirk pulled at the corner of my mouth.

"And here I thought you were just getting tired, but you didn't even know you left someone for me to find who's *alive*, did you?" My smirk widened at

the way Vinny's pained glare snapped to me before focusing on Kieran again.

Vinny faltered, mouth moving desperately before he spat out, "You think you can find her without me? She's dead with—"

Blood sprayed from the force of Kieran's blade slicing through Vinny's throat. And Vinny's vain attempt at seeing another day, hour, or even *second* morphed into a garbled choking noise.

"He wouldn't have told us where she is," Kieran said without taking his stare off the man beneath him.

"I know."

"We have to find her," he said, almost as if he was convincing himself.

"I know," I repeated, then glanced around at the field we were in as if the two of us might've missed someone. "It would make sense for KSG to take Lily because she was an Irish mob princess, and I think James Keane has a bunch of sons around our age who aren't married, right?" When Kieran grunted in affirmation, I said, "But they never worry about covering their tracks—they're direct. They would've taken her straight to Virginia; they wouldn't have done what they're doing to throw Einstein off."

"So, they're taking her somewhere else," Kieran muttered before releasing a drawn-out sigh. "And it has to be somewhere they don't expect her to be able to escape."

"Or maybe they just don't want us following them yet," I offered the possibility.

"They want to be ready," Kieran acknowledged after a beat of hesitation.

"Maybe. But Lily isn't dead," I said unnecessarily, even if just to help my grieving heart and guilty conscience know that at least there was *that*.

In the middle of all this bullshit and heartache, Lily was alive.

We could find her.

Between Einstein, Kieran, Jess, Maverick, and me, we'd done that before.

"*Shit*," Kieran hissed, the word instantly putting me on edge because it was at once worried and defeated and filled with warning.

My body vibrated as I put Vinny's gun in the waistband of my jeans and then gripped my own. Listening and listening for whatever it was that could make Kieran sound like *that*.

"Don't shoot," he whispered low enough for only me to hear.

"Who is it?"

"Bad news," he mumbled before standing.



DIGGS

“Yeah, see, I had a feeling it was something like this,” a familiar, masculine voice said.

I glanced over my shoulder and felt my stomach drop when I saw Kieran’s brother-in-law, Aurora’s husband, the *cop*, standing there in regular clothing. Arms down at his sides. Hands repeatedly flexing into fists.

“Twin,” Jentry said coldly, head bouncing before roughly shaking. “I *fucking knew*.”

“Knew what?” I asked, the warning in my question clear, but Jentry just lifted a brow at me, meeting the challenge.

“You think we didn’t know y’all were into *something*?” he asked with a bitter laugh. “I’m not a fucking idiot, but Jess told me dozens of times how good y’all were—about the good y’all do for so many people. And then I find you like *this*? Fucking hell, what’d you do to him?”

“He’s clearly had a bad day,” I said dryly, gesturing to Vinny’s lifeless body.

At the stunned sound that left Jentry, Kieran asked him, “Why are you even here?”

Jentry looked at me a second longer before glancing at Kieran, palm roughing over his jaw before he gestured to the houses I’d just run past. “I grew up there—my parents still live there,” he explained.

From the way Kieran’s gaze momentarily darted that way, he hadn’t known the house was so close to our main one. Then again, Jentry and Jessica had been separated by their addict mom and an adoption at a young age.

“I came to check on them when I heard about the explosion and heard a gunshot when I was getting out of my car,” Jentry went on, then lifted his chin at Kieran. “Saw you just before you disappeared into the grass.”

Kieran’s jaw worked before he asked, “Did you call it in?”

“Not yet.”

“Ever,” Kieran corrected at the same time I said, “At all.”

“You won’t call it in *at all*,” I repeated firmly.

“You fucking ki—” Jentry drew in a sharp breath and dragged his hands

over his head, jaw twitching as he looked between us. But where most people outside our world would be horrified at what Jentry had walked up on, there was only a depraved understanding that came from living *in* our world. When Jentry continued, his voice was softer but filled with frustration. “You killed someone.”

“Two people, actually. His brother’s over there.” I pointed in the vague direction I remembered Vinny’s brother being, my tone mocking when I said, “And your reaction and the fact that you walked up to us without your gun drawn makes me think you didn’t just expect it of us, but you’re okay with it. So, we’ll take care of the scene, and you won’t call it in.”

An irritated laugh left Jentry. “Everything I am demands that I do.”

“If you knew what they’d done, you would’ve been right here with us.”

The look on Jentry’s face said it all: He *wanted* me to be telling the truth. He *wanted* to believe we weren’t just randomly murdering people. He *wanted* Jess to be telling the truth when she said we were good people.

“Doesn’t matter what they did; I have to call it in,” he finally said. “You know . . . you or your brother were just trying to convince Aurora that everything was fine, that everyone was safe, and then all this shit happens.”

“I told your little wifey *she* was safe if we were staying away from her,” I corrected and finally lowered my bandana so it hung around my neck. “I also asked if she would believe we were protecting the town, and she laughed.” I waved my gun at Vinny. “Protecting the town.”

Disbelief settled over Jentry’s features as he looked between us again. “What, y’all go around playing Batman?”

Kieran sighed as a scoffing laugh burst from me. “Batman wishes he was as cool as us.” I made a shooining motion at Jentry with my gun, dismissing him. “All you need to know is we’re taking care of it; you don’t need to know details. There will be no crime scene. There will be no news story about brothers being murdered—there won’t even be missing person reports. So, you can go and forget you saw anything.”

“That isn’t how—”

“They’ve been kidnapping and savagely killing people,” Kieran confessed, shocking the hell out of me and forcing me to my full height. “People who are connected to the Borellos in any way.”

“Excuse the fuck out of you,” I snapped, forgetting momentarily who Kieran was when I stepped up to him and felt the length of a blade press against my neck.

“Jesus Christ, Kieran,” Jentry yelled, but Kieran continued divulging the facts of all the bullshit we’d been surrounded in recently, all while his murderous glare remained on me, warning me from stopping him again.

“They just killed Dare’s mom,” Kieran said softly. “They’re the ones behind the house explosion—that was Dare’s family home for generations. Right before the explosion, they took Dare’s wife. We don’t know where.”

There was a heavy silence before Jentry asked, “You’re serious, aren’t you?”

Kieran finally tore his focus from me to look at his brother-in-law. “Being adopted into your rich family can’t change who you are. You’re a good guy, Jentry, but a part of your soul is just as dark as Jessica’s—just as dark as ours are.”

Fuck if that didn’t hit a nerve with his brother-in-law.

Jentry’s jaw strained as his hardened stare shifted my way before returning to Kieran.

“Everything Jessica has told you is true—we help people. We help them escape shitty situations. But there’s another part of our lives, and this is that part.”

“And what exactly is the name for ‘that part?’” Jentry asked, clearly already knowing but wanting us to say it.

Kieran just slanted his head as if he had no intention of indulging that question. “But this part of our lives? We only do it to protect our family and to help others.”

Jentry looked between us before saying, “There is a legal way to do things. There is a judicial system.”

“Not in our world,” Kieran said simply.

Another aggravated sigh left Jentry before he moved, walking slowly through the tall grass to look for Johnny’s uncle.

“The hell do you think you’re doing?” I asked Kieran while watching Jentry’s every move.

“Solving a problem we’ve avoided too long.”

“Not your call to make,” I hissed, reminding him of his place in our family. “And this? Jentry? Not a discussion he should be part of *ever*.”

“Which of us was trained to take over an entire mob family?” Kieran asked darkly, forcing my attention to him long enough to see the cold warning he was sending my way. “I know what I’m doing, and I know *him*. Trust that.”

I'd trust Kieran to have my back in life-and-death situations. But after this conversation, I couldn't trust him to keep us safe if he was telling civilians the ins and outs of our dark world that were supposed to remain hidden from them.

"Your world," Jentry said as he started toward us, the words seeming to taste bitter as they fell from him. Slanting a glare at us, he asked, "What exactly is 'your world?'" The question pure expectation as if he knew he would trick us into answering one of these times.

"Unicorns and magic rainbows, five-oh," I bit out before Kieran could make things worse by telling the fucking cop that we were mafia. "*Harry Potter* shit."

Jentry just watched me for a second longer before looking expectantly at Kieran. When neither of us gave, he asked, "So, how does this work? I do what you say or end up like these guys?"

A scoffing laugh left me, but Kieran was the one to speak. "We aren't going to kill you, but you aren't calling this in either."

Jentry's head roughly shook. "I'm not going to be a dirty cop just because my sister married—" He gestured to Kieran, struggling to find the words before giving up. "I won't work for whatever you are."

"Not asking you to," Kieran assured him, then gestured between himself and me. "None of us work with cops. But it's safer if you and Rorie stop looking into things you shouldn't. It's easier if you understand things like *today*. Because I fucking promise you, this town is safer now that these brothers are dead."

When Jentry wavered too long, I added, "What Kieran said earlier? This isn't an everyday part of our lives—it's as needed. Even then, it's only to help others and protect our family. And so you know, *your family* has been included in that before."

Shock and something close to horror coated Jentry's expression as his stare snapped to Kieran.

"Events like *today* have directly saved you, your wife, and your kid without you even realizing it because we clean up these messes," I continued. "The people in this town feel safe because of what we do and because police don't get involved. Understand?"

"My family?" Jentry asked Kieran, sounding like he didn't know if he wanted to rage at him or was about to get sick.

"It's dangerous to be connected to us," Kieran replied simply, the

pointless reminder like a punch to my gut that I tried to ignore.

I couldn't lose focus. Not now.

But damn it if my gaze didn't briefly drift to the line of houses, searching for the girl who wouldn't be there.

Jentry muttered a curse and dropped his head back to face the sky. "What are you?" he asked without looking at us.

"Your brother-in-law," Kieran answered smoothly.

"Hungry," I added numbly as the need to check on Willow grew stronger and stronger.

A bitter laugh bled from Jentry as he let his head fall with a bouncing nod. "If my wife and son have been dragged into shit like this, and if you want me to walk away without calling it in, then I wanna know." He held up a hand before either of us could respond. "I know—Aurora and I are pretty sure we know. Just fucking tell me."

"I'm your brother-in-law," Kieran said unwaveringly.

"You think it's dangerous being connected to us?" I asked, unable to keep the urgency from my tone. "That danger magnifies once you get the answers you're looking for because then you're in something you can never truly escape, and other people will *know that*. Understand? So, Kieran's your brother-in-law. I'm fucking hungry. You and your wife need to stay out of our goddamn business. And we're done here."

For a long time, Jentry didn't move or speak. When he did, it was to send a questioning glare at Kieran. "And Jess knows? Everything," he hurried to add. "Not the watered-down version you're trying to give me."

"It's how I met her," Kieran confirmed.

At that, Jentry gave a decisive nod and said, "Then how do we clean this up?"

"No," Kieran and I said at the same time, but Jentry already had his hands raised as if he expected the retaliation.

"I'm already involved because now I know whatever shit you're involved in puts my family in danger. And knowing my twin sister is in on this?" He rubbed at his chest, his gaze pulling away momentarily just as my phone went off with a string of messages. "She's had to deal with enough without me there to help her. I need to be there for her now."

"She has me," Kieran said gravely as I pulled my phone out. "She'll also kill me if I don't make you leave."

A breath of a laugh left me as I opened the messages, even though I knew

Kieran was probably telling the truth.

MAVERICK

Police and fire chief are done talking to Dare about the house.

Where the hell did you go?

Is Kieran with you?

“I’ll deal with her,” Jentry said dismissively as I tapped out responses.

ME

Gas main in the field just outside the neighborhood.

Vinny and his brother were waiting for me.

Kieran took care of them but we have company . . .

My phone rang seconds after I sent the last message, and I hurried to accept the call as Kieran and Jentry continued fighting their sides.

“Jessica’s brother,” I said in way of answering, already knowing that would be what Maverick and Dare wanted to know. “He’s seen things.”

“Understood,” Maverick muttered. “We’ll be there in a minute.”

“Lily?” Dare asked, voice strained and sounding in a way I hadn’t heard from him in so damn long—taking me back to that time when his fiancée had been ripped from their bed and murdered right in front of him.

“Nothing,” I said softly. “From what Vinny said and his reaction, Lily was supposed to be in the house. Shocked the hell out of him when I told him she was alive.”

The silence that filtered through the call was all deep relief and unrestrained rage. “Find her.”

“We will,” I assured Dare before ending the call and taking the few steps back to where Kieran and Jentry were still clearly at a standoff. “If you aren’t

gone in the next minute, you're gonna be introduced to a dark world that thrives on chaos and fear. Your family will be introduced to it."

"I'm not changing anything. Not *my* world or who I am," he said with a stubborn lift of his chin. "But I won't blindly continue through life when my family is at risk simply for being related to some of you."

"Jent—"

"Fine," I said over Kieran. "Dare and Mav are—*no*." The last word came out on a strained whisper when I saw Dare and Maverick clearing the line of houses and heading for the field . . . with Willow right behind them.

Beautiful and worried and so clearly out of her element . . . and about to walk up on a scene with two dead men, a worked-up assassin, and a cop who wanted *in*.



WILLOW

He was pushing me away.

Minutes after whispering *I love you* against my lips, Diggs placed a metaphorical wall between us. Only this time, I wasn't sure he realized it was there. This time, he was close enough for me to see the internal battle in his gray eyes. This time, I understood that look and so much more.

Any outsider to their world could understand the grief, rage, and fear moving through the people connected to Diggs. A family house had been destroyed. A mother had been murdered. A wife had been taken.

After having seen even a glimpse into their world? I knew it went deeper than that.

This was unanticipated retaliation. This was an act of war.

The urgency in the mansion they were using as temporary housing had been palpable. Nearly everyone had been gathered in the conference room since we'd returned, endlessly theorizing and working to find where they could've taken Lily.

The devastation, the rage, the determination . . . I'd understood it all.

But the difference in twenty-four hours had been staggering.

One night, Diggs had kept me close to him throughout their speculations and planning. His eyes repeatedly searching me out as if to assure himself I was still there, even though I'd never left his arms. The next, his hands had curled into fists and crossed over his chest whenever he reached for me. His stare catching on me for long moments before tearing away as if it was hard to look at me, even though he'd remained by my side.

From our conversation the night before, I knew where the battle was coming from—knew *why* a part of him was subconsciously pushing me away. Still, the last thing I'd wanted was to become a distraction to Diggs or his family when they were drowning in their pain.

So, I'd left.

Quietly slipped from the conference room with Diggs' powerful gaze on me and wandered the mansion instead. I'd gotten lost in the different halls, multiple kitchens, and even stumbled upon Henley memorabilia before finding the large theater room where the babies and toddlers were gathered

for the afternoon.

I'd spent hours there, feeding and playing with them and getting to know Sutton and Alexis better while Libby sat off to the side, never saying a word until I started leaving.

"You've been around Keane Street before?" she asked, voice hoarse, her bloodshot eyes wild as they pinned me in place near the door.

"No, not—I mean, yes," I stammered, then hurried to backtrack. "I've encountered them when they, uh . . ." A shiver rolled down my spine at the flood of memories I couldn't seem to escape the past day and a half, and I had to clear my throat before continuing. "A year ago. But I wouldn't put it as *being around* them."

"You survived," she said as if waiting for an explanation.

"Only because sirens sounded nearby."

"Only because you were a *nobody*," she countered bitterly. "Do yourself a favor and keep it that way. Because *here . . . with us . . .*"—Libby's head moved in slow, wide shakes as her attention drifted back to where Alexis was playing with one of the babies—"you'll quickly become a *somebody* to every person with mafia ties. And that kind of mark is a dark beacon that follows you no matter how hard you try to escape it."

My head dipped on a delay even though she wasn't looking at me. "I'm sorry," I said as I reached for the door handle. "I'm so sorry about your mom and Lily."

Libby's dark eyes snapped my way and narrowed.

By the time we'd gotten back this morning, Libby had been completely inconsolable. Blaming herself for not going to the house with Lily because of her strained relationship with her mom.

From her distraught expression then, I was sure she still was.

When she spoke, her voice was low and somber, but it didn't hide the tremor there. "Get out while you still can."

I didn't offer anything in way of response; just slipped out of the room. Once I had the door shut behind me, I pressed against the hard surface and let the past thirty-six hours crash over me.

The man in the neon mask and in my apartment.

The truth about the man I'd fallen for night after night.

The threat inside my apartment and the warning I'd just received.

Dead men in fields and the tragedy that'd hit this family.

All of it felt so heavy. All of it made me want to do what Libby told me to

—leave before it was too late.

But as I stood there with one hand pressed to my aching chest and another to my trembling lips to mute any cry that might escape, I knew with a sureness that surprised me that I was where I needed to be.

Because that *dark beacon* was already on me, practically begging trouble to come find me. Keane Street Gang and the Guerras . . . I'd been no one to them, but I'd ended up in their crosshairs just the same. And there was this feeling like my skin was too tight for my body that warned it wasn't over.

Not now. Maybe not ever.

But even if there were no beacon and if there'd been no Keane Street, there would always be something that stopped me from leaving.

Because I loved Diggs too . . .

The way he effortlessly shifted from ridiculous arrogance to commanding adoration. The intoxicating energy that flared when we were together and ached when we were apart. The confidence that he would always come back to me, no matter what barrier he placed between us that day in an attempt to keep me safe.

“Willow—”

I jolted away from the door at the unexpected voice.

“Hey, sorry. Just me,” Jess said, taking a step away and lifting her hands in a placating gesture when her greeting nearly sent me spiraling. “Sorry. I didn't mean to scare you.”

“Hey-hi,” I stammered awkwardly and fought the urge to roll my eyes at my inability to keep my composure.

Logically, I knew I was safer in that house than ever before. But my heart was racing and ice-cold fear was rushing through my veins as I struggled to catch my breath. Almost as if some subconscious part of me had anticipated a neon mask to pop out of the shadows at any moment.

“Is everything okay?” I asked, then hurried to add, “Wait, no . . . sorry; that's so insensitive. I just meant—”

“It's okay,” she said over me as an understanding smile pulled at her lips. “I know what you meant, but I don't know if there's news. We've been checking Diggs' apartment and yours to see if there were any other signs than what you saw this morning. There weren't,” she added quickly.

I glanced down the hall when she did, not seeing anyone else as she continued.

“We brought your car back. Kieran has your keys and school stuff.” She

added the last on a whisper, complete with a conspiratorial wink. “I can’t imagine Diggs will let you out of his sight any time soon, but these guys need to be challenged every once in a while.”

She lifted one of her shoulders as she turned to walk away, her hushed laugh fueling her next words. “So, in case you’re anything like me, I wanted to give you the chance to defy whatever rules Diggs tries setting. Besides,” she added as she turned to walk backward, her eyes dancing with mischief, “if you *do* go to work, you won’t be alone or in danger.”

Right. Jess hides in the school . . . weird.

Funny how just that morning, I’d been fighting with Diggs about why I *needed* to be at the school. But then a house had exploded.

The idea of going to work seemed asinine after today’s devastations, but that would fade. I would crave the distraction of work in the coming days. Soon enough, I would want to be there simply because I loved it. And I had no idea if Jess was right—if Diggs would try keeping me from work for even longer.

Still, I said, “I appreciate it,” as I followed her to the end of the hall where Kieran waited just around the corner, my bag clinging to his fingertips. I awkwardly took it from him, hesitation pulsing from me when I realized they’d gotten exactly what I needed. “Do I want to know how y’all knew I needed this bag?”

“No,” Kieran mumbled, earning a hissed “Stop it,” from Jess as she smacked his stomach.

“You and Diggs were talking about it when you came into the kitchen this morning.” Jess rolled her eyes and gave Kieran a dry look, but he just shrugged unapologetically. “We heard you.”

“I see.” The corners of my lips twitched as I looked between them, a weak tease pushing out my next words. “Much less creepy than any alternative I was coming up with.” Lifting the bag slightly at my side, I started walking away from them. “Thank you.”

“Find me when you wanna get out of here,” Jess called out as she wrapped her arms around Kieran’s neck, smiling widely at me as she did. “I’m happy to be on Willow-duty.”

A laugh tumbled from me at the way she made the words sound like a rebellious girls’ day out and a babysitting job all at once. “I’ll let you know.”

But as I navigated the large house, I wondered if I would. Not that I didn’t intend to go back to work; I did. I just couldn’t imagine using Diggs or

anyone in his family for something as ridiculous as *watching me* so I could.

I'd just decided on hiding the bag and not pressing the issue until they got Lily back when I finally located the room Diggs and I had shared the night before. But the bag slipped from my fingers when I found him already inside.

Furiously packing my suitcase.



DIGGS

I couldn't concentrate.

Not on the people around me, desperately whispering and strategizing. Not on the conference room I was sitting beside my brother in. Not on the blueprints on the screen in front of me. Because Willow had left *hours* ago and still hadn't returned.

My gaze darted to the closed door of the room before snapping to the screen again as I tried focusing, but I was restless with the need to find that girl. To pull her close. To pour all my comfort onto her and let her try to ease some of my pain. To get her far away from me if it meant she was *safe*.

"Shouldn't have sent her away," Maverick mumbled from beside me as he studied the same prints.

"I didn't," I snapped.

"Well, she's still here somewhere; you can fix it later," he whispered, then lowered his voice in reprimand when he added, "Focus."

I was trying. I wanted to. I knew I *needed* to.

Einstein had finally followed all the vans back to a fenced-in lot of more of the same. Minutes after the last arrived, multiple cars had raced out of the lot and driven straight to the warehouse district of Richmond, where KSG's pride and glory stood like a red-bricked siren song of sin and depravity.

A place Maverick and I didn't know because we'd never been there.

None of us had ever had reason to because the KSG had always given us a wide berth before now.

And now? We were learning and memorizing every entrance into the building, from the roof to the front door. Every interior door, hidden or otherwise. Every room. Vent. Tunnel.

At least, Maverick was learning it.

I was fucking struggling under the war my mind and heart were waging over the distraction I couldn't afford and the girl I needed to breathe.

"Twins," Dare said in question.

Maverick waited a few breaths, giving me the chance to answer, before saying, "Getting there."

"Should've already had it," Dare countered. "I need you two ready to go."

I felt more than saw the way Maverick glanced at me before he said, “We’re getting it. We can study it on the way if you wanna go now.”

“Diggs,” Dare hissed, and my attention shifted to the frustration and disappointment dripping from him. “Snap out of it. Don’t make me pull you from this.”

“You’re not pulling me from shit,” I said numbly before letting my eyes drift back to the screen. “I’ve got her.”

Just as he was about to argue, we all looked at Einstein when her phone began ringing.

“Richmond number,” she said slowly, then shared a quick look with Maverick when Dare gestured for her to answer it. Once the call was answered and on speaker for the rest of us to hear, she offered a bored, “Yes?”

“Einstein.”

At the sound of Lily’s voice, Dare swiped the phone from Einstein as the rest of us rushed from our spots at the long table to get closer.

“Lily,” Dare breathed in pain and relief. “Fucking hell, I—”

“I need to talk,” Lily said on a rush, the words coming out soft and shaky.

“Did they hurt you?” Dare demanded, and it felt like Conor, Maverick, Einstein, and I all held our breaths as we waited for her response.

A hushed, pained sound filled the room, contradicting her next words. “No. No, but—”

Conor had pushed from the table at her response, phone in hand, but paused at the next grieving sound that left her.

“Dare, you have to listen,” she pled softly. “Is Einstein tracking the call?”

“Already had you locked a while ago,” Einstein answered. “We’re about to come get you.”

“Don’t,” Lily warned harshly, sending an ominous threat through the room. “They *want* you to come out here.”

“Babe, that isn’t anything new for—”

“I’m not who they want,” Lily said over Dare. “They told me everything and left a phone near me. They *wanted* me to call because they know I can get you out here. They know you’ll make the trade, but you can’t.”

Dare’s narrowed glare touched on the four of us before he said, “Who do they want?”

“They weren’t supposed to take me,” she confessed shakily, a quiet sob leaving her when she continued. “Vinny Guerra wanted me in the house

when—God, Dare. The house. Your *mom*.”

“Who do they want?” Dare repeated, voice taking on a hardened edge.

A sound of hesitation and harried worry filtered through the phone. “Who’s there?”

“Conor, Mav, Diggs, and E,” Dare rambled quickly, looking more anxious the longer she delayed telling him.

“Lachlan?” she began, sounding so damn remorseful. “He’s James Keane’s oldest. He wants Willow.”

Felt like the world dropped out beneath me at her confession.

The roaring in my ears and rage burning a path down my chest drowned out everything for long seconds before Maverick tightly gripped my shoulder and muttered, “He won’t get her.”

My gaze snapped in his direction as a deep panic threatened to overwhelm me. As that dull echo to get Willow far from me exploded into a *need*. But Maverick’s hold just tightened.

“She’s still here,” he reminded me. “She’s safe.”

She’s still—fuck.

“. . . when her boyfriend was murdered,” Lily was explaining when I struggled to focus on the conversation again, but my mind raced.

Willow’s still here.

“Vinny gave them locations for each of the letter victims and said the last location was important. Said it had to be their last mark because the apartment belonged to—well, a Borello whore,” Lily said, the last coming out on an apologetic whisper because she knew I was listening. “Vinny, Lachlan, and a few others were checking the complex and building when Lachlan ran into Willow and apparently recognized her.”

Willow’s in danger.

“He said he wants the girl who can survive them and who’s wanted by so many of us.”

Fuck that.

“And Lachlan knows I’m worth more to you than she is, so they took me instead of killing me.”

A warning growl built in my chest when Maverick slammed me into the closest chair as if he’d known I was about to react to Lily’s words.

Dare’s glare shifted our way just as Lily added, “Do *not* leave the house.”

“Lil—”

“They’re waiting,” she argued. “They’ve planned everything—including

this call.”

“I’m not fucking leaving you there,” he shouted over her.

“She knows you’re not,” I snapped and shoved Maverick away when he tried stopping me. “You really think Lily’s worried we aren’t coming for her? Jesus, Dare, she *knows* we’re coming. She also knows what happens when we do.”

I gestured to the phone he was holding, my words like grated steel when I continued. “Keane Street murders at random, but all this shit has been so damn calculated. You honestly think Lachlan fucking Keane ever once considered I’d let you *trade* Willow for Lily? They aren’t just waiting for us to come for Lily,” I seethed. “They’re waiting for us to leave Willow *here*. Alone.”

Dare just watched me, not giving any indication as to what he might be thinking before he vowed, “We’re coming to get you.”

“Dare, *no*,” Lily cried. “It’s a trap. Do not go—”

“Lil?” Dare muttered when the call abruptly ended, a whisper of worry coating her name. His fear-fueled curses followed me as I pushed from the table and stalked from the room, ignoring Maverick’s attempt at stopping me.

I was too restless. Too anxious. Too *scared*.

“Fucking try,” I challenged when a firm hand clamped down on my shoulder halfway down the hall, my narrowed gaze snapping back to find Conor there, keeping me in place. “Try to stop me.”

He held his free hand up in a pacifying motion. “You think I don’t get it?” he asked solemnly. “Every one of us has felt your fear before. We’re feeling it now.” That hand hit his chest as if the entire situation was slaying him. “My job was to protect Lily for *years*. I would do anything for her. Trading anyone—or even putting them in danger—isn’t one of them.”

“Then get your hand off me.”

“We’ll keep Willow safe,” he said as he released me. “Kieran and Jess just got back—they’re looking for her.”

My head shook wildly as I slowly continued down the hall. “No, see, *safe* isn’t good enough anymore. KSG’s after her—a Keane *wants* her—so I need you to relocate her. I need her removed from our world permanently.”

Conor’s expression shifted, doubt and understanding flashing there. “You don’t want that.”

“Bet.”

“Diggs—”

“This is what you fucking do,” I nearly shouted. “This is what you all do. You move women to keep them safe. She isn’t safe. Fucking *move her*.”

Conor went to say something and blew out a harsh breath instead. After a moment, he shrugged and said, “No.”

My shoulders sagged at the small but profound response, the word forcing a betraying wheeze from me.

With every person in this blended family, I’d never questioned a request or demand. I’d just done what was needed.

Always ready to go. Always ready to sniff out danger on the way to save whoever needed it. Always ready to take the first, second, and third bullet. Always there for the people who meant the most, even if I didn’t totally agree with it. Their decision. Their consequences to deal with.

It usually worked out in the end anyway.

So, for any of them to refuse the only thing I’d ever asked for? It hurt more than I would’ve expected it to.

“And what happens when Lachlan Keane decides he’s ready for her?” I asked gravely. “Because I’ll be in the thick of it, unable to protect her. Not only that, I won’t be able to *focus* because I’ll be so goddamn worried about where she is and if she’s okay.” I gestured irritably at him. “For fuck’s sake, your job is protecting women, and you *still* almost got yours killed.”

The warning look that flared in his eyes slowly dimmed when he said, “You knew what you were dragging her into when you introduced her to this world. Knowing you? You didn’t make that decision lightly, so you won’t be able to truly let her go if we move her. You’ll just keep bringing her back because you’ll keep finding her.”

My head shook even as the constant roar of her name in my veins shouted that she was mine. Mine to protect, mine to take care of, mine to *keep* . . .

Forcing it all back, I muttered, “Talk to Einstein. I want Willow relocated with a new identity within the hour,” before turning and storming down the hall and through the mansion.

Soul shredding and heart wrenching as I focused on nothing else but making it to the room I was sharing with Willow.

When I found it empty, I grabbed her bag and just stood there for a moment. Gripping the canvas material in my trembling hands as indecision tore at me and mixed with all the other bullshit from the day.

But I was doing the right thing. I had to be.

Allowing myself to want and have her was one thing—one incredibly

dangerous thing. It opened her eyes to this world. It made her a target. But for her to already be *marked*? For her to be wanted by someone as ruthless as the oldest son of James Keane?

I couldn't let her live in that fear.

More than that, I couldn't let her end up in his hands.

Tossing the bag on the bed, I rushed through the bathroom and bedroom, grabbing everything of hers and packing as quickly as I could. Never stopping, even when Willow's wounded voice floated over to me and tore at the remnants of my soul.

"Diggs . . ."

I'd known she was there. I'd heard her soft footfalls coming down the hall. But even if I hadn't, the way her pain had amplified all that vanilla and lavender as soon as she noticed me would've let me know who'd entered the room.

And as much as my body begged me to look at her, to go to her, to do *anything*, I continued my frantic packing.

"I know what you're doing, but you can't do this," she claimed when I began zipping her bag, a waver to her words that cut me open. "You can't push me away because of what happened. You asked me to handle you, and I am. Even after today."

"Today?" A laugh that was agony and ruin clawed from somewhere deep inside me, and then I was looking at her. My body moving involuntarily because I *needed* her.

But I needed her safe more.

Gritting my teeth, I said, "Today was a reminder of why *I* can't handle *you*."

Her head jerked back at the clearly unexpected twist on my words, but just as her lips parted, I continued.

"Today has been countless reminders of why my life was better before I met you." The lie fell like the heaviest kind of sin, but it left her stunned. Breathless. Gaping. "*That* is why I'm 'pushing you away.'"

Grabbing her bag from the bed, I started toward her. My body twitched with restless needs and demands, and reeled from the chaotic storm of pain and confusion and humiliation that burst from her once I'd forced myself *past* her.

I staggered back a step when I rounded the doorway and found Dare there, arms folded over his chest and disappointment dripping from him. But

I only had a second to worry over the fact that he'd been able to walk up on me before he was muttering demands under his breath.

"We're gearing up. Get downstairs and get your head straight."

"She—"

"Downstairs," he said over me, his dark eyes locking on me and conveying his frustration.

With a nod, I left.

Ignoring the way it felt like I was breaking. Ignoring the undeniable need to go back to the girl I'd just walked away from. Ignoring her shattered expression playing out in my mind like my own personal nightmare.

She would be safe, and I'd do my job.

It's for the best.



WILLOW

A vicious, critical blow. That's what his words had been.

I turned in a daze, my brain numbly begging me to follow Diggs. And realized long after I should've that I still wasn't alone in the room—except the man in the doorway wasn't the man I wanted to see.

Dare was there. Arms folded over his chest. Handsome face looking worn and haunted, clearly expressing the hundreds of demons he'd been fighting throughout the day.

I understood that far too well.

His dark eyes drifted around the room before locking on my face. His voice soft and almost thoughtful when he said, "You aren't going anywhere."

A breath that was equal parts humor and devastation burst from me. "If it's because you think I'll tell someone about . . ." I waved my hand at him. "You know . . . *you* or this or the rest of the people here; I swear to you, I won't. But I can't—" My jaw trembled as tears pricked at my eyes. "I was just told in no uncertain terms that Diggs doesn't want me, and you can't ask me to stay here, reliving that heartbreak over and over again."

A rumble of understanding left Dare as he took a step into the room. "I heard. But pushing the people we love away is just part of this life."

"If you heard him, then you heard me." I pressed a hand to my chest when a pained-sounding laugh scraped up my throat. "I told him I was here—that I could handle him and this life. Trust me, he doesn't—"

"So, that just makes all the bullshit between the two of you disappear?" Dare asked over me, voice an odd combination of power and kindness. "*You* have to decide if you're strong enough to stand by his side through all this shit, but *he* has to live with the knowledge that he pulled you into our world. *He* has to live with the knowledge that you are now in constant danger and a target . . . because of him. *He* has to figure out how to keep you safe and not falter in his job—a job that weighs heavily on him."

"Because of you."

His eyebrows lifted at that, but he just said, "We all have our parts. None of us could do this without the other. And they all know I would do anything to get us out of this life if I could."

A bitter-tasting sigh left me, but I held back the retort gathering on my tongue because I'd heard the story the night before. I knew Dare had tried pulling them from this life and that their old enemies had pulled them back in.

Besides, it wasn't Dare I was upset with.

It was Diggs' whiplash and cruelty. It was my heart for getting so wrapped up in him.

"When Lily and I were just starting, I made her think she was nothing to me. I wanted her to," Dare said, surprising me. "I would've said anything to keep her away from this life . . . but I only lasted a few days before I broke down, begging her to forgive me." He gave me a meaningful look, his voice lowering when he added, "I know exactly how much you scare him. I know *why* you do. And I know he can't live without you, even though he'll keep trying."

A muted sob broke from me, my head shaking quickly as I hurried to brush away the tears that slipped free. "How long?" When Dare just slanted his head in question, I asked, "Diggs just packed my bag for me. How long am I expected to stay, showing him that I'm *here*, before I realize I'm just some delusional girl who won't take a hint?"

Dare fought a smirk as he dropped his head, a hushed laugh leaving him before he met my stare again. "Maybe in the real world with a normal man, I'd tell you to take that hint. But we don't live in that world, and anyone in this life who has a soul will do what he's doing. So keep fighting. Stay. With Diggs," Dare quickly added, as if correcting himself. "I'm not giving you a choice on staying here. You have to."

A stunned breath fled from me. "In the real world, that's kidnapping."

"My wife was kidnapped," he countered darkly. "What we're doing is protecting you."

"I'm sorry." Shame coated my words as I remembered exactly who I was talking to and what he'd gone through in just the past twelve hours. "Do you know where she is yet?"

"That's why I'm here . . . why Diggs was here."

"I don't . . ." My gaze flitted from where Dare stood to the empty doorway. "I don't know where she is."

"No, but we do," he countered. "Keane Street has her . . . and they want *you*."

A sharp, bemused sound forced from my lungs but fell flat when Dare's

expression didn't waver. "I'm sorry, what?"

"One of the Keane sons wants you and is holding Lily for trade," Dare said calmly, as if we weren't talking about the very people who had murdered Mike and haunted my every thought for a year.

As if we weren't talking about *trading* a life for a life.

I floundered for a response, but he went on before I could form one. "We aren't trading you. But they won't wait long to see what we'll do—they'll come for you here too."

I stared straight ahead, seeing nightmare after nightmare play out as my shaking hands searched for the bed behind me and my knees weakened. But I only managed one unsteady step back before my legs gave out beneath me and I clumsily landed on my butt.

When Dare continued, his voice was so much closer than before. Softer. Gentler. But every word was filled with the brutal realities of this fucked-up day. "Need you to understand if you leave, you'll be in more danger. If you leave, KSG will continue searching for you in places we can't protect you. Diggs knows that."

My head felt so heavy as I looked over at where Dare was crouched beside me, my eyebrows drawing close in confusion and surprise at his revelation. "Then why . . . I don't understand."

"Because he pulled you into this world," Dare said meaningfully, going back to his earlier words. "Because of him, this wholly different target has been placed on you, and he's trying to keep you safe by *undoing* all of it. But panicking the way he is puts my wife and the rest of us in danger."

A warning chill swept over my body, leaving bumps on my skin at the shift in Dare's tone and the way he was watching me.

Because I knew from the look he was giving me that he wanted something from me. Expected it. And as I sat there, throat constricting and choking me with the words gathering there, I worried I already knew what it was.

"Diggs knows battles and enemies and their strategies, but he isn't thinking clearly because he just wants you as far from this as possible."

"Wha—" I choked over the question, my head listing as I cleared my throat and struggled to take a breath. "What aren't you telling me?"

"If I send Maverick and Diggs, I get my wife back. No doubt," Dare said with a subtle dip of his chin. "I send them with you *here*? With you *anywhere*? Diggs' fear over Lachlan Keane getting his hands on you will

have him slipping up. Faltering. Getting himself or the rest of us hurt.”

My heart slammed painfully against my ribs as a cold fear settled over me. Because even though his words could easily be taken that way, I had a feeling Dare didn’t plan on killing me. Despite Diggs’ insistence on getting me far away from him, I knew down to my soul he wouldn’t let that happen.

But the other option?

“You said you weren’t trading me,” I said under my breath, the words coming out shaky and uncertain.

“I won’t,” Dare vowed. “But as long as you’re wanted by KSG in any way, Diggs won’t be in the right headspace, and I can’t do this without him.” A darkness passed over his face and slipped into his voice when he added, “And I am getting my fucking wife back. Tonight.”

My tongue darted out to wet my lips as my stare once again drifted to the doorway. My entire being screaming in protest at the heavy, expectant silence bleeding from Dare.

This mafia Boss.

This *family* of the man I loved.

“And to make it so I’m no longer wanted by KSG . . . to get Diggs in the headspace you need . . .” I began, trying to sound understanding when I wasn’t sure I *could* understand. When a part of me was silently begging Diggs to come through the door and put an end to this insane plan before the idea could be fully breathed into the world. “You want—”

“I’m *going* to take you,” Dare said firmly.

A shuddering breath ripped from me. Denials and accusations rose and mixed with my confusion. Before I could get any of them out, he continued.

“Diggs is sure they’ll be waiting for when we leave to get Lily—leave *you* unprotected. Which means some of them are nearby,” he informed me. “If I make the call that the trade’s happening and that I have you? Any KSG hanging around here will get called back to follow us—to make sure I take you where I’m supposed to.”

“And how is that not doing exactly what you’ve been saying you wouldn’t?”

“You really underestimate what you mean to him if you think Diggs wouldn’t raze the world to protect you. When he realizes I’ve taken you? Our small lead will be nothing for the rest of my family to take over.” Dare’s voice lowered to a soft murmur. “The twins will have my wife before we make it to the KSG. The hardest part will be assuring Diggs you’re safe and

calling him off.”

“Why not just tell Diggs what you’re doing?”

Dare’s head shifted just enough to let me know that wasn’t an option. “Then his focus will be wherever he knows I have you, not where he thinks you *might* be. Where I need it to be.”

I nodded on a delay as I absorbed his plan, as convoluted as it all seemed.

But I understood what Dare was leaving out—I would still be in danger. More than before.

Because Dare planned on lying to the Keane Street Gang to get his wife back. Not just with feeble words but with promises of human flesh. I understood, of course, but it took me from being *wanted* by this Lachlan Keane person to being in *danger* for deceiving this terrifying gang. Because I had no doubt they would still come for me, just as Dare had warned me about earlier.

Again, I understood because Dare was worried about the now. He was worried about Lily. I also understood a man like Dare was already worried about and preparing for the fallout . . .

“I can’t even begin to grasp this life of yours, but if I know KSG won’t just let you get away with something like that, then you’re very aware of that too.” At the slight hardening of Dare’s jaw, I added, “I also have a feeling you don’t *want* to do this plan because Diggs is your family—you just said that. And making him think you’re giving me over would hurt him. It would hurt your relationship. So, I understand what you really want.”

Dare studied me for a while before nodding. “Except, I would never ask that of any of my family, so I won’t ask it of you. And Keane Street will retaliate . . . someday. But we can prepare for that later.”

“Or I—”

“Willow, if you offer yourself up to Lachlan Keane, we’ll just take you back. Diggs will take you back,” he ground out. “There will be retaliation no matter what we do because I’m not leaving my wife with those fucking assholes, and I assure you, Diggs feels the same about you.”

Small tremors rolled through my body as I considered the different paths and outcomes. As nightmares crippled my lungs and seized my throat.

Just as I finally managed to part my lips to respond with my decision, shouting rose through the giant house, echoing through the floors and down the halls. Sending Dare rushing from my room without another glance in my direction.



DIGGS

“I just don’t understand why—how could you?” Jess yelled, shoving Kieran away as she pointed at where Jentry stood, just inside the great room of the Holloway mansion. “My *brother*? I’ve told you I don’t want him in this!”

“I can explain,” Kieran grated, repeating the phrase he’d been saying ever since our argument over what to do with Willow had been interrupted by Jentry’s unwelcome knock on the front door.

“There is nothing to explain,” Jess cried out, once again shoving her husband back when he tried pulling her into his arms. “You know what this means. You know what this world will do to him. And *you*.” She whirled on Jentry, her jaw trembling through her fierce expression. “*Why* couldn’t you let it go?”

“Let it go that this is your life?” A scoff bled from Jentry. “That you willingly walked into this and *live this*?”

“How is that any different from what you’re currently doing?” she shot back before a sob burst from her. Her betrayed gaze drifted between her brother and her husband before she muttered, “Fuck you both,” and stormed away with Kieran on her heels.

Jentry blew out an aggravated breath before focusing on me as if he blamed me for the entire interaction.

I lifted a shoulder defensively. “Tried keeping you out of it, five-oh.”

“Whatever,” he breathed before jogging off in the direction Jess and Kieran had gone, taking him past where Dare waited at the base of the stairs.

My gaze automatically swept up them, looking for the girl who wasn’t there. Whose pain I could still feel echoing in the hollows of my heart.

“Told Kieran she wouldn’t take it well,” Dare said as if he didn’t know I was dying to know why he’d been up there so long. “He should’ve told Jess as soon as we got back.”

My head bobbed in quick jerks as I made another quick sweep of the stairs. “What did—”

“Gear up.”

My jaw clenched as I fought the urge to ask anyway—to *beg* him to tell me what he and Willow had talked about. Swallowing every plea, I started

toward the hall to do what I needed to, only to come to an abrupt stop when Maverick came barreling out of the conference room.

His mouth opened to say or ask something, but a hissed curse left instead. Slapping his hand against the wall, he demanded, “Where’s Dare?”

I started gesturing behind me just before Dare’s harried “What?” sounded from around the corner.

“Shit ton of KSG outside,” Maverick quickly answered.

“The gate?” Dare asked, at once sounding like he was confirming and worried about what the next words from my brother would be.

“Inside the estate,” Maverick corrected. “Started pouring out of the goddamn trees like they’ve been camped in them this entire time. Jesus, Lily said not to leave the house—that it was a trap. Because they’ve been *right here* waiting for us to do exactly that.”

Dare’s response was little more than inaudible background noise as my gaze darted behind me, to the end of the hall . . . to the path my heart was begging me to take . . . to her.

“*Diggs*,” Dare snapped as if he’d already called my name a few times. Once I focused on him, he seethed, “Clear head or fuck off.”

“I’m here.”

“And so are they,” he reminded me unnecessarily.

I knew that. It was all I could think of because they wanted Willow and had come for her.

Dare grabbed my shoulder and pulled me close, his entire body vibrating from the day’s traumatic events and the adrenaline this new incident incited. “She’s safe. She’ll be safer once this is taken care of, and there’s no one I trust more than the two of you.”

I gave a sharp nod even as that draw to her pulled stronger.

“Clear head.”

“I’m good,” I assured him, even though I couldn’t actually be positive of that.

He smacked my shoulder before pushing me back. “Then take care of this.”

I’d just started begging Dare to find Willow when Maverick grabbed my arm, rushing us both into the large room directly next to the conference room.

The rockstars had turned it into what we called their peacock room—where they could show off or look over all their accomplishments and awards. But this room had been built for war, so that’s what we were using it

for while we occupied their house.

But as Maverick and I tied bandanas around the lower halves of our faces and geared up with enough guns and ammunition for whatever awaited us outside this house, and as he recounted what he and Einstein had seen on the security cameras, I wasn't there.

Mentally.

Emotionally.

I was in a bed in a darkened apartment, asking questions and evading answers. I was falling for that girl no matter how many times I'd told myself not to.

"Where are you?"

"Right next to you," I muttered distractedly as I finished putting the last handgun in my double-shoulder holster, then reached for my rifle.

A worried scoff bled from my brother. "You're quiet as shit. You're prepping like we're about to walk out to our funerals. You're not *here*."

"What do you want me to say?" I snapped, voice rough and low. "They want *her*, Mav. They're here for *her*. And I could've prevented *everything* that happened this morning if I hadn't let myself get distracted *by her*."

"Diggs," Maverick whispered, my name leaving him disapprovingly. "I told you not to do that shit."

"Don't tell me I'm wrong. I know I'm not." A bitter laugh scraped up my throat as I finally met my brother's worried gaze. "And the fucked-up thing? No matter what I try telling myself—what I know I should do—given another chance, I'd let myself get distracted by her all over again."

"This isn't on you."

"Except it is," I countered with a forced shrug. "This morning, you said your job's to end threats—but there's no ending it if I don't find them. If I don't even *try*."

"Not sure you've ever actually tried anyway," he said on a delay, his slow words thoughtful—almost *lazy*—and I stilled.

"I'm sorry?"

He nonchalantly lifted a shoulder as he released the charging handle of his rifle. "I mean, *do you* find them?" He shrugged again before mumbling, "I think you just happen to be there when shit finds us."

"I know what you're doing," I said in warning as he continued.

"You ask me? You just stand around, getting in the way."

"Fuck you, I saved your wife," I shot back, stepping closer when I added,

“I saved you *countless* times overseas.”

“And I returned the favor,” he reminded me carelessly, using the butt of his rifle to tap my side. “Debt repaid.”

“I know what you’re doing,” I shouted, the repeated words lashing from me and snapping around the room.

I knew my brother, and *careless* wasn’t a word that would ever describe him. Just as I knew he would never go into battle without me and vice versa.

“I’d say you could try to prove me wrong, but . . .”—he sucked in a sharp breath—“you’re busy falling apart, and I already know how you shoot.”

I smacked the rifle out of his hands so it swung from the strap around his neck. “See if I don’t drop more of those neon clowns than you and look like more of a badass doing it.”

Maverick just shrugged and pointed to the door. “Prove it, *tracker*.”

“I want pancakes when I do,” I responded easily.

“Jesus.”

“Keep up, *assassin*.” I knocked Maverick’s rifle out of his hands again and started past him, repeating, “I know what you’re doing,” one last time as I did. Only this time, there was an edge to my voice.

One that buzzed with anticipation and excitement and amusement.

Asshole.

“Need you here with me,” Maverick said unapologetically as he followed directly behind me.

I didn’t respond because I knew what he meant, just as I knew I hadn’t been. I just left the room and quickly continued down the hall toward where Dare stood. Perfectly positioned in this large house so he could see if anyone came in from the front or back doors.

It also put him directly in front of the stairs.

But I didn’t look up them. I just rolled my neck as adrenaline started mixing with everything else and kept my steady gait, listening to Dare’s hushed updates as we passed him.

“Conor’s protecting the kids. Kieran and Jess haven’t been seen since her brother showed. Einstein said the window’s still clear.”

“Pancakes,” I said when he was done, nodding as I did. “Pancakes when I show Mav up.”

Dare just released an irritated sigh, but there was no mistaking the relief behind it.

Hurrying past the large main room of the house, we moved to one of the

front-facing rooms and slipped inside. Keeping the lights off, we started toward the windows we would climb out of.

“Déjà vu,” I murmured with a hushed laugh.

“Yeah, except this time, we don’t have to worry about the rockstars.”

I straightened from where I’d been gripping the bottom of the window and turned on my brother. “Yeah, and you cheated that night. You said ‘no guns,’ and what’d you use?”

Maverick’s head dropped back with an irritated sigh. “His gun. *His*. The asshole had a suppressor,” he claimed, reverting to his favorite argument.

I pointed at him and echoed, “Cheated.”

“If I say I cheated, can we finally do our jobs?” Maverick asked as he pushed in closer to the window. When I just shrugged, he leaned close, voice dropping to a grave rumble. “You alive, man?”

“I’m fucking alive.”

Maverick’s head bobbed a few times before he pled, “Keep it that way.”

The small beginnings of a smile started tugging at the corner of my mouth as I reached for the bottom of the window again, stopping when Maverick grabbed my shoulder.

“That girl your heart’s so twisted up over? The one you’re so worried about?” he began, waiting just long enough for thoughts of Willow to slam into me. Clashing with all that adrenaline and anticipation, creating the worst kind of chaos. “These assholes are here for her. So stop them from getting in.”

Stop them from getting in.

Stop them from getting to Willow.

Funny how my every thought today had been centered on that girl, dizzying me up and distracting me. Pulling me away from where my focus needed to be. But with the perfect storm of emotions clashing in my veins and a few perfectly timed words, it all fell into place with an eerie sort of calm.

Dare said I would be able to focus on my job because Willow would be safe—I would’ve made sure of it. This . . . this was how I made sure of it.

Stop them from getting in.

And that’s exactly what I planned on doing.

I’d never asked Maverick what it was like for him when we went into any kind of mission. Even though he’d been a sniper in the military and had been the Borello’s sole assassin for nine of the fourteen years we’d been in this

life, he'd always been quiet about this part of it.

Then again, when it was all said and done, I was too.

We'd joke to alleviate the darkness of our world but never went into detail about what it was like *during*. Because there was something about taking a person's life that did things to your soul.

Dark, damaging, irreversible things.

Guess that's where we would always differ from those born into this life: Dare and Kieran, Johnny and even Libby. The heaviness weighing down those of us who had been brought in didn't seem to haunt the lifers—at least, not the same way.

Maybe because it was already in their blood. Passed down from one generation of damaged souls to another.

For me? This? All that adrenaline, excitement, and humor narrowed into a hyper-focused peace that had worried me in the military. When the Borellos first found us and started using us, I'd realized with a sickening clarity that I was made for this dark world I never imagined seeing.

You set me free in a battle, and I'm gone. Moving through the space with quick, knowing steps. Finding ways through barriers as if they were never there. Marking people as I go—wherever they may be hiding—calling out some for Maverick while taking the others for myself until the current threat to whatever peace we were searching for was gone.

Tonight was different. Easier.

There were no barriers once Maverick and I were outside, and all those KSGs were standing in plain sight, neon masks lighting up the dark like pretty little targets.

Maverick tapped my shoulder, and I was fucking *gone*.

Moving across the lawn with a lethality I'd accepted long ago. And even if I hadn't, I would've made peace with what I was doing tonight because, as I'd been saying from the beginning, this was personal.

To our family.

To *me*.

And I refused to let them have what they wanted.

With a steadying exhale, I gave two gentle squeezes of the trigger, dropping the first neon mask of the night. Letting the KSG gathered in random clumps and uneven lines know we'd met their challenge. Giving them our position.

But by the time shouts erupted and return fire started blindly going off

around the estate, I'd already dropped two other masks beside the first and had veered right, knowing Maverick would've gone left.

I heard him. I knew in the short, rhythmic bursts that sounded so distant that he was fine.

But all I could see was my path. All I could feel was the hard, steady beating of my heart and the familiar weight in my hands. All I could focus on was the next and the next and the next.

Stop them from getting in.

Stop them from getting to her.

"Ho-oly *shit*," I ground out, nearly choking over the words as that steady beating of my heart faltered into a panicked sort of frenzy at the close call. "What the *fuck*? I almost shot you."

"Don't," Kieran said in that gruff way of his as he continued looking around as if he were listening for something.

"Then don't pop up *right in front of me* like a scary-as-shit jack-in-the-box."

Kieran's glare settled on me for only a moment before sliding past again as he informed me, "KSG at the back are taken care of."

I nodded as my attention continued pulling to the tree line behind him. "Makes it easier when the people you're up against meet fights head-on." I rubbed at the back of my neck, my body suddenly restless, when Kieran grunted in affirmation. "Hey, did they only have guns back there?"

"What?"

"The KSG in the back," I clarified. "Did they only have guns?"

Kieran's brow furrowed as if he were just now realizing what I had.

KSG had and used guns. We all did. But they'd always proudly boasted they killed with a more personal touch . . . personal being that psychotic brutality. But anything that could be swung or had some kind of power source behind it—like drills and chainsaws—was more their style.

"I only saw guns," I told Kieran.

Kieran's sharp gaze cut to me before he turned and stalked to the closest cluster of bodies. But just as I started following him, I heard the softest sound of grass being shifted and turned, rifle up and aimed at the cop.

"Why?" I demanded as I lowered the rifle. "Fucking *why* would you walk up behind me like a goddamn ghost?"

"I'm walking," Jentry shot back just as defensively.

"You always walk like you don't exist?" I gestured to him. "I barely

heard you.”

His eyebrows just lifted as he started past me, but I slammed a hand against his chest to stop him.

A harsh, shuddering breath ripped from him. “Get your—”

“Shh—shut up,” I hissed, my eyes wide but unseeing as I struggled to think—to *breathe*—around everything else.

Blood was always strongest to me, and the wind was blowing it toward me. But I was sure . . . I was so goddamn sure . . .

I slowly looked behind me to where Kieran was crouched beside one of the bodies, staring intently at it, then past him to the tree line again.

“I don’t think we’re done,” I said under my breath as I released Jentry.

“What do you mean?”

“You in this with us, five-oh?”

Another harsh, irritated exhale left Jentry. “I’m not in *anything* with y’all. But if you’re asking if I just killed a bunch of people for y’all, then, yeah . . . I did that. Because this protects my sister in ways I failed to do for a long time. This protects my family and innocent people—something I will always stand behind. But I’m not one of you.”

“Great speech from a guy who was ready to turn us in this morning and is now standing comfortably beside us after being thrown into a mafia ambush.”

“Four tours overseas prepare you for unexpected shit like this.”

Fuck if I didn’t hate that I understood that and him a little more.

I cleared my throat and pretended to check my rifle over, switching out the magazines as I did. “Well, I’m about ninety-nine percent sure we’re being watched from the tree line you’re facing.”

Jentry didn’t ask how I knew; he just lifted his gun enough to let me know what he was talking about when he said, “I’m out.”

Pulling one of my handguns from my holsters, I handed it to him and said, “Now you aren’t.”

As soon as I saw Maverick coming around the far side of the lawn, I subtly gestured in the direction I’d continued being drawn to. If anyone was actually waiting in the trees and watching me, at most, it would look like I was gesturing to Kieran.

But Maverick would understand.

And as soon as he fell back and started drifting toward the tree line, I turned and started toward Kieran with Jentry beside me.

“You need to see this,” Kieran muttered as we got closer.

“Not yet,” I said on a breath and watched Kieran change in an instant. Everything went on high alert as he stood, palming knives like they were extensions of him.

But I faltered.

Because I saw what he wanted me to see. Just a glimpse, but it was enough.

I didn’t know the man Kieran had been crouched next to, but I knew the one beside him. Even if I hadn’t, the gray symbol tattooed into his neck would’ve been enough.

He was a Borello. *Ex.* One of the ones who’d chosen to find a new family when Dare disbanded.

“Shit.” I cleared my throat, head shaking as I forced the sight and realization from my mind. As I tried calling back that hyperfocus. “Trees,” I said after clearing my throat again. “Think there are more in there, right in front of us.”

“Think they’re everywhere,” Kieran countered, a whisper of rage leaking into his next words when he said, “That’s an ex-Holloway at my feet.” With a barely-there glance my way, he needlessly informed me, “They’ll know how to get inside.”

My finger twitched closer to the trigger as my heart slowed to that hard, steady rhythm.

Stop them from getting in.

Stop them from getting Willow.

I’d just lifted my rifle when the first shot left the tree line and whizzed past my head.

“You fucks, I like my face,” I shouted as I started toward them, slipping into that peace as I pressed the butt of the rifle to my shoulder and kept my eye trained on the night vision scope.

Easily picking out where they were lying on the ground, maskless, guns in hand and shooting in our direction—terribly.

But just as Kieran and Jentry broke off to check more of the trees and Maverick’s signature bursts sounded to my left, another sound had me coming to a jarring stop.

It shouldn’t have. It was gunfire.

We’d been surrounded by it for a while now.

But this wasn’t sharp, clear firing in the open air. These were rounds muffled by the structure of the enormous house behind me.

And I thought my heart would give out right then because it meant they'd made it inside.

All training and all logical reason fled as the need to rush inside and protect Willow overwhelmed me. But before I could take a step in that direction, Maverick was beside me. Shoving me to the side and barking orders.

"Clear the outside, then push in." When I hesitated, he repeated, "Clear the outside first."

I looked around wildly before my attention fixed on the giant house, my entire being screaming to go there. Be there. Protect what was inside there.

Stop them from getting in.

They were already in.

Stop them from getting Willow.

I'd destroy anyone who got close to her.

"I know," Maverick ground out. "Diggs, I know. My wife and baby are in there. So fucking *clear the outside.*"

"*Fuck,*" I yelled as more gunfire sounded in the house, then forced myself to turn away from where I'd left my soul and did what I always should have.

My job.

Heart steady. Eye trained on my scope as the four of us moved through the hidden parts of the estate before pushing toward the house. That disturbing peace settled over me like a comforting weight as we eliminated the remaining threats outside.



WILLOW

Before that night, the only time I'd heard a gunshot had been the imitated sounds they'd created for film or television. And yet, I found myself surrounded by it. Caught in a warzone cloaked as a beautiful mansion.

When Dare and I had gone running at the sound of yelling earlier, we hadn't even made it halfway down the hall before Dare had commanded, "*Go back,*" in a soft tone that somehow still had me rushing to follow his direction.

I'd paced the length of my borrowed room for what felt like hours but had probably only been five minutes before the first two shots had sounded, immediately followed by another two and another . . .

A smarter person would've dropped to the floor or searched for any kind of cover, considering the large windows I'd been near. But I'd frozen. Again.

Tensed body shaking, head slanted as I'd listened to the quick, almost rhythmic bursts, broken up by the louder pops seeming to come from everywhere and with no sense of reason.

Because as soon as the shock faded enough to realize what was happening outside the walls of the home, I remembered who Dare sent into fights first, so I knew who had delivered those first shots.

It felt like I was holding my breath as those aching long minutes passed, trying desperately not to think about what was happening while also praying I would continue hearing those short bursts because it meant Diggs was okay.

And in the deafening silence that followed, I was sure my heart would give out as I waited for the next sign from him.

But then I nearly screamed when my phone vibrated from where it rested on the nightstand. My heart forced out harsh, unforgiving beats as it and my lungs struggled to work properly as I rushed for the table.

Not realizing until I was scooping up my phone that I still didn't have Diggs' number.

But before I could let my phone fall back to the small table, I caught sight of the lock screen, and it felt like my next breath wrenched from my chest.

The notification had been a text from my mom—something I couldn't care about right then because there was a literal war happening outside the

house I was standing in. But the missed call and voicemail from hours before had me pausing . . . had my world narrowing to nightmarish nights and my shattering past.

Seeing that name on my screen always elicited that reaction.

My fingers shook as I tapped into my voicemail, and I clenched my jaw tight as the detective's deep, familiar voice filled my ear.

"Good evening, Ms. Bennett. It's been a while, but—well, you know."

A sliver of unease wove through my stomach at the implication of those three words because I *did* know why it'd been a while.

I listened as he cleared his throat in that way he had a habit of doing, just subtle and rough enough to make you wonder if the young, irritable detective was aggravated with *you* and always preceding a slow inhale.

"We caught an unexpected break in Michael's case," the detective had gone on. *"I know you moved to North Carolina, but we need you here to look over some things—identify them. Let me know when you can make it back to Richmond. The sooner, the better."*

I was no longer in a mansion, on an estate, in the middle of a mafia war.

I was back in Richmond, watching men in neon masks laugh as they savagely killed my boyfriend. I was falling out of a car and fighting for my life, knowing I was about to die as the one stepped closer like he was ready to end the game. I was on my knees, hands slick with blood, screaming for someone to help like they might be able to put Mike's mutilated body back together.

I was in an interview room, screaming at Detective Higgins because I'd given the police *everything*, and nearly a year after the fact, they still had nothing to show for it.

"Ghosts," Higgins had told me. That was all he'd had to offer other than the delusional idea that I might be ready to move on . . . with him.

And yet, they'd caught an unexpected break. Now.

I blinked away the past, slow to come back to reality and the sound of gunshots that were so much closer than before, and realized I'd sunk to the floor at some point.

Probably good that I had. Smarter. Safer, considering all the bullets. But I was in such a daze that what had seemed so huge and jarring to me just minutes before was now background. Muffled. Because the detective leading Mike's murder was calling me after months of silence.

As if I hadn't already been smacked in the face with the fact that my

nightmares were real now that a neon mask was demanding me in trade, I had *this*. An unfailingly blatant confirmation of that terrible night in the form of a man with a badge and macabre information in a case file.

There had been so many times over the past year when my mind would slip into a dangerous place—one where *that night* had never happened. Where it'd truly *only* been a nightmare.

In those hazy moments just before I fully woke, knowing Mike's arms would curl around me and pull me close. In those weird silences as I moved from one room to another in our crappy little apartment, knowing I'd hear him unlocking the front door *any minute*. In the crescendo of a song, knowing he was about to join in.

Whenever those predictable comforts were disrupted, that dangerous place took over. Because there was no way *that night* had been my life. There was no way I'd lost him—especially *that way*. There had to be some other explanation for him not being there.

And just as I'd start spiraling down a path of those desperate, dangerous thoughts, I'd get a call or visit from Detective Higgins. Without fail. As if he knew when I needed to be brought back to the reality of neon masks and maimed boyfriends.

Uncanny, really. Eerie.

Except, I hadn't heard from him since the day he'd tried kissing me, and I'd slapped him in the middle of a police station before unleashing a year's worth of pain and anger on him.

But he'd called *today*. He wanted me to come to Richmond today of all days. And I was sure—*so sure*—I'd never once mentioned to him *where* I was moving.

Eerie.

I glanced down at where my phone was cradled tightly in one hand in my lap, the voicemail screen still pulled up, and tapped on the message to replay it. Listening to the hushed dips and rises of his voice without ever lifting the phone to my ear.

And then again.

Trying to find some hidden message within his words. Vainly trying to pry whatever *break* they'd caught from the recording, as if it might be there the next time I listened or the next. Because I needed there to be an actual break. I couldn't let myself believe Higgins was—

“Willow.”

My head snapped up. My breath came out on a stuttered exhale as the real world broke through the painful, apprehensive bubble I'd found myself in.

"I'm—hi—yes," I stammered as I looked at where Dare stood in the doorway. Barely passing the threshold, eyes on the hall, black bandana covering the lower half of his face, gun in hand.

He made a quick sweep of the hall before sparing a glance my way. "You good?"

"Fine," I said automatically. Numbly.

I'd gotten used to saying the word long ago, and it wasn't any different then.

I was in a situation that was wholly unfamiliar and terrifying, some guy from an Irish mob wanted me, the man I loved was pushing me away, and Detective Higgins was calling.

But I was fine.

"Need you to walk with me now," Dare said in that same tone as earlier. Soft, disinterested, full of command.

I wasn't sure what it said of me that I so easily scrambled to follow his orders, but that was what I once again did. Scrambled to stand on unsteady legs and then hurried to where he waited.

"Grab the back of my shirt. Don't let go," he ordered, already taking a step away from me as he did.

My heart gave a painful wrench as I did what he asked on a delay, rushing to keep up with him at first because he was clearly on a mission, and my soul was begging me to go back to the room.

"I know you don't want to do this," I began softly as we swept across the wide halls toward the top of the staircase. "You don't want to hurt your family. So, I'll do it—I'll go to Lachlan. Just let me say bye to Diggs."

Dare faltered for the span of a hummingbird's heartbeat before he continued deftly down the stairs with me at his back. "Not what this is."

The next time we faltered was because of me.

Because of the two bodies on the floor of the great room.

You'd think it wouldn't be able to phase me, considering the scene was tame in comparison to what I'd seen, and they weren't my first dead bodies of the day. But I wasn't sure I'd ever get used to seeing someone lying there, blood pooling from various parts of their bodies. I wasn't sure people were supposed to get used to seeing that.

"If they made it inside, they can make it to you," Dare said on a low

breath as he paused at the base of the stairs, seeming to listen and calculate our next move. But just as he started moving us across the great room, Jessica came running in, splatters of blood dotting her clothes and skin.

“They went right for the basement,” she said a little breathlessly, eyes wild as she looked between Dare and me before glancing in the direction we’d been headed—where the kids were. “How the hell did they know about the basement?”

Dare’s head slanted before he glanced behind us. “They came in from directions we weren’t expecting either,” he mumbled, voice laced with frustration and confusion as he faced Jessica. “Heard shots from Conor—”

A sound of fear and anguish ripped from Jessica, but Dare hurried to assure her, “Kids are safe.”

She gave a reluctant nod, longing and worry dancing across her face as Dare continued.

“They were just suddenly in here.” From the way Dare’s head was still on a swivel, I realized he expected more to appear at any moment.

“A lot of ways to get in here—I know,” Jessica said solemnly. “But how did they?” She inhaled sharply as she turned, already running toward the large back doors just before Kieran’s cross voice echoed in the great room.

“Dare.” Short. Lethal. Filled with meaning.

I hadn’t realized I was still clinging to the back of Dare’s shirt until he moved from his position in time to see Jessica crash into Kieran in a move that seemed as effortless as it was dangerous, considering the bloodied knives Kieran kept firmly in his grip as he lifted her into his arms.

Their reunion was weirdly uncomfortable for how brief it was, but then Kieran let Jessica slide to the floor as his narrowed gaze met Dare. “Have you seen?”

“What?” Dare asked just as Jessica’s brother came walking up from the direction Kieran had, looking wary and conflicted and oddly at ease.

“Check them,” Kieran said, jerking his chin in the direction of the men behind us, their masks not nearly as unsettling under the room’s bright lights.

An irritated breath rushed from Dare as he turned, head still shifting to take in one hall after another as he stalked toward the bodies with me staggering after. “Outside?”

“Clear,” another man answered, pulling my attention in that direction and bringing me to an unsteady stop.

My hand slipped from Dare’s shirt before I realized the twin jogging

down the hall that held the conference room, bandana still in place and weighed down with guns, wasn't the one who held my heart.

But then a familiar voice sounded that had relief barreling through me and wings taking flight in my stomach.

"I'm owed pancakes for finding and dropping those clown-faced fucks."

As ridiculous as the arrogant statement was, my reaction to hearing his voice was so strong that I nearly dropped to my knees when I saw Diggs slip through the front door before slamming it shut behind him.

Pulling his bandana down to hang around his neck, covered in tactical gear and weapons, and oozing that cocky swagger I knew came so easily to him. And then his gray eyes met mine, and the smirk curling at his mouth fell as his stare shifted back to Dare.

But I'd seen the relief, just as great as mine.

I'd seen the longing and love.

I felt them reaching out to me as he started toward his boss.

"Right, that," Diggs said, then cleared his throat and gestured to the bodies Dare was knelt beside. "So, those are ours. Clearly. There were more outside—Holloways too."

"Wait, what?" Jessica asked from behind me, but I didn't look at her to see the expression that went with the surprise and confusion in her tone. I couldn't look away from Diggs and the way his eyes lingered on me a little longer each time they drifted my way.

He was there.

He was okay.

"Haven't checked everyone," Kieran began, voice that gruff irritation he seemed to always speak in, "but the ones we did were *all* ex-Holloway or Borello."

"The only Borellos in Keane Street were the Guerras," Dare whispered as if struggling to wrap his head around it all. "There weren't any Holloways."

"Vinny said something to Kieran earlier," Diggs said, gesturing behind me as he did. "Something about the Holloways getting theirs. Figured it was because he thought he'd killed Lily, and it probably was," he added quickly before gesturing to the room we were standing in. "But this had to be part of it too. He was letting us know they were coming for us *here* and that it wasn't only personal to Borellos."

"Agreed," Kieran murmured. "From the size of the ambush and lack of Keane Street bodies so far, this was retaliation on all of us from our old

families. The Guerras were just at the head of it, calling the shots.”

“And Keane Street’s been helping because the Guerras had joined them,” Dare said in understanding, nodding to himself when Diggs spoke again from a noticeably closer distance to me than before.

“From things said and done, I have a feeling the Guerras and James Keane started having different ideas about how this retaliation should go. So, if Keane Street even knew about tonight, I doubt they knew a shit ton of ex-Borellos and Holloways came here with their signature look.” Slanting his head in consideration, Diggs added, “If Keane Street *did*, if they allowed it, the ambush had nothing to do with getting Lily back or trading for her because she was never supposed to be taken.”

“Speaking of my wife, she’s still there, and we’re not. We need to get her,” Dare said unquestionably. “So, if you’re sure we’re clear here, then we need to regroup and head out.”

“There’s no—”

“Kieran was shot,” Jessica’s brother said, cutting Kieran off.

“*What?*” Jessica snapped, already turning to inspect her husband as a barking laugh burst from Diggs.

“So was Diggs,” Kieran tossed back nonchalantly, clearly not wanting to be the only one who got hurt.

Just as my stomach began dropping at the news, Diggs snapped, “The fuck I was! That was Mav.”

“Grazed,” Maverick added on an annoyed sigh. “Barely. I’m fine.”

“How did *you* get shot?” Dare asked Kieran, his tone giving away his amusement at the idea of it.

Kieran glowered at Jentry reproachfully. “Knocking this asshole out of the way.”

“I was following you,” Jentry said, drawing out the words as if they’d already had this exact argument outside.

And I couldn’t figure out how this was a conversation I was present for—one where there was amusement and unconcerned accusations.

There was no rushing around. No panicking over the fact that Kieran had been shot and Maverick had been grazed. They were just talking about it like it was nothing more than a minor annoyance in their night.

And there were two dead men just feet away and countless more outside.

“Twins, gear up.”

“You aren’t going without me,” Kieran said before Dare could finish

giving his order, all while Jessica softly admonished Jentry that *this* was why he needed to leave—why he needed to run before he could get pulled in deeper—reminding me of Libby’s earlier warning.

Odd how they all seemed so at ease in this life they’d chosen but did everything in their power to prevent other people from choosing it as well. As if there weren’t devastations and dangers in the real world. As if innocent people hadn’t been the targets of this retaliation against *them*.

“I don’t have time to wait for you, and you were *shot*, Kieran,” Dare said in a tone that rang with finality, but Kieran just stepped up to him.

Challenging and ignoring the intermittent drops of blood dripping from his knives onto the glossy floor.

And I realized with a start that some of the blood was his. Slipping down his inner arm in thin streaks and curling around his forearm and hand.

“You aren’t going without me,” Kieran repeated firmly.

“Or me,” Jessica tossed out brightly before turning on her brother again, pleading with him to go home.

Dare stared Kieran down for a few seconds before nodding. “I’ll give Conor fifteen minutes to get you ready. We’re leaving with or without you.”

“Dare,” a feminine voice said from the hall Maverick had come from, and I turned with everyone else in time to see Einstein lift a tablet a few inches before heavily dropping it to her side.

Her defeated expression had my own lungs straining as I waited for the bad news she was clearly there to deliver.

And despite the day—the exhaustion and heartache and worry and battle they’d *just* come out of—Dare’s voice was a calm, dark confidence that boasted exactly *what* he was. “Explain.”

“We have a . . .” Einstein’s head bobbed unsteadily as a frantic laugh bubbled free. “Well, *problem* is one way of putting it.”

Maverick was at her side and looking at the tablet before she’d finished speaking. From the helplessness in his gray eyes as they bounced between the screen, his wife, brother, and boss, I wondered exactly how much worse this day could get.

“What kind of problem?” Dare asked her when Maverick started toward the front door, gait almost hesitant as he nodded for Diggs to follow him.

“The inevitable kind.”



WILLOW

Another laugh left Einstein that showed every bit of her worry and defeat, but then she gestured between Jentry and me, her lip curling in a sneer when she repeated, “Inevitable. That’s what Kieran said about bringing you in, except that should’ve never happened. This was *never supposed to happen.*”

I slowly glanced at where Jentry stood just a few feet from me, having moved closer once Einstein came in, and took in the bemused set of his brow as Dare demanded a better explanation.

“The rockstars are back,” Einstein ground out. “Here. Right now. Outside with dozens of bodies.”

“What rockstars?” Jentry asked when a whispered curse left Dare.

“Henley,” Jessica said as if he should’ve known that. “The band. They live here.”

“How the hell was I supposed to know that?”

“Because it was all over the news for months when it happened *years ago,*” she snapped at her twin. “It still is.”

Before Jentry could respond, the front doors were opening again to an angry man I’d only ever seen in celebrity gossip pictures before—Maxon James. Stalking across the great room, never once sparing a glance at the dead men as he headed right for our group.

Oh my God.

I wondered if I’d wake up tomorrow, only for the past twenty-four hours to be some bizarre dream. Hell, maybe even the entire past year would be nothing more than a horrifically bad one. Because how could all this be real? How could I run from one devastating life only to end up in this unbelievable one?

Where the man I’d fallen in love with was in the mafia, houses exploded, and mansions were covered in dead bodies. Where my boyfriend’s murderer wanted me as *his*, and famous rockstars were feet away because they were just as entwined in this world as I was.

“Where’s Libby?” Maxon demanded, his whiskey-eyed glare set on Dare.

“With the kids,” Dare replied easily. “Warning would’ve been nice.”

A bitter scoff bled from Maxon. “What the fuck?” he hissed as he blindly gestured behind him to where the rest of the members of Henley were being led into the house by Diggs and Maverick, looking equally panicked and horrified and confused. “They don’t need to know what’s going on, yeah? Fucking told you y’all make that hard. And a *warning*? I’ve been calling ever since we got word of the explosion.”

Dare considered his response for a moment before conceding with a subtle slant of his head, but his tone was unapologetic when he said, “Had other things on our plates than answering your calls, rockstar.”

“No,” Maxon said over him, stepping close as his head wildly shook. “No, your family home *blows up*? Someone needs to let me know my wife and daughter are—”

“My wife was taken this morning,” Dare ground out, meeting the challenge with a coldness that had me taking a step away from them. “My mom was murdered. My house was destroyed. In the middle of all that bullshit, we were ambushed tonight.” With another step closer, Dare asked, “When should I have taken your call?”

“Shit, man, I—I’m sorry.” Maxon’s jaw shifted a few times before he asked, “Lil?”

“About to go get her,” Dare explained, then corrected, “We’ve been trying, but things keep stopping us.” He gestured meaningfully from Maxon to where the other three members were huddled close, eyes wide and hollow, faces leached of color. “Your daughter and Libby are safe, but Libby’s in an unreachable spiral because she left Lily right before it happened.”

At that, Maxon’s throat bobbed forcibly. “Shit,” he breathed, eyelids shutting momentarily before he glanced around as if taking in the scene for the first time. For only a second, he locked on Jentry and me, eyebrows furrowing before he must’ve decided we weren’t important right then. With a harsh shake of his head, he asked, “Where are they?”

“Go with Kieran,” Dare muttered, jerking his chin toward the hall across from where we stood. “He needs to go that way anyway.”

“For the record,” Maxon said as he started in that direction, then pointed toward his band members, “they don’t think they’re being Punk’d anymore. Have fun explaining who you are.”

A ripple of irritation left Dare at the taunt, but he just turned for the opposite hall, barking orders as he went. “Rockstars: Get over all the bodies or call the cops—one’s right there.” He pointed behind him in the general

direction of where Jentry stood as he went on. “Einstein: Update on Lily and KSG. Everyone going to Virginia: Gear the fuck up; we’re leaving in fifteen minutes. No more delays.”

One of the other Henley members, Ledger Hale, watched as Dare disappeared down the hall before taking in the great room again and mumbling, “There were enough signs and mafia jokes that we wondered if you *were*. But this?”

“You were never supposed to see this,” Maverick said gravely.

“Except you did it in our house,” the lead singer, Lincoln Grey, argued numbly.

“You were warned against buying the estate,” Maverick said as if reminding him.

“Because of *this*?” Lincoln shot back, some life returning to his expression and voice. “Because y’all wanted to use it for your own personal bloodbath playground at random?”

“Because it was already covered in blood,” Diggs cut in coldly. “It was mob land for generations, and that world still remembers this place. All the sin, anguish, and betrayal that comes with our lives doesn’t just disappear because someone new moves in. It disappears when the threat’s gone.” He gestured to the men on the floor. “You’re welcome.”

A low laugh started from Henley’s fourth and final member, disbelieving and aggravated. “Let me see if I have this right,” Jared Kerr began, pointing between people as he went on. “You all forced me back to Wake Forest in time to be implicated in a full-on massacre at our house?”

“No one has ever forced you to be here,” Lincoln said irritably.

“Mafia. Cop. Shit ton of dead people,” Jared continued as if Lincoln had never spoken, pointing from the twins to Jentry to the men on the floor. Before anyone could confirm what he’d said, he nodded and turned for the front door. “I need a drink.”

“You can’t speak about what you know to anyone,” Maverick said before Jared could reach the door, earning a stunned laugh from Jared as he tossed a wide-eyed, disbelieving look over his shoulder.

“No shit.”

After a brief hesitation, Lincoln and Ledger followed.

Once the door closed behind them, I looked at Diggs and felt my heart fall into a familiar rhythm that had my eyes burning when I found him watching me.

Gray stare soft and worried, assessing and adoring before he forced it away. “Gotta get ready,” he said, voice thick and uneven as he focused on his brother.

With a heavy sigh, Maverick nodded and started walking backward, toward the hall Dare and Einstein had disappeared in. “Jentry?”

I felt the hesitation from behind me before Jentry finally said, “Yeah, let me check on Aurora first.”

“No more delays,” Maverick reminded him. “You can do that while gearing up.”

Jentry hesitated for a few seconds before slowly following in the direction the twins had gone. Leaving me alone in the great room with two dead men and my vibrating phone.

I was sure I’d been about to have a heart attack the moment I’d felt it go off. But as I slowly reached for where I had it in my back pocket, my pulse hammered harder and harder as dread overwhelmed my initial jump scare.

It could’ve been my mom since I’d abruptly hung up on her the night before and never called back. It could’ve been Cora checking on me since I’d given her a hasty, bullshit excuse for not making it in today.

But the ice creeping into my veins warned me the reason behind my phone going off was so far away from the world I’d known just twenty-four hours before. And as I finally lifted my phone, a defeated, chilling breath rocked me when I saw *Detective Higgins* lighting up my screen.

Tapping the green button just before the call could be sent to voicemail, I shakily lifted the phone to my ear. My body suddenly feeling so heavy and weak as I thought of the man on the other end of the call.

The man I’d thought was safe. The man I’d gone to multiple times each week, begging him to help, hoping he’d have *some* lead on Mike’s murder. The man I’d trusted.

“Detective,” I managed to say around the barbed knot of betrayal and loathing in my throat.

“Ms. Bennett,” Detective Higgins began smoothly, “did you get the message?”

“Eerie,” I whispered as I looked down the hall Diggs had gone, my soul stretching and reaching in that direction, begging me to go to him.

But I knew what his reaction would be. I knew Dare was trying to keep him focused.

And I knew what Dare needed me to do.

“What was that?” the detective asked as if he hadn’t heard me.

“Your timing has always been uncanny,” I explained as I forced myself to turn away from the hall and take a reluctant step toward the front door. Then another and another. “Whenever I was spiraling over what happened last year, whenever I was sure I saw someone in a mask, you would suddenly be there. And now, after nothing for months, when I’m caught in the middle of what I am . . . here you are.”

Higgins cleared his throat in that way of his. The following sigh so conceding it may as well have been an acknowledgment of every suspicion dancing through my thoughts.

“Where are you, Ms. Bennett?” he asked gruffly, earlier pretenses gone. “Exactly. Right now.”

“Exactly how close were you watching me in Richmond?” I asked as I reached the door, my fingers hesitating over the handle. When he didn’t respond, I admitted, “I feel like an idiot for not seeing it before tonight. But no one could’ve had your timing unless they were there with me, which means you were with me. Somehow. So, did you just bug me, or were there cameras too?”

“That’s illegal, Ms. Bennett,” he answered, but the hushed amusement of his tone had chills skating across my skin.

“Is it because I wouldn’t let it go?” I asked over the fear shaking my words and clinging to my spine. “Because I was trying so hard to get them caught? Get *you* caught?”

A breath that was laced with mischief sounded in my ear. “I was never there. You were going to tell me where you are.”

“I wasn’t because you already seem to know where I am. And whether you were there that night or not, you’re one of them,” I said undoubtedly. “You couldn’t find anything for a year, yet the day you suddenly catch a break—one that requires me going back to Richmond—just happens to be the same day one of Mike’s killers decides he wants me. With him. In Richmond.”

Heavy silence fell over the line for a moment before he said, “Timing’s funny that way, Ms. Bennett. Now, about getting you to Richmond—”

“Tell Lachlan Keane he needs to let Lily Borello go and come get me himself.”

My phone slipped from my hand, and a scream of pure terror ripped from my lungs as I was hauled away from the door with a hand clamped firmly

over my mouth. But just as I started thrashing against the person pulling me farther from the door, a gruff, eternally cross voice sounded in my ear, hushed and admonishing.

“They’re here.”

My stare fell to the blood-stained arm guiding me, my head bobbing in understanding.

“Stay hidden,” Kieran said before disappearing from behind me.

Just as I stumbled back a step at the unexpected withdrawal, my body lit up—burning and aching and crying in relief—when another man slipped into place. One I knew, even though the gear he wore changed the way my body fit against his.

My soul knew his. At any time and in any situation, I would know him.

One of Diggs’ strong hands wove around to press flat against my chest, keeping me close to him for the span of two achingly beautiful beats of my heart . . .

And then he spoke.

Voice unforgiving and pained. Determined and betrayed.

“You run, Tree, then you run away from my world. You don’t run to him.”

“Diggs.” His name tore from the depths of my soul when he released me but was little more than a wounded breath as I turned to watch him stalk across the room. Catching up with his brother, Kieran, Jessica, and her twin.

“He’ll understand.”

I glanced to the side at Dare’s voice, my focus pulling away from Diggs on a delay. My brow furrowed as I tried comprehending what he’d said, and after a moment, I nodded unsteadily. “I was trying to help.”

“I know,” he said before I could get anything out, gratitude weaving through the short words as he checked the gun in his hands before letting it rest at his side. “And he’ll understand . . . later. Not when we’re being attacked. Not when the people attacking have figured out ways past Einstein’s security.”

I’d been looking in the direction of where the others were quickly disappearing but faced Dare again at the disbelief and aggravation gently fueling his words.

I didn’t know much about Diggs’ family—other than what I’d learned during their fast-paced, shocking meetings—but I knew from Dare’s tone that getting past Einstein’s security wasn’t something that easily happened.

“They’re all going to the back.”

“Conor’s still protecting the kids,” Dare informed me. “And don’t ever discredit me again.”

I swallowed carefully when it felt like I might start sobbing or throw up right there, then hinted, “The cars are out front.”

His dark stare slowly turned on me, scrutinizing and understanding all at once.

“I don’t have my keys though,” I added, the unspoken question lingering between us like a bomb set to go off as he contemplated what I was suggesting.

“Told you I wouldn’t ask this of you,” Dare muttered, even as a deep longing burned in his eyes.

“And you didn’t—you aren’t,” I said with a shaky nod. “But I was already decided. I’m still decided.”

Dare wavered for a second longer before he pulled out his phone with his free hand, quickly tapping on the screen and lifting the device to his ear as he glanced around the great room and down the hall we were near.

“I’m *blind*,” I heard Einstein shout through the phone, causing Dare to twist fully to study the hall. “My feeds switched to recordings right after you left.”

“Fix it,” Dare ground out as he started moving toward the front door, nodding for me to do the same.

“Why didn’t I think of that?” she sneered. “Oh, wait . . .”

Dare sighed irritably before whispering, “It’s time, E. Give us that head start.”

From the way Dare immediately ended the call before she could respond, I had a feeling Einstein was the only person he’d trusted with this idea he’d planted in my head. I also had a feeling he’d known I would come to this decision.

Pocketing his phone, Dare made one more sweep around the room before looking directly into my eyes. “You will not get traded. We will not let you fall into their hands. Understand?” Just as I began nodding, he gripped the handle of the door and demanded, “Then hold onto my shirt. Keep up with me.”

I don’t know what I expected when he opened the door—maybe for there to be an actual war with explosions and people shooting at each other.

But it was unnervingly calm as he stepped onto the porch with me

directly behind him. There were no masked faces. There were no sounds of fighting.

Just a silence that was as thick as it was wrong.

It could've had something to do with the bodies scattered everywhere—masks discarded beside them. Or it could've been what we were doing.

Preparing to trick the KSG.

Leaving the place my heart wanted to be.

Lying to Diggs.

I stepped carefully through the minefield of bodies, following Dare's path, and felt a chill erupt on the back of my neck when he slowed to a near stop. Bringing the gun close to his chest as his other hand moved around me.

Just as he grasped my arm and started pulling me around him, another arm slipped around my waist and hauled me in the opposite direction. My scream broke off as my back slammed against a firm chest, and then strong fingers were gripping my jaw, forcing my face up.

Except this wasn't Kieran trying to save me when we were being attacked.

This wasn't Diggs unable to stop himself from holding and gripping me tight for even the shortest moment before he verbally pushed me away again.

This was evil and greed. This was sin and depravity.

This was my nightmare because the glow of neon was burning just above my head, and there was a long blade pressed tenderly against my stomach.



WILLOW

“I wouldn’t do that,” the man holding me said, voice familiar and taunting as he looked at Dare. “We have your wife.”

“There are more of you,” Dare said unapologetically.

“But they don’t have your Lily,” the man said, and I nearly choked on my gasp as the slightly muffled voice registered. And then I was clawing at him.

His arms.

His neck.

Screaming as many accusations as I could with how tightly his fingers were digging into my jaw.

“I trusted you,” I seethed as I thrashed in his hold, no longer worried about the knife he was holding. “You promised you would—you were supposed to—you *asshole*.”

I twisted in his hold, sure I only managed to because he allowed it, and swung. Connecting with the mask in a punch that was nowhere near enough.

“Ms. Bennett,” Detective Higgins muttered as he removed the mask, revealing a smirk as if my hit had amused him. “I’ve missed your temper.”

“How could you?”

“Think it’s obvious.” He winked, and then I was scrambling.

Or, at least, attempting to.

But Higgins kept me firmly in his grasp as a handful of people rose from the bodies we’d just walked past. Laughs low and mocking and completely unhinged. Gathering their masks and a variety of weapons as they turned toward us.

Two gunshots rang out through the weighted silence of the night, making me jerk just as one of the undead KSGs hit the ground.

“I wouldn’t,” Higgins seethed, and a shocked cry tore from me as an unexpected, searing pain ripped across my back.

“Stop,” Dare yelled from behind me, but two other shots had already sounded, and another masked person had fallen.

Higgins looked down at me, a slow cruelty gracing the corner of his mouth when he said, “I did warn them.”

Somehow, I knew what was happening that time. Somehow, it was worse.

I choked over my screamed curse as his blade made another slow path across my back. Dragging out the cut. Dragging out my pain.

“Diggs,” Dare snapped in command, in caution.

My body shook and swayed against the detective, making his smirk grow.

“Lachlan will understand if you don’t make it to him alive, Ms. Bennett, and he’ll repay the favor.” His glare snapped up and his smirk fell, his voice lowering to a growl as he spoke to Dare, “Do we understand each other?”

That earlier silence engulfed us, thick, pained, expectant.

“I don’t usually ask twice—”

“Yes,” Dare said over the detective.

“You’re not—” Diggs began from somewhere behind the line of bodies, making my heart clench between its strained, frantic beating. “Dare, *what the fuck?*”

“Willow understands,” Dare said calmly. So calm that it felt out of place for the nightmarish surroundings and the pain pulsing through my back.

It wasn’t until Detective Higgins placed his mask over his face, covering the victorious smirk there, that I realized Dare’s words had been a message for me.

“You will not get traded. We will not let you fall into their hands. Understand?”

I’d understood before, but I was already in their hands. Literally.

“I want my wife before you take Willow,” Dare said just as Detective Higgins took a step away with me.

“That isn’t how this works,” Higgins said with a click of his tongue. “You know better than that.”

“I know Lachlan will kill my wife once he has what he wants.”

Higgins cleared his throat. “Once Ms. Bennett’s delivered, your wife will be returned safe and sound,” he said on that irritable sigh of his. “Besides, Keane doesn’t want a war with you, and a mob princess turned mafia queen isn’t nearly as intriguing as this girl here.”

I jerked away from his hand when his fingers began skating across my cheek and found myself much like before. Head tilted back with his fingers digging into my jaw, only this time, I was facing him.

Facing Diggs.

Looking like he had been frozen in time, mid-step. Rifle aimed directly at me—at Higgins—but I felt those gray eyes searching me. Checking me over. I felt his rage and fear. I felt his determination and unwavering love.

“Interesting that Keane doesn’t want a war considering what happened this morning,” Dare ground out. “What’s *been* happening.”

“Our executions, not our plans,” Higgins said unapologetically. “You get that though, don’t you?” Looking at me with the blue neon glowing directly in front of my face, he asked, “Do they know? Do *you* know?”

My breath came out shaky and stilted as I clawed at his chest, trying to escape his hold. Each movement feeling weaker than the one before it as that fire pulsed across my back and the edges of my vision wavered. Blood dripping and soaking through my shirt and the top of my jeans with each twist of my torso.

“Unpredictable gang. Wrong place, wrong time,” Higgins said, a clear smile in his voice. “Just happened to be in the same place as them. Isn’t that what I told you about why your boyfriend was killed that night?”

I closed my eyes against the flashes bursting across my vision, my head shaking against his tight hold as he continued.

“Could’ve been that he dressed weird, or we didn’t like the way his face looked. Maybe his laugh was annoying, or he drove a shitty car.”

“What the hell is wrong with you?” I yelled and forced my eyelids open to meet the mask in front of me again, shoving at his chest and ignoring the way my back screamed in protest at the action.

“Wouldn’t be the first time,” he seethed. “But that wasn’t the case with your boyfriend, and your new friends are already aware of that.” My hands fell limply against Higgins’ chest at the mocking claim. But as quick as denial burst through me, hesitation rose up to battle against it. “Because we do get a little restless when we’re bored . . . but we also help clean up messes.”

I forced my stare to Diggs again to see him in a different position than before. Straighter. Rifle mostly lowered. Head somewhat tilted like he’d been about to look over his shoulder at where some of the others stood.

Everything about his stance let me know he had no idea what Detective Higgins was talking about, but he was worried to find out.

“As I said: Our executions, not our plans. It’s how we stay neutral with other families.” Higgins’ voice dropped to a hushed taunt when he continued, keeping his words only for me. “Your boyfriend? Your new friends? They made the order. We were happy to carry it out.”

“No . . . no, they—they wouldn’t have.” I struggled to look between Diggs’ family before Higgins forced my attention back to him. Seemingly

unbothered as I struggled to break free from his grip.

“So, do they know?” Higgins demanded, words increasing in volume and anticipation when he leaned in close and asked, “Do they know your boyfriend’s name, Ms. Bennett? Better question: Do you know why they wanted him dead?”

“Shut up, shut up, shut *up*,” I screamed over him, shoving and thrashing against him. “You’re lying!”

“Am I?”

“He was nobody,” I cried out. “I was nobody. They wouldn’t have—they didn’t know him!”

The next few seconds’ worth of silence felt unsettling in a chilling way, as if I’d willingly stepped into the detective’s trap.

“Notice how none of your friends are denying it?” Higgins finally asked as he jerked my face enough to see Diggs and the others standing there. Bodies tense and ready. “They can get their own hands dirty—clearly. But they also know when to back down . . . like when one of their issues settles in our city . . .”

I saw the moment Higgins’ words resonated with them. The way Kieran’s head snapped toward where Dare waited behind me, and Maverick looked at Diggs just as he stumbled back a step as if he’d been hit in the chest.

“Listen,” Dare began, but Higgins spoke over him.

“Say his name, then tell me again your boyfriend was a nobody.”

I watched as Diggs drove one of his hands into his hair as he fell to a crouch, and something in my chest shattered at the sight because I knew—I *knew*—everything Detective Higgins was saying was correct.

We hadn’t been randomly chosen that night.

Mike hadn’t been murdered because we’d happened upon a horrific street gang.

And the man I’d fallen in love with had been behind it all . . .

“Mike.” His name escaped me on a twisted wheeze and ended on a pained cry when Higgins jerked my face up to meet his.

“Louder, Ms. Bennett.”

“Mike,” I repeated shakily, my eyes pricking with tears when Higgins’ fingers dug in harder in prompting. “Michael Larson.”

Maverick’s hushed “Shit” just barely made it to where we stood. But it was enough . . . and it nearly brought me to my knees.

“Now you know. Now *they* know exactly why Lachlan is so intrigued by

you.” Straightening to his full height, he pulled me close against his chest and turned us toward Dare, my body limply moving where he forced it to.

“Willow, I can explain—”

“We’re leaving,” Higgins said over him. “Your wife will be released to you once we make it back to Richmond.”

“You’re not fucking taking her,” Diggs snapped from behind us.

“She deserves to know *why*,” Dare ground out as he spoke. “She deserves to know who he was.”

A rumbling sound left Higgins as he started pushing me toward Dare and the cars. “Maybe, but I’m bored.”

Dare lifted his gun when Higgins took another step forward with me, bringing us to a jarring halt.

“Thought we had an understanding,” Higgins drawled, seeming disappointed rather than terrified that a barrel of a gun was aimed right at him.

“Let Willow go. Give me my wife back. Or I’ll unleash Hell on Keane Street until there are none of you left.”

An irritated rumble sounded in Higgins’ chest and vibrated against the searing pain in my back. When he spoke, his words were barely more than a breath and almost too soft for me to hear.

“You leave with me now or watch another boyfriend die.”

Even with what I’d just learned, my chest heaved at the thought. My spirit thrashed inside me. But just as my lips parted with a cry, I felt the length of a blade at the base of my back again and hurried to choke out, “I’m leaving—I *want* to leave.” A sob managed to escape as I wildly shook my head.

“Tree—”

“They don’t lie about being monsters,” I bit out and closed my eyes against the stinging there. “They don’t pretend they’re anything other than what they are. And what does it matter?” I forced myself to look over my shoulder to meet Diggs’ frantic and pained gaze as he took a hesitant step closer. “You wanted me to go—you wanted me away from you.”

“No,” Diggs said adamantly, rage and regret battling for dominance in his voice as he took another step toward us. “Fuck, Tree, you don’t understand.”

“Just let me go.” The plea ended on a sharp cry as Higgins’ blade started another slow path up my back, stopping only when Diggs stumbled before retracing the steps he’d just taken.

“Cute name he has for you,” Higgins murmured sarcastically as he forced

me another step toward the cars. But the next time he stopped had nothing to do with the gun Dare was still aiming at him and had another anguished sound ripping from me.

Because there he was. Red, stitched face glowing brightly against the humid night sky as he dragged Jessica forward by her neck.

Lachlan Keane . . . my nightmare in a neon mask.

But he would always be so much more than that.

He was the leader from that night. He was the one coming to finish it all. He was my ending.

And once again, I was just feet away from him.

I struggled to remain standing when the weight of my sorrow and dread were pressing harder on my shoulders, my entire being shuddering in revulsion and fear as he came closer with Jessica staggering along.

Clearly trying to maintain her fierce, unaffected composure, but her jaw was trembling and her cheeks were wet. The earlier blood speckled across her skin and clothes was nothing compared to the smears on her face and chest or the alarming streaks flowing down one of her arms.

“Don’t,” she cried out, eyes wide with terror and a silent message for me . . . except I hadn’t done anything.

“Unleash Hell?” Lachlan asked as he neared us, sending chills across my body at the first sound of his voice.

Deep. Gravely. Terrifying.

Lachlan drew in a deep breath and released it with an amused, “Well, now, that’s my favorite pastime.” With a hard jerk on Jessica’s neck, he waited for her to hold out her non-bloodied arm, phone hanging from her fingertips, before continuing. “This is how we’re gonna do this—”

“I’m gonna kill you first,” came from behind me. The vow low, lethal, and so unexpected that it took a few seconds too long to realize Kieran was standing directly behind us. That Jessica had been speaking to *him*.

If it surprised Detective Higgins, he didn’t show it. Just kept his hold on me tight, and the knife positioned in the same place as before.

At the threat, Lachlan’s head slanted in that subtle, menacing way that had my trembling body going so cold before his attention returned to Dare.

But Dare only looked at the screen of the phone for a second before his dark stare quickly shifted to where his family was now spread out. “They have Einstein too,” he muttered tightly.

“All I want is that one,” Lachlan said with a nod in my direction as if he

were deciding on a piece of furniture. “Let me leave with her, and we’ll go back to being strained allies, or lose three of your women, and I’ll *still* leave with her.”

“Try, and your death will be slow and painful,” Diggs said on a rumbling growl.

Lachlan glanced in his direction, a cold warning radiating from him when he said, “I don’t plan on *trying*.” A strangled whimper left Jessica as he pulled her closer. “Lift the phone and say ‘thirty seconds.’”

Jessica’s body jerked as a sob tried to escape her. When her hand heavily fell before she could do what he demanded, she shook from the force of his harsh, “Lift the goddamn phone.”

“Thirty seconds,” Jessica cried before she even finished raising her hand, then repeated, “Thirty seconds,” just as Lachlan ripped the phone from her grasp.

“You have that long to give me what I want, Borello, or your women start dying,” Lachlan told Dare calmly just before a pained sound burst from him.

I barely had time to register the knives sticking out of Lachlan’s shoulder and arm before multiple shots pierced the thick veil of the night. The whizzing sound of some of them passing right past my head was something I could hardly comprehend before Higgins jerked and stumbled, taking me with him as we fell to the gravel driveway.

And then a scream . . .

Maybe mine.

Or maybe it was the animalistic roar from the assassin who’d been racing past me and was now stumbling. Swaying. Falling to his knees as an inhuman sound of agony and rage exploded from him while the scene unfolded in front of us as if in slow motion.

Lachlan Keane.

My nightmare.

My neon mask.

Dropping Jessica’s limp body to the ground—a gun still extended in his grasp. Blood spilling from the wound in her chest too fast and too substantial to be anything other than fatal.

“Kill the queen and hacker. Kill the kids,” Lachlan ordered into the phone.

I fought over the tears building faster than they could fall, and choked out, “N-no, I’ll go! Stop, I’ll—just stop.”

I squeezed my eyelids tightly shut against the heart-wrenching sight of Kieran desperately trying to get to his wife as Dare held him back. But nothing could block out his tortured yells for her or the weight of his grief, saturating the air.

A grief I felt so deep in my soul because I knew it. I'd lived it.

I shared his pain just as I shared his hatred for the man in the red neon mask.

A sob ripped from me at his next anguished *Jessica* and ended on a cry of unexpected, unfathomable pain.

I'd been so entranced by the horrifying scene that'd happened in the span of a few seconds that I hadn't realized I could hardly breathe until that moment. But as it was, I was taking short, gasping breaths, and my pain from earlier was nothing compared to then. The stinging trails of fire now felt like excruciating tearing at the slightest shift.

But I clenched my teeth to keep from crying out again as I forced myself to my knees, trembling so badly I wondered if I was going into shock. "Let everyone go," I begged, the words sounding like weak whimpers. "Promise . . . promise no one else dies. And I'll go with you."

The next few seconds were agony as red-stitched neon stared at me. Just as I started screaming at Lachlan to end this, he said, "Hold," into the phone and started toward me.

Focus never swaying from me. Gait steady, as if he hadn't been stabbed twice. As if there weren't a handful of rage- and hate-fueled men ready to end his life before his cold, black heart could beat again.

As if the image of him slowly walking toward me hadn't haunted me for over a year.

"I like you like this," he said once he was stopped in front of me. Dropping to a crouch, he trailed the tips of his fingers along my jaw before gripping it in a surprisingly gentle hold. "On your knees. Crying. Bleeding. Mine."

My jaw shook as I fought the urge to respond or spit in his face. I was afraid of what would happen—of who else might die—if I set one foot out of line. Then again, I wasn't sure I had the strength to do either.

Releasing my chin, he reached for his hip, and a whimper of fear crept up my throat as panic had my heart tripping over itself.

"Courtesy of your brave friend," he muttered, lifting a bloody knife.

If I hadn't been wavering between my fear of this reality, the shock of the

past few minutes, and the pain threatening to make me lose consciousness, I might've understood he was referring to Jessica much sooner. But I was still struggling to breathe. I was still facing my nightmare. Kieran's cries were tearing at my chest, and my movements were so weak as I tried to stop Lachlan from taking the knife to my shirt.

"It'll be more painful if it dries to you," he said, then released a harsh exhale as he let the pieces of my shirt fall to the driveway with a wet slap. "That's unfortunate."

Leaning back, he glanced down at the knives protruding from his shoulder and arm, then removed them as if they were nothing more than thorns.

Once all three knives were gathered in one of his hands, he gave me the phone Jessica had been holding earlier. "Take this. Lives depend on that call staying open."

I clumsily took it from him, my shaking so bad and my strength so drained that I could barely grasp it.

"Until I get you in front of a doctor, that blade's staying in your back," he said, casually informing me why my pain was so much worse than before.

"What?" I said on a dazed wheeze, but he continued as if I hadn't spoken.

"But getting you there's gonna hurt, so take a deep breath."

I weakly gripped his arm when he shifted it to start lifting me, my words strained as I begged, "No one else—please. No one else dies."

The slow, menacing tilt of his head had fingers as cold as death gripping my spine as I saw *this mask on this body* do that exact move countless times in my nightmares and real life.

"I'm not the one you should be saying that to," he warned in that gruff, terrifying tone. "Your friends have only lost one person by our hand . . . so far. They've taken three of mine. The only reason I'm not leveling the score is because I still have their queen and I'm taking you. So, as long as they stop shooting my crew, we'll stop killing theirs. Now, take a deep breath. Or don't. I like hearing you scream."

I didn't want to give him the satisfaction. But a curse broke from me on a cry when he lifted me to my feet, keeping me tucked close to his side. Supporting most of my weight as he started walking us toward the cars.

Stopping beside where Dare sat with one of his hands gripping his hair, staring at where Kieran and Jentry were grieving over Jessica, Lachlan said, "If we don't make it out, their orders are to continue. If they don't make it

out . . . your wife's next.”

Dare didn't respond in any way. Not that Lachlan gave him a chance to.

And even though my spirit begged to see the person I truly belonged to, I didn't look around for Diggs, and he didn't make any more comments as Lachlan and I finished our slow, painful trek to the cars.

And when Lachlan laid me face down in the back of a car and climbed in beside me just as an unseen driver pulled away from the mansion, I decided it was for the best.

As much as my heart was grieving over this night, I didn't know what to think about Higgins' revelation over the Borellos being the reason behind Mike's murder. And even though I knew Diggs loved me, the people in his family were in danger and dying . . . all because the psychotic man carefully cleaning the blood and cuts on my back had decided he wanted me.

I wasn't sure there was any recovering from that.

For either of us.



DIGGS

I woke the next afternoon in the peacock room with a splitting headache and dried blood covering the side of my head and neck.

I scrambled for the door. Tried to. I stumbled into tables and desks on my way out of the room, my vision blurry as I called for Willow in a panic.

Maverick was waiting outside the room and stopped me. Grabbed me in a tight embrace that had my stomach dropping and soul wrenching before he whispered, “Thought we lost you.” When he pulled away, his expression was drawn and wary. “Would’ve been my fault.”

But as he led me through the house, he wouldn’t answer the one question I repeatedly asked.

The only thing that mattered.

“Where’s Willow?”

He wouldn’t say anything at all. But then we made it to where the rest of our family was gathered in the large, industrial-sized kitchen. The grief sitting so thick in the room, I could taste it. And at the sight of their somber expressions, I swayed unsteadily before grabbing onto one of the counters.

Dread building and suffocating with each unexpected face I saw and each person I *didn’t* see.

The cop was still there—as was his wife—solemnly holding Kieran and Jessica’s kids, even though they were nowhere to be seen. All the rockstars were gathered in a corner. And even though the sight of Lily should’ve been a relief, it had my soul wrenching because Tree was nowhere to be seen.

“Mav, where’s Willow?” I asked one last time as my head pounded out a punishing rhythm.

He gave me an apologetic look before confirming, “Keane Street has her.”

We’d failed. Miserably.

As if that hadn’t been obvious the night before—shit, the entire day before—each detail I was given over the next hour had driven that stake

home harder than before.

Dare told me about his and Willow's plan—one she'd decided on only because he'd placed the idea in her head—one that was pointless because Lily had never been where we thought she was.

Jentry explained how he and Jess had gone different ways to come up from the opposite side and how she'd disappeared behind an SUV—one none of us realized had been there for most of the day because we'd trusted Einstein's security.

Maverick shamefully admitted how he'd bailed from his position behind me to get to Einstein—to protect her—when Dare informed us Keane Street had made it to her too.

I let them know the last thing I remembered was Kieran going for the clown holding Jess as I'd fired two shots directly into the head of the masked asshole who'd thought it was okay to touch Willow—to *hurt* her. I'd seen them start to fall, and that had been it.

Maverick said they'd found me later, among the rest of the bodies, unconscious and bleeding. And while Willow was with the enemy, Jess was fucking *gone*.

We'd gone against all training. We'd lost focus. And we'd *failed*.

Or maybe it was that we'd gotten comfortable during these three years of peace and forgotten how to do our jobs correctly. Either way, the outcome was the same.

Keane Street had used the ex-Borello and Holloway ambush as a distraction to move into place against us—as a way *in*. They'd used Einstein's skills and security against her to throw her off and keep us blind to what was really happening. And they'd used what was most important to each of us to get away with what they wanted.

Spouses. Kids.

That *collateral damage* I'd sworn off for so many years—had tried to keep safe and *lost*.

And Lily? She'd never been in Virginia or Keane Street's den of corruption. She hadn't even been in any of the vans that had kept Einstein occupied for so long. They'd brought her back here, to the estate, almost immediately after the explosion and kept her locked up inside Soldier's Row until late this morning.

She thought we knew because Einstein had assured her we had her position locked. She'd even warned us not to go *outside*, thinking we

understood it was the same outside as hers.

And none of us had ever picked up on it.

There was only one other time I'd failed my family, but only I had suffered for it. This? We'd all failed, and we were all suffering.

"Kieran?" I asked my brother as my stare settled on where Jentry and Aurora held Kieran's kids.

"Never seen anything like it," Maverick muttered. "Guy was savage. Breaking shit and raging like the demon our world thinks he is. Screaming that he killed her." Maverick's eyebrows lifted even as he shook his head. "Conor had to put him to sleep. When he woke up, he was so silent and still . . . never been as afraid to be in a room with him as I was then."

A grunt of understanding worked up my chest. "Plotting."

"Not gonna be any KSG left when he's done," Maverick acknowledged.

"I'll help."

An agreeing hum rumbled from Maverick even as an air of hesitation billowed from him. "Willow . . . her boyfriend . . . did you know?"

"Who he was?" I asked with a disbelieving huff. "No, Mav, I didn't fucking know. Did E?"

"Found out who you were seeing in the middle of one of the biggest shitstorms our family has ever experienced. She's been working nonstop. She didn't have time to research her."

"Nonstop, and people still managed to get past me," Einstein said, her somber tone holding a hint of bitterness as she lowered herself into the chair beside Maverick and passed their daughter to him.

"Avery—" Maverick began, but Einstein continued over him.

"But I checked her, you know . . . after." Her head bobbed as she glanced around where we were still gathered in the kitchen. No one really eating other than the kids. Just sitting as if we'd collectively, silently, agreed to use the room for mourning.

Once Einstein's reddened stare was on me again, she said, "Your girlfriend is either the unluckiest woman alive, or there's something about her that draws evil to her."

"You calling me evil, Einstein?"

She lifted a brow in something close to confirmation. "I see nothing from her family that would've put her in our path. They're the quintessential picture of *wholesome*. She met Larson at college in Tennessee, and he ended up moving to Richmond with her after graduation. Which, as we know, is

because he was in hiding from us after what went down. Considering the Tennessee Gentleman's history of keeping their women completely in the dark, I doubt she knew of any of that though."

I nodded even as I struggled to wrap my head around it. Maybe because I couldn't imagine what Willow thought of us now—of *me*. Or maybe it was just that unbelievable.

"What are the odds?" I muttered mostly to myself, then louder, "She was with a *Larson*, then ended up here. In our town. And her first classroom has Zachary Larson's daughter in it?"

"Unluckiest woman alive," Einstein said with a shrug.

"Fate."

We looked over at the unexpected voice to see Aurora studying us. Cheeks stained from tears. Eyes swollen from crying. Head faintly nodding as she cradled her niece closer to her chest and then readjusted her own son.

"That sounds like fate," she repeated shakily.

"Think you missed the part where we put the call out for her boyfriend's death," I said grimly, prompting a refuting sound from her.

"I was told," she informed me. "And I might not know anything about the people you're talking about, but I know Sutton and Alexis were terrified when they first moved here because their last name used to be *Larson*. Alexis used to say she was afraid her dad would come back for her, even though he'd died. And I never understood that so much as right now," she added with a weak, belittling laugh.

"But I've also seen how much they've changed being here with all of you—how genuinely happy they are and how they thrive," she went on. "So, from what I've heard and seen, I think you saved Willow without meaning to. I think she ended up in a place with people who could help her through her sorrow because they understood it better than she could even imagine." Aurora nodded before once again echoing, "Sounds like fate."

Jentry had been staring at his wife as she spoke but slowly turned his attention to me. Brow furrowed tightly as if he were deciding if he agreed with her.

Finally, he asked, "Why did you?"

"Gotta be more specific, five-oh."

"Put the call out for Willow's boyfriend," he clarified irritably as if I should've known that was the one person—the one death—he'd be thinking about right then.

“I didn’t,” I said slowly. “We did. Kieran, Conor, and—” I cleared my throat when her name caught there. The realization that Jess was really gone hit me like a sledgehammer to the chest. “ARCK helped relocate one of their wives—unknowingly—so the Tennessee Gentlemen decided to play a game of How Long Until You Die with our favorite genius.”

Jentry’s gaze shifted to my side, to Einstein, but it was one of the rockstars who asked, “Shit, Einstein, is he serious?”

“Not a discussion we’re having,” Maverick said coldly, words directed at me and letting me know he wasn’t happy that I’d brought up the memory without warning.

“Sutton had been in contact with ARCK, letting them know she was in danger and needed to escape,” I went on, skipping over the part about Einstein. “It had been a ploy from the Tennessee Gentlemen to get us out there, but it turned out Sutton and Lex really had needed help getting away from Zachary, and their organization was fucked beyond belief. After some near deaths on our side and promises of more, courtesy of them, our retaliation was wiping out an entire generation. Which sounds like more than the handful of seriously fucked up assholes it was. Michael was the last because he was at college when it all went down.”

“So, why not let him live?” Jentry challenged, then lifted a shoulder. “He might not’ve been—”

“He was,” Einstein said flatly. “We have plenty of documentation proving exactly what kind of person he was. Willow was lucky not to know the man he really was because he was still lying low and hadn’t married her yet.”

Seconds passed before Jentry nodded, and then one of the rockstars moved across the room to sit at our table. “So, you guys are like Batman?”

“What the fuck?” I muttered as Jentry laughed this soft, rasping sound. “Why do people keep asking that?”

“You’re masked vigilantes,” the rockstar defended as if it were obvious.

“Bandanas aren’t masks,” I said pointedly.

Maverick looked at me, eyebrows drawn close. “Who else asked that?” When I tossed a hand in Jentry’s direction, Maverick nodded, then looked at the rockstar just as Dare cut in.

“Don’t mistake any of our good deeds for goodness. We live a certain way to balance out the darkness we bleed into the world. Just because we don’t like our sins doesn’t change who we are.”

“You’re wrong,” Jentry said, then sat back in his chair. A sigh easing from him as he checked Kieran and Jessica’s sleeping toddler in his arms. “The first time I saw Jess and Kieran together, I thought—” A huff left him, his head shaking slightly at the memory. “Well, I thought he was just another guy who was trying to buy her for the night. But when she introduced us to him later, I thought, ‘this terrifying bastard is going to be what finally destroys her.’”

His head slanted and jaw wavered, his eyes filling with tears. “And I was wrong,” he went on, voice thick and shaky. “Kieran—all of you—gave me Jess *back*. Y’all gave me years with her I never thought I’d have. She’s right.” A strangled sound caught in his throat, and for a moment, he just sat there. Staring blankly ahead before he amended, “She *was* right. Despite the world you’re caught up in or were born into, y’all are good people.”

Aurora’s glassy stare shifted to me, an apology swirling there before she looked away when Jentry gestured to the windows behind me and said, “And anyone would do what y’all did last night. You defended your family against an outright attack.”

“Last night,” Dare said gravely. Pointedly. “But the next time lives are taken, it won’t be in *defense*. Again . . . don’t mistake our good deeds for goodness. Because at the end of the day, my blood demands I take care of things, no matter the fallout. Yours tells you to do what’s *right*.”

A small nod was Jentry’s only response.

“Were all of you born into this?” one of the other rockstars asked, then hurried to add, “Felt like there was more of you every time we came through on tour and when we moved back.”

“Just us,” Dare said, indicating Lily and himself. “Libby. Kieran. Sutton and Alexis over there,” he added, nodding to where the two sat off in the furthest corner with Conor, head buried under his arms. “And now all of our kids.”

“You knew what they were bringing you into?” the same rockstar asked, looking directly at Einstein, concern burning deep.

“Still my wife, Lincoln,” Maverick ground out.

“Knew her long before you showed up in town,” Lincoln challenged, never taking his eyes off my sister-in-law.

Just as Maverick sat forward, lips parted to reply, Einstein meaningfully said, “I’ve known probably about as long as Maxon’s known that Libby was really a mafia princess. And I didn’t give them a choice in letting me in. I told

Dare I was joining.”

Lincoln considered her words for a moment before retreating with a reluctant nod.

“I’m leaving.”

We all turned at the claim to see Kieran standing there, looking unhinged and so damn calm, it was unsettling.

“I’m not coming back until all ties to Keane Street have been erased from this earth,” he went on, voice low and sounding like broken glass over gravel.

“Kieran—”

“I’m leaving,” Kieran repeated, stopping Dare, but Dare just sighed and gave Jentry a pointed look.

“You’re free to take back that *good people* speech you just made.”

Jentry didn’t respond, and the rest of the room fell into silence when Lily stood and made her way over to Kieran. Head tipped back to meet him straight on because that girl had never feared him a day in her life.

“This isn’t you, and this isn’t Nightshade,” she whispered as if we all couldn’t hear her. “You’re hurting—I know. I see it, Kieran. But if you go like this, your kids will lose both their parents.”

For the longest time, he just stared at her. Green eyes a destructive sort of wild that had every instinct screaming at me to grab Lily and pull her away. But then he spoke through clenched teeth. “Everyone—”

“No,” Lily said over him, already knowing what he was going to say. “It feels like that. Aric . . . Beck . . . Jess. But you have your kids and Conor. You have us. And we can’t let you do this.”

“You’ve never been able to stop me.”

Her head bobbed slowly. “And as much as I want to, I know I still can’t. But they’re expecting and waiting for your retaliation, and you aren’t thinking clearly. This is a suicide mission, Kieran. Do not orphan your kids.”

When his stare shifted to where his kids were still napping in Jentry and Aurora’s arms, Dare said, “We’re going, Kieran—we *will* go. Not yet.”

Right . . . *not yet*.

Because, as I’d found out after waking up with the biggest damn knot on my head, Willow had been stabbed when I’d shot the guy holding her. I’d heard her screams the times he’d slowly drawn the knife across her back—they were echoing in my mind.

But she’d been fucking *stabbed* because of me.

From what Dare said, even the brutal Lachlan Keane hadn’t wanted to

risk pulling the knife out of her.

The only comfort I had was Lily.

Maverick had continuously assured me that Lachlan wouldn't have released Lily to us if Willow hadn't survived. That Lachlan had most likely waited twelve hours *before* releasing Lily to be sure Willow *would*.

"You?" Kieran asked, slanting his disturbed stare my way. "You're fine just sitting around here?"

"I'm not fine with shit."

"Leaving now puts more of us in danger," Dare said in that tone we weren't supposed to argue with. "We know what's waiting for us when we go. We need to be able to get in and out, and Willow was severely injured. We need her to heal enough to not have to be carried out."

Kieran watched me for a second longer, and I struggled to maintain my carefully crafted expression because I knew what would happen if I argued with my boss about this in front of everyone again.

But as I'd said . . . I wasn't fine with shit.

A noncommittal grunt left Kieran as he held something out for Lily to take. As soon as she lifted her hand, he dropped it and stalked out of the kitchen.

A shuddering breath left Lily, and after a second, she looked back at Dare before slowly walking over to where Jentry sat. "I think . . . I think this was one of Jessica's."

A solid *clank* sounded as she placed the item on the table, and that grief filling the air magnified when she removed her hand, revealing a knife.



WILLOW

Faith can be rocked in the strangest of ways.

Faith in humanity after watching your boyfriend be murdered in front of you. Faith in the justice system after they failed to produce anything on the murder—granted, I hadn't known the detective was in on it. Worse, faith in a love you'd been sure was unshakable when it fails you again and again.

Diggs had told me why he was pushing me away. I'd understood the push almost as much as I'd understood the fierce pull because I needed him just as badly. But his words that last night had been calloused and sure. He'd stayed silent as my nightmare had taken me away.

And he'd let me remain with my demons ever since.

I wasn't entirely sure how long it'd been since that God-awful day. I'd lost consciousness before we made it to Virginia and had woken sometime later in a lavish, windowless room.

Sore. Crying out in pain when I'd tried getting off the bed. Completely wrecked all over again because the pain radiating across my back let me know the disturbing images flashing through my mind were *real*. But I'd held on to the knowledge that Diggs was coming. That his *family* would be coming to get me any moment.

But the only person I'd seen had been a masked girl who'd come in at random to check on my wounds and bring me meals, complete with nauseating entertainment in the form of drawings.

Not that the sketches were of anything disturbing, especially considering what I'd seen. And if I hadn't been so disgusted with them, I would have to admit that the artist was incredible. But they were mocking. They were a clear show of how closely Lachlan had gotten to me without my ever realizing it. They were a knife to my heart, as if the passing time wasn't enough of one.

A dog—a bloodhound, to be more specific. But with how the picture was drawn, it could've easily been sleeping or dead, and I'd felt something in my soul crumble at the implication.

A lavender sprig and to-go coffee cup. Which, after the weirdest sense of déjà vu while studying them, I'd realized I probably left those exact items on

my counter the morning I'd first run into Lachlan.

A bed shrouded in darkness. Something I wouldn't have thought twice about if it hadn't followed the others. But it had, so I knew, which meant *Lachlan* knew. Now even those memories with Diggs felt tainted.

But with this latest meal, there'd been nothing other than food, water, and the immensely welcome *okay* to finally shower. And even though the art's noticeable absence had warning bells sounding rather than the relief I'd expected, I didn't ask the girl about it as I'd hurried from the offered food toward the attached bathroom. Besides, she'd never spoken to me about anything other than my wounds, and I didn't want anything from her or anyone wearing those disturbing masks.

And as I washed the grime and dried blood away, being mindful of how every slight movement pulled at the stitches in my back, I wondered when exactly I'd stopped expecting Diggs and his family to come. Or when I'd stopped worrying over my class and what Cora must be thinking—what they must have told her to explain my abrupt absence.

After all . . . I wouldn't be getting back to them.

I froze as soon as I stepped into the room, clutching the towel tighter around me as my heart hammered and stomach dropped. Fear clinging to my spine and sending a chill along my skin as I looked at the red neon watching me, head slanted ever so slightly, monstrously large wolfhound sitting stoically beside him.

“Bed.”

I thought my knees would give out right then because of a single word. Because of the implication behind it.

When I only managed to move my head in the faintest shakes, Lachlan said, “Your stitches need to dry before I rebandage them. Bed.”

“Where's—”

“I was giving you time to recover and adjust to your new reality,” he said over me. “But you'll find I'm a little possessive, and I prefer to be the one who takes care of my belongings.”

“I do *not* belong to you,” I said through gritted teeth.

The slant of his head deepened. “The mark on your back says otherwise.”

Confusion and denial swirled inside me, but even as a response gathered on my tongue, I shakily retreated into the bathroom. My heart hammering harder and harder as I worried over what I was about to see as I twisted to look at my back in the mirror, swallowing a hiss as the movement pulled at

the cuts there.

But as I loosened my towel so it dipped down to the small of my back, my attention was drawn to *those*. To the two parallel cuts, running diagonally across the length of my back. One nearly intersected by a shorter, vertical one. All of which were stitched tightly together and would leave a permanent reminder of that night.

As if I could ever forget that night or any night Lachlan Keane intervened and destroyed my life.

Shards of glass caught in my throat as my heartache slammed to the surface with a force that was staggering. But just as I began readjusting my towel, my gaze caught on something else.

I hurried to clutch the towel in one hand and grabbed my hair with the other, moving where the wet clumps had fallen behind my shoulder as I'd inspected my back. A strangled sound leaving me as I took in the angry flesh there.

Xs for eyes. Upturned crescent for a nose. Stitched smile.

There's a goddamn mask branded into my shoulder.

"As I said," Lachlan murmured as he joined me in the bathroom, leaning casually against the wall with his arms folded over his chest. "You belong to me."

"Why?" The question was little more than a wheeze, but it was all I could manage as I stared at my back in the mirror, silently begging for the image to change.

"Didn't their queen tell you?" he asked, sounding surprised at the idea that she might not have. "People don't usually survive us, but you got your second chance. Then—"

"I am no one," I cried out as I faced him, gripping the towel tighter. "I am a person trying to move on from a life *you* destroyed. I am a teacher, and I *love* my job. I am a woman in love with a very frustrating man. I am not someone who can be claimed because you find the devastating circumstances of my life *intriguing*."

Lachlan's head moved in a bouncing sort of nod. His shoulders lifted before he said, "And yet . . ." That neon face locked on me again, his tone dropping to something colder. "Bed."

"If you touch me, I'll—"

"I have to touch you to bandage your back," he said flatly, then pushed from the wall, taking careful steps toward me as he went on. "But for the sake

of getting you on the bed, Ms. Bennett, you should know I have no intention of fucking you until you can handle me. As it stands, you're not healed enough for what I plan to do to you."

I felt nauseous.

Light-headed.

The thought alone made me want to do unthinkable things to prevent him from ever making good on his promise.

He didn't stop until his hands were planted on the counter behind me, caging me there. Stealing the air around me and commanding attention when I never wanted to see another mask for the rest of my life.

"If you still wanna be a teacher, then you'll be a teacher," he began in a voice like sin. "Here. Where I can keep an eye on you. As for you being *no one* . . . I assure you, you're the only one who sees you that way. And as for that *Borello* you think you're in love with?" He glanced to the side, toward the open door, then focused on me again. "Three days and nothing?"

My heart faltered.

My soul cried out in denial at the confirmation of my time there.

"I would've never let you get away in the first place," he went on.

"You didn't give them a choice," I seethed through the searing ache in my chest and the hatred for this man.

"I didn't give *you* a choice," he countered. "Then again, the minute you survived us—tried to find and accuse us—all your choices became mine."

He moved in closer so his muscled body was pressed to mine and his masked face was beside my ear, making my stomach roll and lungs struggle to work. "I was aware of every step you took and every call you made. When your constant presence at the department caught too much attention, I had Sean make sure you wouldn't come back."

Confusion had just started unfurling when I realized who he was referring to. *What* he was referring to.

Detective Higgins . . . trying to kiss me in the middle of the police station.

"Oh my God," I muttered, that nauseating feeling growing as Lachlan went on.

"And when you told that dull therapist of yours just how scared you were to leave your apartment because you kept seeing masks that weren't there . . ." My chest caved at the whisper of amusement in his voice, at the enjoyment he was clearly getting out of this. "She only suggested you start over—away from Richmond—after I paid her a visit."

My eyes were wide, but I wasn't seeing the demon in front of me or the bathroom we were standing in. My lungs were screaming for oxygen, but as I processed his confession, I couldn't figure out how to do the most natural thing in this world. Breathe.

"Why?" I whispered numbly.

"You ask that a lot."

"Because I wanna know," I cried out and shoved at him with my free hand, a sound of frustration bursting from me when he barely seemed to rock from the hit. "I wanna know why you killed my boyfriend and left me alive if you were just gonna control my entire life. I wanna know why you think you can claim people who aren't yours. I wanna know why you're such a shameless, evil monster."

A dark laugh built in Lachlan's chest as he shifted back so that mask was directly in front of me. But then my head was snapping back with a shocked cry, my scalp stinging from the force of him pulling on the wet strands.

"Monster?" he asked, the word little more than a rumble. "I'm a god. Remember that—treat me as such—and I'll make sure you know you're the same."

My jaw shook and words wavered when I declared, "I want nothing from you."

"I don't care."

Just as he started releasing my hair and stepping back, I reached out. Grabbing the bottom of the mask that had haunted me for far too long and ripping it off his face.

From the guttural fear I'd associated with this mask, I'd been sure something equally terrifying lurked behind it. Something truly evil, sent from Hell. A dark void. Anything.

It was almost disappointing to find out I'd been wrong—to know *this* had been the source of my fear.

Undoubtedly one of the most handsome men I'd ever seen in my life. Sharp jaw and nose. Piercing blue eyes that bordered on unnatural, they were so light. But that evil was in the twitch of his jaw and the narrowing of his eyes, fueling his masculine beauty. It encompassed him, body and soul.

"You're not a god," I bit out as I shoved the mask against his chest. "You're just a bloodthirsty asshole."

His head dipped in a subtle nod, the look on his face chilling me to my core when the corner of his mouth slanted up in a ghost of a smirk. "Bed."

I wanted to refuse anything he demanded. I wanted to defy him until he left.

But that look was a stark reminder that this was still the man who enjoyed murdering people. With or without the mask, he'd been my failed executioner last year, and I needed to tread lightly.

Besides, this was the longest I'd been out of bed since I'd woken in this ridiculous room, and my energy was draining as I fought the pain flaring in time with the beating of my heart.

I twisted to move past him, swallowing a hiss at the pull in my back, and tried walking tall and steady, even with him directly behind me.

Stopping once I made it into the room, I looked at the giant dog draped across the side of the bed, sleeping away, then to the pile of folded clothes at the end.

"Can I get dressed?"

"If you want," Lachlan said as he moved toward the bed, showing in that simple action that he had no plans to go anywhere.

I watched him scratch the dog's head on his way to the nightstand, where all the medical supplies waited, contemplating for only a moment longer before I tried silently slipping up to the bed.

As soon as I had the clothes in my grasp, Lachlan murmured, "I've already seen you naked, Ms. Bennett."

I froze two steps away, clutching the towel and clothes tightly as my mind raced.

With a reserved sigh, Lachlan looked over his shoulder and explained, "You belong to me now, which means no other man touches or undresses you—doctors included." He faced the nightstand again, his voice bored when he added, "I had them walk me through what needed to be done before bringing you here."

"You stitched my back," I said, the words heavily laced with doubt.

"Among other things."

Right . . . the brand.

Still, I turned for the bathroom again. Shutting and locking the door behind me before starting the ridiculously painful and exhausting process of simply dressing myself.

Once I'd finished and managed to somewhat catch my breath again, I carefully opened the door. A whisper of fear flooding my veins as if everything might've changed in the short time I'd been in there.

As if I'd walk out to a neon mask deciding he wanted to kill me all over again.

But Lachlan was standing by the bed. Arms folded over his broad chest. Head slanted in that same menacing way he seemed to always do that was just as chilling without the mask.

"So, you're done with the mask now?" I asked as I stopped just inside the bedroom. When Lachlan's icy stare shifted pointedly to the bed, I tried not to show my defeat or relief as I cleared the rest of the distance and carefully climbed onto it. Because I wanted to lay down so damn bad. I wanted to close my eyes and give in to the exhaustion and pain for a few hours.

I just hated doing anything he wanted.

Pausing when the wolfhound's massive head snapped up before flopping over again, I watched the dog for a few more seconds to make sure it wouldn't move before lowering myself to the mattress.

"You've already seen my face," Lachlan said once I was settled, finally answering. "And the dog won't hurt you."

I nodded against my arms as I folded them under my head. "What's his name?"

"Her," he corrected gently as he came to stand on the opposite side of the bed. "When I can trust you, I'll tell you."

My eyebrows drew together, but I didn't ask. I just closed my eyes so I wouldn't have to look at him standing so close and like *this*.

Our position in the bathroom had been far more intimate than our current one, but this was worse. Because, even though sexual acts often happened on beds, beds meant so much more to Diggs and me. Or, at least, they'd meant more to *me*.

My bed had always been where Diggs found me. Wrapping me up in his arms and making me feel things I'd had no right feeling. And that bone-weary exhaustion from little sleep and countless body-numbing orgasms was something I'd grown so accustomed to because of *him*.

Right then, on my borrowed bed, drowning in a different kind of exhaustion, there was only a monster staring back at me. Reaching for me. Grasping the bottom of my shirt and gently easing it up. And with every inch of skin he exposed, my heart didn't rise toward my throat, it sank deeper into the pit in my stomach.

At the first touch of Lachlan's fingers on my back, I jerked. From the pain . . . from the humiliation of letting Mike's murderer this close to

me . . . from the guilt that sliced through me deeper than Higgins' knife had because this wasn't the man my soul longed for.

"She's a good dog and she's smart," Lachlan began, rough voice holding a hint of affection for the giant beast beside me. "She just has a bad habit of listening to commands from anyone who knows her name." When I didn't respond, he assumed, "You're afraid of dogs."

My eyelids flew open at the asinine assumption that had my heartstrings twisting and pulling as a memory flared.

"First day of school, you told Lex you wanted to get a dog to protect you," Diggs had said outside the school the morning before my life fell apart all over again. *"Already told you I'm a bloodhound. I'll protect you better than anything else could."*

"Why would you think that?" I asked Lachlan, a mixture of accusation and sorrow driving the words.

"You screamed the first time you saw her."

"Because I saw *you*," I argued fiercely. "Because I was in shock that you were there and sure I was imagining things. And then a horse was nudging my chest."

I was so caught off guard at the rasping laugh that scraped up Lachlan's throat that I just laid there, unmoving, as he returned to working on my back.

"I'm a shameless, evil *monster*, as you say, because I was born into a world of more of the same," he said a moment later. "If you don't adapt to your world, it'll destroy you. And I have no intention of letting anything destroy me other than myself."

"No." My head shook against my arms, my eyelids squeezing tight as if I might be able to block out the flashes of the night I'd first encountered Lachlan and the KSG. "No, you and your stupid neon gang are ruthless and kill innocent people for no reason. For fun. You're vicious."

"Innocent people?" he challenged darkly, his fingers trailing along the raised mark he'd branded into me. "Thought you learned the other night that the boyfriend you've spent so long grieving over was far from innocent for a mafia family to call up his name."

Just as I started defending Mike, Lachlan added, "Granted, his crew likes to present a clean-handed façade to maintain their image. But I assure you, Ms. Bennett, his hands were extremely dirty, as was his mind. And you were nothing more than an object to be used and abused once he forced you into a marriage."

“That isn’t—”

“I’d have you ask your Wake Forest friends if I ever planned on letting you see them again,” he said darkly. “But *that* is why they took out so many of his crew. *That* is why they called for your precious boyfriend’s death—because they knew what he had done and what he was capable of.”

“You’re lying,” I breathed, but the words sounded unsure, and tears were slipping from my eyes onto my arms.

“Did he ever tell you why he was so eager to get out of Tennessee?” Lachlan asked, goading me. “Did he ever mention his brother and the rest of his generation were murdered just before he fled to Virginia?”

My chest felt too tight and too small as denials gathered on my tongue and were weighed down by doubt.

Because Mike had a brother. I knew he did. But he’d stopped talking to his family when he’d moved to Richmond with me—said they’d had a falling out. His parents wouldn’t even take my calls to inform them about the horrific incident. I’d eventually had to let them know over voicemail.

“Vicious, sure . . . you can label me that. You can label us all that,” he admitted, then drew in closer and closer until his next whispered taunts were being delivered in my ear. “As long as you remember I’m no different than the other *monsters* you’ve been fucking.”

I jerked away when his teeth grazed my jaw, my chest shuddering and hands curling into fists against the comforter beneath me when another rough laugh escaped him. The softness of it making it more sinister than amusing.

“I like you like this,” he said as he pushed away from the bed. “Get used to being beneath me, Ms. Bennett. I plan on keeping you that way.”

I clenched my jaw tight to keep any of the responses gathering on my tongue from breaking free because he was already slipping the mask over his face and backing away, and I wanted nothing more than for him to leave.

But despite the brand on my shoulder, I would never belong to him. I had no intention of letting him that close to me again. And if I couldn’t figure a way out of this windowless, locked room, I would die before he could make good on his promise.

With a low, sharp whistle, the massive dog awkwardly scrambled up and jumped off the bed to follow Lachlan. “Until next time, Ms. Bennett.”

Chills skated across my body at the promise, but I just looked straight ahead, refusing to meet that neon stare.

As soon as he was gone, I got off the bed as quickly and quietly as

possible—as if he might be outside the door, waiting to catch me. Righting my shirt as I turned in slow circles, I looked wildly for something—*anything* that might help me get out of this godforsaken room.

As if I hadn't already spent countless hours searching the room for this exact purpose.

But nothing had changed and there was nothing new. I'd already tried everything I could think of to unlock the only door that led *out*. I'd broken numerous things to use the shards and splinters in place of a key on the doorknob. Nothing had worked.

Just as I determined to try a picture frame fragment again, the door opened to the girl who'd been coming and going the past days.

At least, I assumed it was the same one. Most of their masks had differences here and there—from color to the neon shapes. And hers was very distinct. One eye was an outline of a large heart. The other was a horizontal line, making it look like she was winking.

The pink neon might've been cute, but paired with the stitched smile beneath, she looked even more unhinged and terrifying than the others.

"Ms. Bennett," she began in a condescending tone as she set down a plate of new food, "you weren't about to do something naughty . . . were you?"

"Why do every one of y'all call me 'Ms. Bennett?'" I asked instead of answering, my grip around the wooden shard tightening. "I have a name."

"To remind you of your place," she said easily as she held out her hand, a folded piece of paper secured between two fingers.

And I knew without taking it from her or looking inside what it would be . . .

Another drawing.

"Who's the person draw—"

"*Ms. Bennett* is to remind you we know who you are and where you come from," she began over me, voice startling in its force. "Which means we know your family. So, if you aren't a good little girl, we can get to them as easily as we got to you."

My gaze had snapped to that horrifying mask as she'd spoken, dread spreading through me slow and thick as I realized what she was implying.

When she extended her hand toward me again, I numbly reached for the drawing. A new kind of fear seeping into my bones as I shakily unfolded the thick paper to reveal whatever they wanted to mock me with next.

My chest caved with a shuddering breath as I took in the beautiful willow

tree, and tears pricked my eyes. “Why are you doing this?” The question came out thick and muted, and I struggled around the lump in my throat. Clearing it, I looked up at her and asked, “Why—*who*—”

She sighed over me, the sound obnoxiously loud and drawn out as she lifted her index finger to her stitched mouth and drew it across as if silently hushing me.

“Oh my God, you ask so many questions—*oh*. I forgot.” A soft, feigned laugh left her as she turned for the door. “You were more interested in a shower than food, but Lachlan says you need to eat. I’ll go get it.”

I glanced at the plate of food as she slipped out the door, then around the room as if someone else in a mask might pop out at any moment. Not that there was anywhere to hide in that room, but I’d never had an interaction with her like that.

Normally, she set the plate and drawing down beside me. Asked how my back felt after checking it and dressing it. Then told me to deal with the pain before leaving.

With a curious look at the drawing in my hand, I carefully followed after her, wondering if I’d stepped into an alternate universe. But when I tried the door, it was still locked.

“Here,” she said when she came bursting in a couple minutes later, nothing more than another folded piece of paper in hand. “Eat. Or don’t. My brother’s the only one who cares.”

I paused halfway through opening the paper, nearly choking over the words when I confirmed, “Broth—wait, *brother*? Lachlan . . . Lachlan’s your brother?”

“One of them,” she said as if having that terrifying man as her brother was nothing more than an inconvenience, and then she was gone.

I stared at the shut door for a while longer, stunned by the knowledge that the girl taking care of me was the sister of the man who’d been haunting me for so long. With a heaving exhale, I resumed unfolding the same thick paper I’d received a few times before, my brow furrowing when I found a note rather than a drawing.

Be careful what you say . . . he’s listening

to you.

Practice silence.

Next time you see me, implement it.

Don't fall asleep.

My head snapped up and my eyes widened as I stared at the closed door. My heart slammed against my ribs as hope swirled through my veins, mixing with that doubt and heartache and a new kind of fear and uncertainty.

Because, as Lachlan had said, it'd been three days, and I was still here. With them—with *him*—and there'd been nothing from Diggs or anyone in his family. I also knew nothing about this woman other than she wore the mask of my nightmares and was the sister of the man I feared and hated most in this world.

The note could be nothing more than a trick.

Or it could be the escape I'd waited for.



DIGGS

Our orders were to wait. To give Willow enough recovery time that she could potentially run out on her own since Dare expected nothing less than a blood bath when we went to get her.

I would've gladly carried her out while shooting down every one of them.

But I kept my mouth shut because I'd pushed Dare enough recently. And if I pushed any harder, Dare wouldn't just leave me out of this; he'd ensure I wouldn't be able to follow.

That didn't mean I was fine with sitting idly by, waiting and planning. All while Kieran was constantly being forced back from his path to self-destruction, and Einstein was in the middle of a meltdown and questioning her abilities for the first time ever.

Which, for Einstein, meant she was still working. She was just more irritable and snapping at everyone who even looked her way. Not that any of us handled failure well, but Einstein didn't fail, so she *wasn't* handling this.

But when I tried slipping away that first night, Maverick was there, already anticipating my move.

"You're an idiot if you think I'd let you do this without me," he said from where he stood beside the front door.

"So, come with me," I suggested as I reached for the handle.

"We can't go yet."

I muttered something under my breath about the inconsistencies in rescuing Willow and their wives as I eased the door open, but came to an abrupt stop when Maverick held out a tablet directly in front of me.

Einstein's tablet. And on the screen was a short, one-sided message.

UNKNOWN

She's hurting but she pulled through.

Figured someone over there would want to know. And after what you did for me, I owe you that.

Thank you.

“Who’s this?” I asked, already turning to see if Einstein would be behind me.

“It’s from the same number Lily called from,” Maverick answered, jerking his chin at the screen as he did. “I was watching when Einstein looked into it . . . the number belongs to that guy who was cutting up Willow—the one you killed.”

My attention snapped from him to the tablet as if I might’ve made a mistake that night, even though I knew that guy was dead. We’d had the clean-up crew haul off his body with the others. Maverick just confirmed I’d killed him.

“His name was Sean Higgins—he was a Richmond detective,” Maverick explained. “He was also engaged to Autumn Keane.” A curse slipped from me just as Maverick added, “He has a younger brother, but I can’t imagine he would thank us that way. After what we’ve seen . . . a fiancée might.”

My eyebrows rose in agreement and understanding, but I still said, “Could be a trap.”

“Or it could be a way for you to get what you want while listening to Dare,” he countered. “If it were a matter of getting Einstein back? I’d be slipping out that door too. But Dare’s right . . . we go in there now? It’s only going to put Willow and us in more danger.”

I wavered for at least a minute before turning from the door with a conflicted, “Give me that number.”

Over the past two days, I’d had twice as many calls with the person behind a dead man’s phone—Autumn Keane. She’d given me more information than Maverick and I could’ve gained from filed blueprints and more than Einstein had gathered from footage. She’d assured me dozens of times that Willow was there, safe, and healing. She’d also promised to let Willow know we hadn’t forgotten about her.

That *I* hadn’t forgotten about her.

That I wasn’t abandoning her.

None of it had stopped me from wondering if she was another trap I was willingly playing into—if every piece of information was laced with purposeful deceptions—but that *thank you* kept me going.

“Why’d you thank us?” I’d asked her the previous morning when she called with an update on Willow. “In your texts, you said you owed us the knowledge that Willow was okay. You thanked us. For what?”

Autumn had been silent for so long that I’d wondered if she would answer at all or suddenly hang up, as she had the night before. But then she’d said, *“I knew they used Sean’s phone when they got your boss’s wife to call in, so I knew that number would get back to someone there—one of you.”*

She’d fallen silent again before finally confessing, *“My dad always said being a lover would destroy me someday, and I thought he was right. I thought I was cursed because every one of my boyfriends ended up dead. If it wasn’t me, then a rival gang . . . something . . .”* A bitter laugh bled through the phone. *“But it was just my father and Sean, ensuring I’d fall into the role they wanted me in. A link between our families. A silent punching bag. So, thank you.”*

It was like Maverick said . . . with what we’d seen working for ARCK, a fiancée might thank us. I wanted to believe her. Her voice had dripped with hate and venom and the softness of revealing a truth that she clearly felt shameful about. Not that she should.

Still, there was that warning in my head of who Autumn was. Not just a member of the KSG but an actual *Keane*.

On top of that, with everything I’d asked about Willow, she’d only given me healing updates. She wouldn’t say if Willow understood why we hadn’t come for her yet. She wouldn’t go into what she’d told Willow about our plans. She wouldn’t give me anything other than help in forming plans I couldn’t have full confidence in.

But if Autumn was right—if she was telling the truth—then Lachlan was done waiting for us to retaliate, which meant it was time to go.

I hesitated with my shirt halfway up my arms when I sensed a shift in the air around me, then swallowed a curse and finished pulling the material over my head just before he spoke.

“I know you’re planning something.”

Half a dozen excuses and jokes built in my throat and died when I turned and found Dare’s dark stare locked on me, letting me know there was no getting out of this. He already knew.

Fucking Maverick.

“Think I haven’t been watching you?” he asked as he leaned against the doorjamb of the room Willow and I had shared in the Holloway mansion,

since we were all still holed up there.

The rockstars had left to finish their last couple of appearances early that morning, but they were letting us stay until we were done since the Borello house was gone.

“You’re too calm,” Dare went on. “You’re too *okay* with waiting to get Willow. If it were me? Fuck, I would’ve been gone that first night.”

A bitter scoff burst from me. “Saying I could’ve?”

“No.” The word was short and definite. “You would’ve risked all of us if you’d gone that first night. You would’ve risked *her*. But you haven’t fought for a second on going to get her.”

“You said *wait*.”

“Still expected a push from you.”

A laugh scraped up my throat, edgy and frustrated. “If I would’ve pushed, you would’ve kept me back when the time came.”

He lifted a shoulder, refusing to confirm or deny, before repeating, “Know you’re planning something.”

I studied him for a moment before giving him the same noncommittal shrug and turning for my boots. “You gonna stop me?”

“Waiting to hear what it is first.”

I considered his words and weighed the very real possibility that Maverick had kept something from our boss for the first time. “Don’t think you’re gonna like it,” I admitted, then blew out a steadying breath as I faced Dare again. “Kinda have a feeling you’re gonna lose your shit when I tell you.”

Dare’s head dipped in a bouncing sort of nod before he said, “I trust you more than you realize. I value your input more than you give yourself credit for.” When I started scoffing, he added, “You’re an absolute pain in my ass because you joke too much and we need to feed you every hour, on the hour. But we wouldn’t get through situations half as easily without you. None of us would be alive without you.”

A smile edged at the corner of my mouth to hide my growing discomfort. “I’m flattered, but you’re married.”

“Diggs.”

The teasing fell away as easily as it had risen, but Dare thankfully continued before the silence could make it more uncomfortable.

“Look where we are, Diggs. That was you.”

“I led us to the worst possible place, considering who ambushed us,” I

shot back, my eyes narrowing on him. “And where we are? What about Sofia and Jess?” I lifted my arms before letting them fall. “We just buried one and have nothing more than a headstone for the other because of me.”

“Us,” Dare corrected. “We all fucked up that night—Jess’s death is on all of us. And my mom?” His jaw shifted a few times before he said, “She knew the danger. She made the decision not to come here. And despite that shitshow of an ambush, this is the best location for us right now. Something I would’ve never considered if it hadn’t been for you.

“Now,” he went on, lifting his chin in my direction, “I’ve explained a fraction of the faith I have in you . . . so give a little in return, and tell me what you’re planning before I have Maverick disable all your motorcycles.”

I sucked a breath in through my teeth, my head slanting at the low threat, but still confessed, “I’ve been in contact with one of James Keane’s daughters.”

“Fucking hell,” Dare muttered as I hurried to continue.

“I think her resentment for her old man outweighs her loyalty for Keane Street.” I swallowed as doubt slowly twisted through my gut, but this was the best chance we had, so I had no choice but to believe Autumn. “Also think she wants to help because we inadvertently saved her from a shitty life.”

“They could be feeding her lines,” Dare said firmly. “You could be playing into their next ambush.”

“I know,” I admitted softly. “Trust me, I’ve considered that so many times. But I—” I pressed a hand to my chest, my head shaking as I thought over pieces of my conversations with Autumn that stood out. “This is how I get Willow back . . . I can feel it.”

Dare studied me for a while, his expression not giving anything away, before he finally said, “I told you to end your battle, Diggs.” My head shifted back and my mouth parted to respond, but he continued before I could. “I told you to end your battle, and you made your decision. You brought her here . . . you pulled her *in*.”

“I know.” A self-patronizing laugh bled from me. “If you’re gonna blame me for this, get in line.”

“I’m not blaming you for anything other than not doing what I told you to,” he ground out, eyebrows drawn close. “I told you to end your fucking battle, and up until the last second, you were pushing Willow away.” He gestured to me before turning it on himself. “I know what you were doing—I know you wanted to protect her. But protecting people we love never

includes pulling them into our lives and then reversing that.

“So, for the last fucking time, I’m telling you to end your battle,” he demanded in a tone that held no room for argument. “Right now, before you take another step or say another word. Because, even though I get what you’re doing, all you’re doing is hurting her and destroying yourself in the process. So, either you go get her, and she stays, or Conor gets her, and she disappears from our world forever.”

“You done?” I asked after a few seconds passed. “Because you’re talking to me like you never fucked up with Gia before she was murdered or like you didn’t do the same damn thing with Lily before finding out who she really was.” I gestured to the room around me, clearly void of the woman my soul begged for. “I know what I did. I know every way I’ve fucked up with Willow, but that’s on me. That’s my shit I have to work through, and I have been. So, the real option right now is whether the rest of you are gonna help or hang back. Either way, I’m getting her and keeping her with me.”

“Just like that,” Dare muttered, seemingly unconvinced. “Decision made.”

“My decision was made before I ever brought her here.”

“You sound real sure for someone who tried having her relocated just a few days ago.”

“Moment of panic,” I defended tightly, my voice taking on a lethal edge when I continued. “Then I saw her in someone else’s hold and heard her scream before she was taken from me.”

“That’ll do it.” Dare’s lips twitched into the beginnings of a smile as he pushed from the frame, nodding as he did. “I’ll have everyone gear up and meet in the conference room.”

I didn’t respond. Just watched him leave, hating that he and Maverick could so easily play me. Taunt me into getting amped up for a battle or twist confessions from me that I’d planned on keeping to myself. It didn’t inspire confidence that I was making the right move by trusting Autumn.

But again, it felt like that was our only path.

Well, that or the blood bath.

“Diggs . . .” Dare stepped back into the room, looking more somber than he had just a second before. “For what it’s worth, I didn’t keep us here to torture you and make Willow think we’d abandoned her. I stand by my reasoning,” he added with a lifted hand as if he’d expected me to argue. “But on top of that, we didn’t know how serious Willow’s injuries were, so getting

her too soon could've been more harmful to her than helpful. Not to mention . . . Kieran."

An amused breath tumbled free as I tossed out my hand, gesturing past him. "What about Kieran? All he can think about is slaughtering every last one of them."

"Including Willow," Dare said grimly, stunning me into a horrified silence. "Conor's been keeping him in place and talking to him. But we needed to wait until Kieran was thinking clearly again because, in his mind, Jess would be alive if it weren't for Willow."

I stammered for a few seconds before a curse ripped from my lungs. Dragging my hands through my hair, I staggered back a step when it felt like the room was closing in around me. "You're telling me that now? *After* I said I was bringing Willow back here? Jesus—"

"He's better."

A harsh laugh bled from me. "Fuck off. You're gonna tell me Kieran—fucking *Nightshade*—is better, like that's a possibility after what just happened to him? You think that'll placate me when I know Willow's on his list?"

"Was," Dare corrected. "I wouldn't consider letting him come if I didn't trust him on this. Conor wouldn't leave his side if he doubted it either."

"It's *Kieran*," I nearly shouted as if Dare was somehow missing that. "When he's in that mindset, there's no stopping him."

"We failed the other night in an irreparable way," Dare said gravely. "We've gotten too complacent these last few years, and none of us did our jobs the way we should've. None of us will make that mistake again—I won't make that mistake again. So, trust me when I say Willow is no longer in danger from Kieran."

When I stared helplessly at him, wanting so damn badly to argue, he tipped his head at me and said, "Finish getting ready, then head to the conference room. Be ready to tell us the plan."

I hesitated for a while longer after he left before reaching for my boots again, and had just finished getting the second on when my phone began ringing.

Pulling it out of my pocket, I scrambled to tap the green button when I saw Autumn's name on the screen.

But it felt like I was moving in slow motion and suddenly couldn't breathe because she'd just called before I'd started getting ready. She

shouldn't be calling again . . . not this soon.

"Yeah?" I said in way of answering, voice strained.

"He's in the room with her," came Autumn's hushed reply before the call ended, and my body nearly gave out before I was sprinting out of the bedroom, ready to demand we leave *now* rather than *soon*.

Because Lachlan Keane was in a room with my entire world.

But I'd only reached the first corner of the upstairs hallway when I nearly ran right into Kieran.

I stumbled a little in my attempt to dodge him and the rest of the group gathered there—a handful of people I hadn't even registered as I'd been racing down the hall because that call had scrambled every thought and sense.

"Shit. Shit, sorry," I mumbled as I sidestepped Conor and Sutton as well.

"We're going?" Kieran asked in confirmation, voice a soft rumble that drew my attention back to him.

To the rage and pain in his eyes. The loss and brokenness etched within the vengeance on his face. The determined set of his jaw.

Shit.

"Kieran . . ."

"Dare said we were meeting downstairs," he added as if that was all he needed to know.

I shared a quick look with Conor before glancing at where Jentry and Aurora were leaning against one of the walls, expressions withdrawn and somber. It was easy enough to see the cop wouldn't be joining us. Apparently he drew the line at being on the offensive.

Not that I cared. I still didn't think he should even be here.

But I didn't think letting the assassin beside me go was a smart move either.

"Kieran, I'm sorry," I began. "I'm—fuck, I'm so sorry about Jess."

His eyes narrowed on me in a way that warned I should stop talking—that I should probably run—but I edged closer and said, "I can't begin to imagine what you're going through or feeling, but I would change it if I could."

Conor grunted but stayed silent otherwise.

I swallowed roughly, struggling to do the simplest action when standing beside a person as dangerous as Nightshade and as broken as Kieran. "But going with us . . ."

"I know what Dare told you," Kieran said before I could go on. "If I

didn't want it getting back to you, I never would've told Conor. And I told Conor so they could lead me away from those thoughts." I watched as his jaw trembled and his eyes glossed over. "The thoughts are still there, and they'll be there because my wife is gone, but a greater part of me knows the truth. I know Willow sacrificed herself so the other women and my kids—all our kids—would be spared."

I nodded even as I said, "I can't trust you not to snap when you see her." I gestured to where Sutton stood. "You've done it before."

Kieran's gaze briefly shifted to her and Conor before focusing on me. "You need me on this, and that kill belongs to me and is overdue." Taking a step closer to me, he lowered his voice even more. The emotion there pulling at my chest when he vowed, "I won't let Willow die too."

My head bobbed as I repeated my earlier words, "I would change that night if I could. I would bring Jess back."

"We all would," Conor said soberly.

Kieran's eyes welled with unshed tears, but he just rocked back and cleared his throat. "We going? I have a Keane to kill."

I watched him stalk away, then kept my voice soft when I asked Conor, "Is he gonna be okay?"

"You can trust him tonight if that's what you're asking. It's the next months I'm worried about." A heaving sigh left Conor as he clapped my shoulder and started in the same direction with me by his side. "We'll be safe from Kieran . . . no one else will."

Then we would watch him. Be there for him and stop him from whatever destructive path he went down.

I just needed to know he wouldn't be a liability tonight.



WILLOW

I'd been afraid to even move after reading the note that girl had given me.

I'd stood there, looking for cameras from my position in the middle of the room for an embarrassing amount of time before I'd realized the likelihood of there being any was slim.

She wouldn't have risked giving me the note if there were. She wouldn't have lied about having forgotten my food.

But that didn't ease my worries because there had to be something. Well, according to the girl with the winking heart eyes. Which . . . I wasn't sure I wanted to put any kind of trust in anyone wearing a neon mask.

Still, I'd found myself being overly attentive to every sound I made as I finally moved through the room, looking for any kind of device that could transmit the sound from this room to somewhere else.

When I eventually sank to the bed, forcefully enough to ensure whoever was listening know what I was doing, my only relief was that I hadn't found anything in the bathroom. Because there was *something* . . . and it was directly next to the bed, attached to the back of the nightstand.

Assholes.

With a slightly exaggerated, pained moan, I curled up on my side, preparing to wait.

I didn't know days from nights in this windowless room, but between giving into the mental and physical exhaustion and trying to pass the long stretches of time between meals, I knew I'd been sleeping away most of my time there.

However, that foolish hope blooming in my chest had my mind alert and my eyes locked on the door, waiting for when that girl returned—if she returned.

I held back a belittling sigh at the realization that I was putting all my faith into one of my nightmares, but given the circumstances, I wasn't sure what other options I had.

But when the lock sounded hours later, sending my pulse into a frenzy of anticipation, that hope flickered when a mountain of a dog loped toward me as if I were her favorite person.

With a hushed demand, the dog abruptly stopped just before the bed and sat, looking excitedly at me as neon red filled the room behind her.

I guess we're back to the mask then . . .

"Ms. Bennett . . ."

"My name's Willow," I muttered irritably before finally giving in and reaching out for the scruffy, adorable dog.

"Don't," Lachlan seethed, stilling my hand with a single word. "She's a great dog, Ms. Bennett, but she *is* mine." He stepped up behind her, his voice dropping to a soft, chilling command. "Danger."

I jolted back when the dog shifted to a defensive position in front of Lachlan in an instant. Baring her teeth at me as a low, threatening growl rumbled from her.

"If I were you, I wouldn't get in the habit of trying to pet dogs you don't know," he said in a tone that bordered on mocking. "You never know what *monster* raised them."

My eyes narrowed, but I didn't respond to the challenge.

He was trying to prove that he was dangerous in all aspects as if I didn't know that.

"Hold," he whispered to the dog as he stepped past her to sit on the edge of the bed.

Despite the warning growl and menacing stance she maintained, I kept my breathing steady and even as I watched Lachlan's every move. Not that it wasn't disconcerting to have that threat directly beside me, but I knew Lachlan wouldn't have his dog do anything to me. Not after everything he did just to get me here.

Resting his arms on his legs, he clasped his hands together and said, "Give me a reason to trust you."

"Me," I replied in confirmation, stunned. A sound of irritation left me as I glanced at his dog. "Really?"

"Release," he murmured gruffly without ever looking away from me, and the giant beast playfully pounced in a circle before rushing around the bed to jump onto the same side she'd claimed the last time they'd been in there. "A reason."

"What could you possibly expect me to say?" I asked on a frustrated laugh. "I don't care if you trust me because I'll never trust you. You have no right to try to claim me. And why *me*?"

"You—"

“I know, I know,” I said over him, my eyes rolling and my tone shifting into something more mocking. “I survived you.”

“Careful.”

I cut a glare at him, refusing to acknowledge the chill that swept down my spine and over my skin at his warning.

Those neon eyes watched me for a while before he said, “I told you I was born into a world of monsters—that you have to adapt to your world, or it’ll destroy you. And I’ve never thought anyone could withstand this world beside me until you.”

Unease spread through me and had my stomach twisting when he added, “For whatever reason, my world is drawn to you. The fact that you keep surviving it, not just me, is how I knew you could handle what comes with being mine.”

“A brand doesn’t make me yours.”

A rumble built in his chest before he sighed deeply. “Thank you.” Before I could settle on shock or confusion at the unexpected term of gratitude, he straightened and added, “For letting me know I still can’t trust you.”

“Are you surprised?” I asked as he stood. “Or did you just expect me to forget about my life and the man I love after only a few days because the great Lachlan Keane *claimed* me.”

“I said *careful*.” The words ripped from Lachlan on a growl as he lurched toward me, that mask getting within an inch of my face and lighting up my entire world, even when I squeezed my eyelids shut. “I will destroy your old life and kill everyone you knew if it’ll make you forget them faster.”

I choked over pleas and rage-filled screams as flashes burst through my mind like they were happening directly in front of me. Then.

Because I knew his threats weren’t empty.

“And that Borello? I told you . . . three days, and they’ve already returned to their old lives, Ms. Bennett. He isn’t coming for you.”

My chest shook from the force of my next exhale, and tears stung the backs of my eyes. But the hope that had been slowly building throughout the day beat down the worst of my doubt.

My faith had been rocked and tested these past days. It’d faltered.

But I knew Diggs.

He’d find me anywhere. He’d come for me.

“I’ll gladly be your monster, Ms. Bennett, as long as you accept that you *are* mine.”

My mouth parted, but nothing left it as he pushed from me and started across the room, steps slow but commanding.

With a low whistle, the dog scrambled after Lachlan just as he glanced at me from over his shoulder. “If I were you, I’d be ready with a different answer next time.”

His unspoken threat hung in the air after he was gone, and those building tears quickly slipped down my cheeks until I was fighting sobs as a deep hopelessness and heartbreak pressed down around me.

I understood then . . . brand or not, Lachlan had taken away my choices in life the moment he decided he wanted me. Even if I could get out of this place, there was no leaving because it meant everyone I knew and loved would be at risk.

My family. My friends.

Diggs.

It was with that shattering realization that I gladly let sleep claim me when it came. And when I woke to pink neon directly in front of me sometime later, heart eyes winking at me, I rolled the opposite way and let my eyelids slip shut again.

She grabbed my arm, but I waved her off.

My heart was heavy and my head hurt. My eyes felt raw from crying and my chest was hollow in the absence of that earlier hope.

Sucking in a quick breath when I was shoved, the abrupt movement pulling at the stitches in my back, I opened my eyes to see her directly in front of me again, pointing toward the door.

With a shake of my head, I started shutting my eyelids again, only for them to pop open wide when she grabbed both of my arms and yanked me toward her like a ragdoll.

My mouth parted to snap at her, but I shut it before the words could slip free and instead worked at freeing myself from her.

With an overly exasperated movement, she released me, then gestured quickly from me to the door.

“I can’t,” I said so softly I wasn’t sure she could hear the words at all. But from the way she flexed her hands before they formed into fists directly in front of her mask in a show of frustration, she understood.

Grabbing a phone from her pocket, she tapped angrily on the screen before handing it to me. Each of her movements showing her urgency and frustration.

Why

WHY

I'm trying to help

I glanced at her before hurrying to respond and hand the phone back.

Lachlan will kill everyone I know and love if I leave.

She didn't need to take the mask off for me to see the *are you joking* look she was clearly giving me. It was evident in the way her head slanted and her hip popped out. But then she was shaking her head and rapidly responding before showing me the phone so I could read her message.

***He's planning on killing them no matter what you do
And we don't have a lot of time so let's go***

“Are you serious?” The words left me before I could stop them. But my fear and anguish pulled them from me on a strained breath that was just as soft as before.

She nodded vehemently, then gestured between the door and me again.

I only hesitated for a second or two before quietly easing off the bed to follow her, but had only made it a step when she grabbed an object from the foot of the bed . . .

A mask.

I stared at the horrifying article for far too long, my stomach in knots as I studied the lines of purple neon. But then the girl was grabbing my hand and holding it out so she could place the mask there, exasperation practically pouring from her and filling the room as she hurried for the door.

With an unsteady exhale, I carefully placed the plastic over my face before following her path. Trying not to think about the feel of the mask or how I now looked like my nightmare. Trying not to let the chill freezing my veins consume me. Trying to swallow when my throat suddenly felt so dry.

Stopping at the door when I bumped into the girl's outstretched hand, I nodded when she whispered, "Walk calmly . . . stay with me," and then we were slipping past the door and out of the room.

And it took everything to continue walking and not stop right there, rip the mask off, and look around in awe and horror.

Because where I'd expected a hallway inside a house, there was only a massive room that was easily the size of my apartment, filled with large metal tanks and containers.

Where the hell am I?

"This rival family you fell into," the winking girl began as she slowed until she was by my side, "what are they like?"

"What?"

She turned her neon mask on me, her head listing in a creepily identical way to her brother. "What are they like?"

"I-I—" I pressed my lips tightly together, worrying over the repercussions of my answer. Worrying over why she was asking at all. "I don't know," I finally said, refusing to give her anything on them.

"You don't know, but you want to get back to them," she said dully, clearly not believing me. "Or are they just the lesser of two evils in this situation?"

When she planted herself directly in front of me, silently demanding my response, I asked, "Why are you doing this?" I gestured past her as if Diggs' family would be standing there. "I hardly know them; I can't give you whatever information y'all want. So, you might as well put me back in that room."

"If I put you in that room, my brother will return soon. If you don't give the answer he wants this time, he'll start giving you reasons to *beg him* to trust you—starting with your parents and moving to that guy you won't shut up about. Understand?"

I was thankful I hadn't eaten the meals she'd brought me earlier because they would've come back up then.

I'd read her words. I'd believed her when she said Lachlan planned to kill everyone anyway. But my stomach heaved and my knees weakened at the

realization of the immediate danger my parents were in . . . and I had no way of warning them.

“I’ll take that as a *yes*,” the winking girl said as she grabbed my forearm and pulled me with her, faster than before. Slipping her phone out of her pocket with her free hand as she did and tapping on the screen as she rushed me through the room, keeping us close to the exposed brick wall.

“Where are you taking me?”

“I already told you,” she said distractedly as we came to a stop in front of an oversized elevator.

“You didn’t—”

“Hush,” she snapped as she studied the brightly lit screen for a while longer, leaving me anxiously looking around at the containers, tanks, and neatly stacked supplies. Waiting for neon red to pop out from behind one of them at any moment.

With a steadying breath, the girl pocketed her phone and pressed the *up* button for the elevator, then looked at me with that unnerving head tilt before reaching for the bottom of my shirt and pulling it up.

I reared back and tried twisting away from her, slapping at her hands as I did. “What—*no*. What are you—oh my God, *stop*,” I ground out when she practically ripped the shirt off me—partially from embarrassment and confusion, partially from pain—and hurried to cover my bare breasts as I struggled to right the mask she’d nearly taken with her.

“Lachlan’s seen you in this.”

“So?”

“He’s dangerously perceptive,” she said as she quickly removed her own shirt and forced it over my head, inside out, as if I were a toddler. “But these are my clothes anyway, so . . . we might just pull this off.”

“Pull what off?”

“From here on out, stop asking questions. Better yet—stop talking,” she said as if she’d greatly prefer that, then hurried into the shirt I’d been in before. “Look like you belong. And just let whatever happens happen.”

A stunned sound punched from me. “What’s going to—”

“I said no,” she said over me when the wide doors opened behind her, her voice soft and with an edge of worry. “Look, you have two choices: You either go back in the room, and everyone you know starts dying, or you come with me, let the events of the night play out how they have to, and hope you can save everyone.”

“I can save everyone?”

“Jesus Christ,” she hissed as I followed her onto the elevator. “Do you ever stop asking questions? Don’t answer that,” she added quickly as she reached for the bottom of my shirt again to adjust it.

“No questions,” she reminded me as she started fluffing my hair, smacking the side of my head when I initially, instinctively tried shifting away from her. But the outright waver in her tone as the elevator climbed higher had me going still. “Act like you belong and have been there before, so don’t look around. Stay by my side no matter what.”

“You’re scared,” I whispered when she took a step away from me, apparently deeming me ready.

An offended scoff left her, but she didn’t respond otherwise. And a few seconds later, the elevator came to a stop.

The girl hurried off the elevator, so I did the same. Even though each step from her seemed cool and confident, I could see the same sense of urgency as before as she led us toward a large bay filled with crates, containers, and half a dozen neon masks.

As soon as they rounded the corner, the girl latched onto my wrist and hauled me in the opposite direction. “Don’t say anything,” she reminded me under her breath, even as she hurried us away, then mumbled, “Shouldn’t have risked going that way.”

My head snapped over to look at her, my lips parted to ask what she meant and *who* was rounding the corner just as a deep, commanding voice rang out behind us.

“Autumn.”

The girl slowed to a stop with a hushed curse but turned with a flourish and taunting tone. “And here I thought I could escape you for another night.” She clicked her tongue as I forced myself to face the group of unfamiliar masks closing in on us. “Damn. How’d you know it was me?”

“Autumn—”

“Was it the heart?” A haughty laugh left her. “What am I saying, of course it was.” Her tone turned hateful when she said, “Because it’s gonna be what destroys me. Right, Dad?”

Oh God.

I knew right then I would rather take the room downstairs with Lachlan’s outrageous demand for trust than *this*. Because the man who had ingrained that sin and depravity in Lachlan was standing directly in front of me.

“Don’t have time for this, Autumn.” He sighed impatiently, then gestured behind him. “With what happened the other night, we think it’s best the wedding continues . . . with Aiden.”

A sharp, disbelieving laugh burst from the girl at my side, and she staggered back a step before rocking toward me. “I just hallucinated because it sure as fucking shit sounded a lot like y’all decided I’m still getting married . . . but to Sean’s brother.”

“Know your place,” her dad barked, and I wondered if I would start laughing or crying first.

I’d blindly put my trust in this girl, I’d let that hope bloom, and she’d been engaged to Sean—to Detective Higgins. She was probably leading me straight to Lachlan to show him exactly *why* he couldn’t trust me.

This had all been an elaborate trap, and I’d fallen for it.

Oh my God, I can’t breathe.

“I know my place,” Autumn shot back just as fiercely, refusing to back down. “You’ve reminded me of it my entire life. But maybe, I don’t know, give me more than three days to grieve before informing me I’m marrying my dead fiancé’s brother.”

At that, she turned again, reaching for me and pulling me with her, and I stumbled after her because I wasn’t sure what else to do.

Either way, everyone I loved was already in grave danger, and I’d signed their death warrants.

“Your fiancé was Detective Higgins,” I mumbled once we were hurrying down our second hallway. Autumn hushed me, but I still said, “I would say I’m sorry . . . but I’m not.”

A disgusted sound left her. “He can rot in Hell for all I care.”

I slowed as the bass of music and the hum of conversations started filtering through the walls, but Autumn gripped my arm tighter, trying to hurry me. Just as I started worrying over where we were going, she explained, “Our club. We can’t go that way.” She held up a hand before I could ask and added, “Masks aren’t allowed. If Lachlan’s in there, he’ll—”

Autumn and I came to an abrupt stop when the power went out. Despite the disappointed groans from the people in the club, the glow of neon lighting our bodies and path, and the absence of electrical whirring filled the hall with a thickness that had chills rising on my arms.

Or maybe that was anticipation and *hope*.

“Shit, shit, shit,” she whispered. “We have to go.”

“They’re coming.” The words were a breath leaving me, and I turned as if I might be able to see Diggs or his family in the pitch-black corridor. “They’re here.”

“And we shouldn’t be,” she seethed.

“No,” I cried out and ripped my arm from her when she tried dragging me away again, but then I was choking over a pained gasp and struggling for air when Autumn slammed me against the wall and gripped my neck with surprising force.

“Your boyfriend is only in *here* because I didn’t get you out *there* fast enough,” she harshly whispered. “Call attention to us, and we’ll be found by people you don’t want finding us. Now, let me get you out of here.”

Shock whipped through me, stilling me in place even after she stepped back. I couldn’t figure out why a Keane was helping me and why she hadn’t told me the truth earlier rather than giving me a vague *I’m trying to help*. I couldn’t figure out if I was truly supposed to believe her or not—it felt like I was getting whiplash with the way my hope kept blooming and dwindling.

But despite my hesitation, I reached out for her, grasping her arm and taking a step with her just as neon red rounded a corner at the far end.

“Oh God,” I breathed as I took a staggering step away.

Autumn grabbed my hand before I could make it any farther, her tone shifting to forced irritation. “For fuck’s sake. Do I really have to get one of the rooms to have a second of privacy?”

“Privacy?” Lachlan growled. “Did you miss the power being cut? And who the fuck is that?”

“A distraction. Get your own,” Autumn answered easily.

I let my head tip ever so slightly to the side when Lachlan’s neon expression remained fixated just past his sister—on *me*—giving him the same slanted look he usually gave me.

“You and your distraction need to look around. Those assholes came for retaliation. They came for that girl,” Lachlan said as he started toward us, that disturbing stare never leaving me. “Don’t let any of them live.”

“Okay, *Dad*,” she said sarcastically, her grip on me tightening as he passed us in the hall. But then he was stalking away from us, and Autumn was rushing me in the same direction we’d been taking earlier, and that hope exploded. Whatever her plan was, it felt attainable.

We’d made it through being stopped by her dad and Lachlan . . . we could make it to wherever the goal was.

But I should've known better than to let myself believe we'd done it. That we could make it outside without any hang-ups.

Because there was a distinct glow that grew brighter the closer we got to the end of the hall. And as we turned the corner, my stomach dropped when I saw a red mask, listed just enough to send chills racing down my spine.

Beside the man sat a mountain of a dog, patiently waiting for a command. "Autumn," Lachlan muttered, his bored tone and relaxed stance somehow deepening my dread.

"No one lives, I know," she said as if she'd had to repeat the words dozens of times. "Maddox already told me."

I stared in bemusement, unable to comprehend for a second too long that the man we'd just run into wasn't the one in front of us.

Logically, I understood more than one of them could have the same mask. But they sounded the same. In the dark of the hall, with only the neon lighting our forms, they had identical builds. And now I was wondering if any of the times I'd had an encounter with Lachlan, it had been his brother instead.

A hum of acknowledgment rumbled from Lachlan as he held a hand toward his sister. "Hatchet."

Autumn's grip on me turned painful as a stilted laugh left her. "Kinda need it."

"Is that right?" Lachlan challenged just as yells sounded in different parts of the building. With another hum, he lifted a bat with the other hand, sending me spiraling as dizzying flashes from that night a year ago assaulted me. "Of everyone, I never thought you would betray us . . . betray *me*. Give me your hatchet—I know it's on you."

"Run," Autumn whispered, but then she was stumbling into me with a surprised grunt of pain as Lachlan said, "I'd rather Ms. Bennett stayed."

"And I'd rather y'all go fuck yourselves and die," Autumn yelled as she hurled herself at Lachlan, swinging at him just as he did the same.

Her scream filled the hall a second before wood and metal clattered to the floor, and then she was hunching over on herself and cradling her arm.

With a low whistle, Lachlan pointed at me and gave the same order as earlier: "Danger."

One nearly inaudible word. But it was all it took for his dog to take a defensive position. Growling and snapping at me when I shifted the smallest bit.

“Don’t make me kill you, Autumn,” Lachlan practically begged as he lifted the bat again.

A crazed-sounding laugh left her. “But Sean could’ve, and that would’ve been okay?”

Lachlan’s bat dipped enough to show her words had caught him off guard, but Autumn continued, yelling and seething at him, before he could speak.

“They can’t choose my life for me. You can’t choose her life for her,” she said, swinging an arm at me. “I deserved more than that asshole who got off on destroying me and killing anyone I looked at, and she deserves more than you.”

“You could’ve told me.”

“Like you didn’t know?” she cried at him in disbelief. “Sean was your best friend; don’t pretend to have been blinded to what he was like. And Dad doesn’t make a decision without running it by you first, so I know you approved me for Aiden too, you asshole. But women can’t be moved around and claimed this way, Lachlan. You can’t claim her.”

“There’s a brand on Ms. Bennett’s body that says I can.”

“Fuck the brand and fuck this family.”

Another grunt left Lachlan as he gripped the handle of the bat with both hands, his head dipping in a nod. “You should know me better than to think I’d let someone live who’s *destroying* my little sister. However . . .”—he brought the bat to the side of Autumn’s head with a slowness that made me feel off-balanced, as if everything were suddenly in slow motion—“take what’s mine, and I’ll kill you myself.”

“Do it,” Autumn said with a defeated huff, slipping her mask from her face and letting it fall to the floor. She slowly reached behind her, grasping something in the waistband of her pants as she continued. “Just know, no matter how long you trap her with you, and no matter what she forces herself to say, she’ll never belong to you.”

“We’ll see,” Lachlan murmured, words dripping with challenge and amusement.

“You won’t,” someone said from behind Lachlan. And even in its cruelty, those words had relief pounding through my veins and tears pricking at the backs of my eyes in this volatile situation because I knew that voice like my own.

That voice was comfort and sin and whispered words in darkened rooms.

It was promises and teases and a desperate, aching *I love you*.



WILLOW

My knees nearly gave out in relief, and Lachlan's dog lurched forward, snapping and barking at me when I stumbled.

"Chaos, *release*," Autumn yelled just as a guttural roar filled the narrow hall.

And I went still . . .

Not because of Lachlan's unexpected cry of pain, or because I truly feared his dog, that was now whimpering as she checked on where he'd stumbled backward. I froze because a dark chill was seeping through the hall and coating my skin, warning me the threat was no longer just in front of me.

"See, I like what you said," Diggs began, voice like grated steel. "'Take what's mine, and I'll kill you myself.' Because I've dreamt of pulling this trigger since I woke up to Willow *gone*."

That malevolent warning drew in closer. Tighter. Making it hard to breathe.

"But you aren't my kill," Diggs ground out just before Lachlan released a pained "*Fuck*." His bat lifting weakly in my direction as he ordered, "Destroy."

"Release, Chaos," Autumn snapped at the dog just as quickly.

"Pray Nightshade doesn't find you."

The instant the sinister voice sounded behind me, amplifying the ominous presence closing in around us, my lungs and heart seized. I felt at once frozen in place and like my body was crumbling under my terror from a *voice*.

A shudder ripped down my spine when Kieran slipped past me, attention wholly focused on where Lachlan was straightening.

"He'll slit your throat and bleed you dry."

A low, cold laugh roughed from Lachlan at Kieran's disturbing words and was cut short by an anguished curse.

I hadn't even seen Kieran move. But now that I knew what was happening, I could just barely discern the multiple handles sticking out of Lachlan's chest and shoulder.

"Looks like I offended you," Lachlan ground out, clearly trying to suppress his grunt of discomfort as he lifted his bat. "Was it someone

important to you?”

“My wife,” Kieran sneered.

“Unfortunate,” Lachlan tsked through his labored breathing just as it felt like the hallway came crashing down around me because Autumn was suddenly holding a hatchet to Kieran’s neck, and Diggs was yelling accusations and demands at her. All while Kieran stood there calmly, and red neon remained fixated on me.

And somehow, throughout all the commotion, the fucking dog had ended up directly in front of me. On high alert.

“Not him,” Autumn begged, unwavering in her threat against Kieran.

“Not your call,” Diggs shot back. “Pick a fucking side.”

“Just—just *not him*,” she repeated.

“Release,” I whispered to the dog as I reached for my borrowed mask and felt a jolt of fear whip through me when her teeth gnashed together in warning.

Autumn had said her name. I was sure of it.

But with the frantic and terrifying events unfolding around us, I was struggling to remember exactly what she’d said.

“Release,” I pleaded again, my mind racing to remember Autumn’s words as Diggs reminded her, “He was going to kill you.”

“He—” Autumn began, only to hesitate. Her pain and wavering mixed with the lethality in the hallway until it felt like one wrong move would be the start of the next cataclysmic event.

“Don’t,” Lachlan seethed when a hand grasped my arm, forcing a surprised inhale from me. “She’s mine.”

“Time to go,” a deep voice whispered from behind me. But just as the man started leading me backward, the dog lunged.

“Chaos, *release*,” I cried out in desperation and stared in disbelief when her bared teeth shifted to a playful, dopey smile as she trotted past me to nudge my side.

Kieran’s head had whipped around to look at us, and I heard more than saw his surprise when he asked, “What’d you just—” The question ended on a shocked curse when he was knocked to the side.

But before I could make sense of what’d happened, I was being rushed away as Kieran’s lethal snarl ripped through the hall and mixed with Diggs’ yells for me and Autumn’s choked pleas and denials.

“Wait, we can’t—” I began as I struggled to keep up, “we can’t leave

them.”

“We won’t,” he assured me. “Faster.”

I stumbled a little at his words, but I wasn’t sure if it was due to nearly being tripped by the massive, gangly dog I hadn’t realized was running with us or because I’d just realized I didn’t know the man pulling me farther and farther away from Diggs.

He wasn’t wearing a neon mask . . . but he wasn’t wearing a black bandana either. And as we turned another corner in the hall, my heart beat relentlessly against my ribs as Diggs’ yells echoed in my mind.

Because he’d known.

Oh God.

I looked back at where the dog had momentarily stopped to sniff a body splayed out on the floor, neon mask marking their position, and reached for her, snapping as softly as I could to get her attention.

“Chaos,” I breathed, my lungs feeling bruised from the perpetual strain on them. I faltered, stammered as I struggled to remember what had been said so clearly in front of me and what now seemed so muddled.

“Faster,” the guy snapped, yanking on my arm and tearing something in my back.

I reached for the dog as she trotted happily beside me, silently begging for her to understand with my touch that I needed help.

“Danger!” I shouted when it suddenly came to me, then pointed at the man dragging me and repeated, “Chaos, *danger.*”

In an instant, she changed. Rushing the man and lunging for his arm. But when he turned on us, I knew it wasn’t enough.

I should’ve known when Lachlan gave that earlier command. Because all Chaos would do now was protect me and scare him, and scaring people who got a thrill out of murdering others wasn’t enough.

“Chaos—” I floundered for a moment, my stomach rolling and knotting at the thought that I was no better than Lachlan, before I whispered, “Chaos, destroy.”

I took a staggering step back when she attacked in a way I hadn’t seen before. Viciously ripping into the man as he tried fighting her off and yelling numerous commands, even the correct one.

But she was unstoppable now that she’d been unleashed. Tearing into him and proving she was just as lethal as the man who’d raised her.

It was horrifying.

“Release,” I said shakily from where I stood, pressed against the wall, watching in revulsion as she continued attacking the man who’d stopped fighting long seconds before. “Chaos, *release*.”

“*Tree*.”

I turned at the sound of that voice—*his* voice—and nearly collapsed in relief when the dark shape at the end of the hall rushed forward and pulled me into his familiar embrace. Body tight and trembling as he held me close.

“Fucking hell,” Diggs breathed into my neck. “Forgive me.”

“Diggs—”

“We need to go,” he said over me, gripping me even tighter before pulling away. “I’ll spend the rest of our lives on my knees, begging you to forgive me for this—for everything. But I gotta get you out of here first.”

My heart stuttered before taking off in some sort of dizzying, hopeful dance just as he glanced the way we’d come before looking the way I’d been going. “We can go that way.”

“Wait—Autumn,” I hurried to say when he stepped around the mangled body and dog. “She was helping me.”

“Kieran has her,” Diggs said in a tone that let me know she was safe, then reached back for me. “Can you run? We’re almost there, but I need you to run with me.”

My head bounced in a mess of nods and shakes as I stammered, “Y-yeah.”

I swayed a little when his fingers trailed down my arm and teased the sensitive flesh of my wrist, but then he was gripping my hand and hurrying down the hall much the same way I had been just minutes before.

Only this time, fear wasn’t coating my veins. This time, my only worries were of later repercussions, not of our current situation. And even when Diggs released my hand so he could lift his rifle, I knew I was undoubtedly safe. No one would get through him, and if anyone came up behind us, I now knew what the dog at my side was capable of.

“Oh my God,” I breathed when we rounded the oversized elevator and spilled out into the large bay—now illuminated with the dull glow of backup lights and revealing the same group of men Autumn and I had run into not long before.

Only now, they were all dead.

From their clustered position and lack of weapons, I wondered if they’d even known what was happening before they’d all been killed.

Not that I felt an ounce of remorse for them.

“That’s the Keane Street boss,” I said as we ran past the bodies, then snapped for Chaos when she stopped to smell each of them.

Diggs glanced at me, his eyebrows drawing low in concern and making him look even more mysterious with the bandana covering the rest of his expression.

“We’re aware,” he finally answered as he slowed, reaching back to make sure I slowed with him as we neared the open bay doors.

“I can still handle you.”

He faltered in his next step, his breath coming out harsh and shaky before he made a quick check around the corner of the door.

With another slow exhale, he looked at me. “Dare and Mav are waiting for us. They’ll have our backs, and I’ll have theirs. Don’t wait for me, just run to the SUV. Understand?” When I nodded, he added, “Get the dog to stop following you.”

“No,” I said as I stepped up to his side. “Lachlan took me . . . I’m taking his dog.”

“Lachlan’s dead,” Diggs informed me bluntly, even though I should’ve already known they wouldn’t let him live with all he’d done.

“Then I’m still taking his dog,” I said resolutely. “She followed me when he was still alive. She chose me.”

Diggs eyed the massive beast at my side, then gave a sharp nod. “Let’s go.”

As soon as Diggs lifted his rifle, I did what he said.

Ran.

I didn’t look back for him. I didn’t focus on Maverick and Dare with their rifles trained at different points of the building, bursts of gunfire filling the night. I just ran with a blood-covered beast of a dog at my side, dragging in deep breaths of the first fresh air I’d tasted in days, until I reached the idling, blacked-out SUV just as the back doors opened.

I’d barely rounded one of the doors when I was grabbed by Alexis’ dad and hauled into the back, where a bed of blankets waited.

“The hell?” he snapped, stumbling back with me when Chaos jumped in as if she’d been invited.

“The dog’s apparently coming,” Diggs said as he followed us in and shut the doors.

“We going?” Dare yelled as he slipped into the driver’s seat.

“Yeah,” Diggs called back just as Maverick slid into the car, turning to look at us and eyeing the dog warily. “Don’t ask.”

“I kinda want to,” Maverick gently argued as Dare took off, peeling away from the building.

“She’s Lachlan’s,” came a feminine voice, filling me with relief just before Autumn glanced at us from the passenger seat. “Was.”

“What’d you call her?” Kieran asked from where he was fully turned around in the second row, his expression even more terrifying than usual. Then again, I couldn’t blame him.

“Chaos,” Autumn and I answered at the same time, and Alexis’ dad’s gaze snapped to me before slowly shifting back to Kieran.

“Why?” I asked softly, suddenly unsure of myself.

Neither responded for a while. And when Kieran finally did, his hushed words were full of a heartbreak I felt to my core. “That’s what I called Jessica.”

“I’m sorry,” I began, my tongue darting out to wet my lips. “That pain is . . . suffocating and cruel. I’m so sorry for—I’m just sorry. I wish I could —”

“Don’t,” Kieran said softly, making me choke over my broken apology.

Alexis’ dad cleared his throat to break through the tension between us and said, “I’m Conor—not sure if you remember. I heard about your back.” Gesturing to the blankets, he asked, “Mind if I check it?”

With everything that’d happened in such a short time, I’d forgotten all about it. But now that we were away from the building and the threats within, now that the adrenaline was fading, I wondered how I could’ve. Because the wounds were throbbing in time with my pulse and searing in some places. It felt like all my energy was being shifted to that pain, and I was so, undeniably exhausted.

“Tree, it’s bleeding through your shirt,” Diggs informed me softly, breaking me out of my self-inspection.

“Right,” I mumbled, my head bobbing, then met Conor’s patient stare. “Yeah, of course.”

I awkwardly settled onto my stomach on the blankets and watched Conor lift the dog as if she were a tiny puppy to deposit her in the middle row.

“You’re in the way,” he told the dog irritably before looking pointedly at Diggs.

“I’ll stay in the way,” Diggs said stubbornly. “I’m not leaving.”

“Understood,” Conor muttered, then carefully worked my shirt up my back as Diggs set his rifle down and eased onto his side next to me.

“You found me,” I whispered as he lowered his bandana.

His eyebrows drew close as he nodded before shaking his head. “We knew where you were. Waiting killed me, but we wanted to give you time to heal so we wouldn’t hurt you more when we came.” He lifted his hand, his fingers gently trailing along my cheekbone and jaw. “Tried letting you know—Autumn,” he added in explanation.

My head shifted, but just as I started telling him I didn’t know what he was talking about, I realized, “The drawings.”

Confusion lit his expression and had a seed of doubt forming in my chest.

“Were they not from her?” I asked slowly. “They were us—I thought it was Lachlan at first, mocking me by letting me know how much he knew about us. But there was a coffee cup with a lavender sprig, a bed, and a bloodhound. And there was a—”

“Willow tree,” Diggs said, head nodding. “I gave her specifics so you would know you could trust her. But she was supposed to tell you we were coming.”

“The room was bugged.”

“Got it,” he muttered as his hand slipped down to intertwine with mine. “Tree, I’m so damn sorry.”

“I went.”

“You shouldn’t have.”

“There was no other option,” I reminded him gently, softly, hoping Kieran couldn’t hear us.

“If the only option is you being taken from me, I promise you, there’s another fucking option.” His fingers clenched tighter around mine. “I owe you a lot of explanations, and I’ll give you every one of them. But I need to know if you meant it.”

A questioning hum rose in my throat and was met with a whimper of pain when Conor wiped over a particularly sensitive area.

“You’ve seen my life now,” Diggs began. “You’ve seen the literal worst parts of it. So, tell me you wanna go back to your old life, and you will. Tell me you wanna start over somewhere no one from my world can find you, and we’ll make it happen.” His eyes searched my face for a moment, his voice twisting in something close to a plea when he said, “Or tell me you meant it—tell me you can handle who I really am—and I’ll never let you go again.”

“I can handle you,” I said undoubtedly. “But I can’t handle being repeatedly pushed away by you.” Tears burned the backs of my eyes, and my words came out strangled when I said, “I love you, but my heart can’t take that anymore.”

Clearing his throat, he gave a hesitant nod as if realizing his words weren’t enough, as if he’d just realized how badly I’d been hurt by his words and actions before everything had fallen apart between us.

He shifted forward to press his lips to my forehead for a few seconds before reluctantly pulling away. “I fucked up with you in so many ways, but don’t write us off yet. Give us one more chance.”

I just nodded because I’d never been the one to write us off.

From the beginning, that’d been him.



DIGGS

We would go back to our homes . . . eventually. For now, we needed a place big enough to house us while we waited for the remaining KSG to retaliate, so we were still holed up at Holloway.

Autumn was sure they wouldn't.

Not with the numbers they'd lost. Not with the significant members—the boss and underboss being two of them.

And then there was her. No one trusted Autumn enough just yet to leave her alone. Sure, she was how I'd gotten my information on Willow during those days, but we would've gotten Willow with or without Autumn's help. And with the way she'd turned on us at the end so we would spare Lachlan . . . well, simply put, Conor was standing guard outside her bedroom door, and Dare had taken her phone.

I didn't care where we were; I would've been right there no matter what house or apartment we were in. In a chair beside the bed Willow was asleep in. Knee anxiously bouncing as I waited for her to wake.

She was fine. Conor had said for how bad her injuries must've been, Keane Street had taken care of her surprisingly well. Autumn had been offended at the *surprisingly* but confirmed everything they'd done for Willow. But all that pain, healing, and stress from the night we'd come for her would've made for an intense crash. Mixed with the pain reliever Conor had given her, I wasn't surprised she'd been asleep for over twelve hours.

But they'd been the longest twelve hours of my life because I had no idea where we'd stand once she woke.

My fault. I knew.

But I couldn't lose the girl in front of me.

I glanced at my phone when it vibrated and looked over the message from Maverick. Tapping out a response, I hit send just as Willow shifted, her breath hitching and eyelids slowly blinking open, revealing those stunning green eyes.

"Hey," I said when she relaxed against the pillows with a heavy exhale, voice thick with my unknowns and worries.

"Hey yourself," she rasped, the corner of her full lips twitching into the

beginnings of a smirk before falling into a startled frown. “I can’t move my legs.”

“There’s a giant ass dog on you.”

Willow twisted to look at where the Irish Wolfhound was spread across the entire foot of the bed and draped over her legs, affection and something like guilt warring in her eyes as she reached over to pet the dog’s head.

“She likes everyone . . . loved when Lily and Libby gave her a bath. But she’s protective of you,” I informed her, jerking my chin at the dog when I explained, “Won’t let me closer to you than I am now.”

Willow’s brow furrowed at the news, and with another scratch to the dog’s head, she relaxed on the bed again. “Lachlan must’ve said something to her—given her a command I didn’t hear,” she said slowly, carefully. “I was trying to figure that out on the way back here. He could make me her target, but she still came with me like she knew to stay with me in dangerous situations, even when he was in trouble.”

A grunt of irritation rose in my throat as I thought about the fresh brand on her shoulder and the way Lachlan Keane had tried taking this girl from me.

“Lachlan . . .” I began, drawing his name out as if it tasted bitter rolling off my tongue, “you saw what he did the other night. Had his crew go for the wives and kids.” I tipped my head at her. “That’s what happens in my world. People you love are used against you to destroy you. To force you into retreating or giving up.

“I’ve watched my family nearly fall apart after Dare’s fiancée was murdered in retaliation for something that never even happened,” I told Willow gravely. “I’ve seen the crippling devastation in my brother’s eyes when he realized Einstein had been taken—when he thought she was dead.”

Shock coated Willow’s expression, but I continued before she could ask. “Enemies will always go after the person you love most because they’re your weakness, and I swore I would never have one. I swore to never put anyone in that kind of danger.” I scrubbed my hands over my face and leaned forward, resting my arms on my legs and clasping my hands tightly. “And then that vow turned into an outright fear the night I almost died.”

Willow’s eyes widened with horror, her full lips parting slightly as her chest caved from her heaving exhale. “What?”

“My scars—” I cleared my throat, my head slanting as I prepared to tell her everything I’d avoided all this time. “You’ve asked about them. They’re

—well, it’s even more fucked now because of who your boyfriend was, but I swear I didn’t know until the other night.”

“I know,” she said on a breath. “I could see the way it shocked all of you.”

My head bobbed and my jaw worked for a while. “We were going after Zachary—Michael’s older brother. He and a few other guys had kidnapped and almost killed Einstein—tortured her. All because one of their wives had run away and sought out Kieran, Conor, Jess, and Einstein—” Unease burst from me as I was once again slammed with the reminder Jess was fucking *gone*.

“Uh, they have a private investigative business. But they also help relocate people . . . like witness protection. Probably better though because they have Einstein.” *I would know*. “Zachary used his wife as bait to trap the rest of us, but it backfired, considering we ended up helping her and her daughter escape him. Sutton and Alexis,” I explained meaningfully.

Willow’s expression shifted into disbelief as all the mixed-up pieces of the puzzle continued falling into place for her. “But they . . . oh my God. Are you serious?”

“Yeah,” I muttered. “But we were going after Zachary and the rest of his generation of the Tennessee Gentlemen—their gang. You would’ve never known Michael was part of it. None of their women were allowed to know anything,” I added gently, my stare falling to the bed again as I struggled to continue.

Because, other than losing Willow, that night was my greatest failure.

It was why I’d been so damn afraid to let Willow in.

“I go in first,” I reminded her. “I let my family know when there’s hidden danger. I’m the one who detects things. But the night we made our move against Zachary . . . I was distracted.” I swallowed thickly, trying to clear the shame and embarrassment from my voice, but it was still evident when I continued. “I’d always been so against settling down, but we’d just met Sutton and Lex that morning, and for whatever reason, that little badass burrowed into my heart and shook me.”

A ghost of a smile tugged at the corners of my mouth but was quick to fall. “After a day of taking care of Lex and having her as my little shadow, I remember thinking, ‘I could do this. I could let myself fall in love with someone and have kids,’ and I wanted it for the first time in my life. I *craved* it.”

That night flashed before me as if it were happening right then and not a few years before. “That’s what I was thinking about when we went in . . . a family. My surprise at wanting one and my regret at the time I’d missed out on potentially having one. And because I was so distracted by that, I didn’t notice the ambush waiting for us.”

“Diggs,” Willow whispered when I didn’t go on. “That wasn’t your fault. It couldn’t have been because of that day.”

“It was,” I assured her as my stare shifted back to her beautiful, heartbroken expression. “There were a handful of them, and they’d been smoking. I should’ve easily noticed them, and I didn’t. Maverick was shot in the arm. I took three in my right side and got a back full of shrapnel. Conor had to rig a transfusion in a hotel room just to save me.”

“Oh God,” she said on a strained wheeze. “Evan . . .”

“And then I met you,” I mumbled meaningfully, the corner of my mouth lifting in a sad smile. “The biggest distraction of my life. And it fucking terrified me.”

Willow nodded, a heavy exhale leaving her at finally understanding.

“I didn’t want to want you the way I did, and I hated that I couldn’t stay away from you,” I admitted. “I was terrified because I’d fallen so damn hard for you, and the hours you weren’t by my side were agonizing, but I didn’t want you anywhere near my world. Then bodies started turning up with clear messages for us . . .”

I studied her for a moment as I sifted through my frenzied, rattled thoughts and decisions during that time. “And between my need for you and worries of what *could* happen—my fear that I’d get distracted again and get someone killed—I ended up getting in my own way and sabotaging my job and us anyway. Then Lachlan set his sights on you, and I fucking panicked because he wouldn’t have if it weren’t for me. And instead of pulling you closer, I did everything to get you as far from me as possible.”

“You think that’ll just stop?” she asked doubtfully, sadness pulling at each word. “A few days is enough for your worries to disappear?”

“Having you taken from me is enough,” I countered unquestionably. “Tree, I don’t know how to live without you.”

“You tried,” she reminded me, voice wavering with emotion. “You said —”

“I know what I said,” I ground out on a plea as I stood from the chair, my stare narrowing on the dog when she popped up in warning. With a deep

exhale, I focused on Willow again and said, “I know what I did. I would’ve done anything to protect you from this.” I gestured to the room we were in. Not that this room or mansion had meant anything since the rockstars moved in, but it had at one point.

And the people inside it then . . . they still represented a danger and life I’d never intended on introducing anyone to.

“But I—fuck, I’m drowning when you’re not there. I look for pieces of you in every part of my life. You’re so deep in my veins, I couldn’t remove you even if I wanted to,” I confessed as I stepped closer to the bed and was met with a deep growl.

Lifting my hands placatingly, I pointed at Chaos and started for the bedroom door. “The dog has to go. At least for now.”

A hushed laugh left Willow, but she just gave a gentle push against the giant beast.

“Out,” I said once I was at the door and holding it open, but the dog didn’t move until Willow repeated the same thing, as if she hadn’t been taking orders from me before Willow woke.

“She’ll go find Lex or someone,” I informed Willow as I slowly started back to where she was now fully sitting up, legs crossed and hands resting in her lap.

“Now you know . . . my scars are a reminder of my failure. They’re a reminder that loving someone, loving *you*, is dangerous for so many people.” I rested my palms on the bed, studying her glassy eyes. “But if you choose to stay in this life, if you handle me, I will battle that fear until my scars are nothing more than scars. I will prove I’m worth all that trust you’ve always freely given. I will make sure you know the only place I want you is by my side. I will love you with every fucked-up part of me, and I will gladly give my life to protect yours.”

A tear slipped down Willow’s cheek, and then another, but she casually brushed them away as she studied me. “And if I told you I wanted you but not this life?”

Fuck.

I leaned back but kept my grip on the bed, my stare unfocusing for the brief moments it took me to realize my answer.

Because I was made for this life—I knew that. I felt that in my bones. But choosing the mafia over Willow? Choosing *anything* over her after experiencing even a glimpse of how soul-destroying life was without her?

“I’d disappear with you today,” I said gruffly, honestly.

But from the understanding swirling in those green eyes and the gentle curl of her mouth, my answer hadn’t surprised her. It was almost as if she’d wanted me to know, without a doubt, exactly what she meant to me.

“I can handle you and your life,” she said firmly, a gasp of surprise bleeding into a needy whimper when I crushed my mouth to hers to taste the claim. Taste *her*.

All vanilla and lavender and *mine*.

“I love you,” I breathed against her lips before parting them. Slowly. Teasingly. Nearly groaning when she fisted my shirt in her hands and drew me closer as I swept my tongue into her mouth.

The kiss nothing less than a slow, seductive dance that promised carnal endings.

Tipping her head back, I deepened the kiss as I knelt on the bed. Towering over her and loving the way a shiver rolled through her when I began laying her down. But then her back hit the bed, and her subdued hiss fanned across my lips as she tensed beneath me.

“Shit.”

“I’m fine,” she hurried to assure me, but I slowly shook my head. Letting my mouth brush across hers a few times before I placed my hands on either side of her and shifted away.

“You aren’t,” I argued, a wry grin tugging at the corner of my mouth when I added, “Conor even warned me against this exact thing.” A laugh worked up my throat at the frustration that crossed her beautiful face, and I hurried to steal another quick kiss. “I have something to show you anyway.”

“I don’t want it if it means we’re leaving this spot,” she said when I pushed from the bed.

My next laugh was louder as I carefully helped her to her feet. “Trust me, that’s the last thing I wanna do. But I also don’t want Conor to kill me because he has to fix your stitches again, and this is one of my favorite things.”

“Sandwiches?” she teased when I began pulling the comforter off the bed.

My head listed because there would be sandwiches there, but that wasn’t it. “Not quite.”

“Blueberry scones?” she tried again, not nearly as confident as before.

“*Mini* blueberry scones,” I corrected, feigning offense that she hadn’t noticed, then gently pressed my hand to her back and led her to the door.

“And again . . . not quite. Just wait.”

“Okay, but can I change if we’re leaving the room?” she asked, pulling from me just before I reached the door.

I turned to take her in, my stare slowly drifting over her as she nervously smoothed her hands over my shirt she was wearing—one I’d helped her into just before she’d crashed last night. She wasn’t drowning in it or anything, but it fell just right to give the illusion she wasn’t wearing anything underneath. Not that the stretchy shorts she had on covered much of anything other than her ass . . . but she was dressed. She was in my shirt. And with her hair a fucking mess and her lips even poutier than usual due to sleep, I wasn’t sure she’d ever been more beautiful than at that moment.

By the time my stare locked on hers again, a soft blush was filling her cheeks and she was fighting a smile.

“Don’t,” I pleaded softly, then reached for the door handle.

“Okay,” she said just as softly, that smile breaking free as she passed me on her way into the hall.

“There’s this thing we do—my family,” I added as we walked. “Maverick and I started it after joining them, and it’s continued ever since. I mean, it changed a little when everyone started having kids, but it’s generally the same. And it’s usually at our main house, but . . .” I worked my jaw a few times, still struggling to come to terms with everything that happened in the past week. Everything we lost.

Death was a part of this life. I’d known that from the beginning.

Shit, death had even been a very real part of our lives before Maverick and I were brought into the mafia. It’s why Maverick asked if I was alive before every battle we went into. He wanted to give me that second of pause to feel the oxygen going in and out of my lungs and to remember who I was. He wanted me to do everything to ensure I came out on the other side the *same*.

But Dare had given Maverick and me a home when the rest of the world had abandoned us. The Borello house had been the place we’d hidden out, living with Sofia, for so long before we’d felt confident enough to start going out in public again.

She’d become a second mom to us. She’d been a mom to all of us.

To have our mother figure and that haven—that symbol of our second chance at life—taken away in one fell swoop? To lose Jess right after? It hit so damn hard.

“Anyway,” I went on, clearing my throat as I did. “I was so fucking restless waiting for any word from Autumn or the orders from Dare that we could finally go get you that I nearly left a dozen times anyway. But I knew I’d fuck things up even more, so I focused all my energy into creating the room so it would be ready for when I got you back. Because I was getting you back.”

“Creating what room?”

A slow smile curled at the edge of my mouth, but just as I was about to respond, my head snapped up in time to see one of the rockstars charging around the corner, a murderous expression on his face that only grew more severe when he saw us there.

“Are you *fucking* kidding me?”



WILLOW

Diggs had dropped the comforter and shifted me partially behind him before Jared Kerr ever finished speaking.

Because he was there. Again.

Standing in front of us like being confronted by famous rockstars was a totally normal thing. Then again, we were standing in their house. There was no way Cora would believe me whenever I finally saw her again.

“I don’t know,” Diggs said in that easy, arrogant amusement of his, even though his hand was still pressed protectively and possessively to my stomach. “Am I?”

Jared’s outraged glare shifted from Diggs to where he was hiding me, his eyes narrowing. “There’s a dog in my house, and I’m told it’s yours,” he ground out.

A stunned breath punched from me. “Why does everyone have an issue with that dog?”

“It pissed in the entryway and our merch room,” he snapped as if I should’ve known that.

I clearly hadn’t, but my face flushed with embarrassment at the news and sorrow for Chaos. “Oh, I—”

“Maybe take her outside next time?” Diggs suggested casually, shrugging as he bent to gather up the comforter. “Just a thought.”

Jared’s hands balled into fists as if he were trying not to explode on Diggs, but his tone was a soft warning when he said, “Get control of your dog.”

“Wouldn’t say she’s our dog—more like the collective Rebel pet,” Diggs said as he reached for my hand and started leading me forward again. Just as we reached Jared, Diggs paused and met Jared’s enraged stare. “But that dog can turn lethal with a command, so I’d be careful if I were you.”

Humiliation and guilt tore through me at the reminder of what I’d done, but Diggs pulled me close to his side as we began walking again. His head tilting close to mine and his fingers drifting up to tease my wrist when he murmured, “You did what you had to,” as if he knew where my thoughts had gone. With another pass along my wrist, he pressed his lips to my temple and

whispered, “And I’m so fucking proud of you.”

“For ending someone’s life.”

“For surviving,” he countered. “For using what you had. Don’t ever be ashamed of what you do to keep yourself alive in life-or-death situations.”

I nodded, but that guilt remained deep in my stomach as we wove through the house until we came upon the room I’d spent hours in just days before, spending time with Sutton and Alexis and loving on the babies.

But just when Diggs reached for the door, he paused and muttered, “She’s coming,” just as someone else asked, “This yours?”

I turned in time to nearly be barreled over by Chaos in all her clumsy excitement as if I were her favorite person and not someone she hardly knew.

“Easy,” Diggs warned, hurrying to push her away when she leaned against me, placing all her weight on me and nearly taking me down for the second time in as many seconds.

“Jesus, that dog’s huge,” Lincoln Grey said in disbelief, once again momentarily stunning me because there was a famous rockstar directly in front of me. Talking to us like it was just another day.

“Yeah,” I said a little breathlessly and scratched Chaos’ scruffy face when she nudged my chest. “Jared told us about your merch room and the entryway. I’m so sorry; I’ll clean everything.”

“I will,” Diggs said over me. “I didn’t know everyone was already in here when I kicked her out of the room, so it’s my fault.”

Lincoln lifted a shoulder as if he wasn’t bothered either way. “Ledger’s already on it, and I just took her out.”

“Oh, I could’ve—” A soft laugh bubbled free when Chaos nearly knocked me over again despite Diggs trying to calm her. “Thank you, but I would’ve done that when I found her.”

“You’re right,” Jared began when he entered the hallway we were in, voice a sarcastic drawl. “That *is* a vicious-looking dog. Real killer you’ve got there.”

“Chaos . . . danger.”

My head snapped up at the unexpected command as Chaos’ did the same. Her body going tense as she looked to see *who* the threat was before locking on Jared, a vicious snarl ripping from her as she took a protective stance in front of me.

“Shit,” Diggs hissed. “Shit, *shit. Enough.*”

I floundered for a second, unable to think clearly as my gaze snapped

from where Lincoln was backing away with his hands raised to where Jared was staring at the dog with an irritated expression to where Autumn and Conor were standing at the entrance of the hall.

Conor looked utterly lost in what was happening. Autumn was pointing at Jared.

“Chaos, release,” I finally managed to choke out, the words sounding strangled as they scraped up my throat.

“Chaos, *destroy*.”

“Chaos, release,” I nearly screamed just as Autumn gave the command, already reaching for the dog just as she lunged for Jared.

I was shaking. I wasn’t sure I was breathing. It felt like my heart was going to beat out of my chest even after Chaos happily trotted over to Autumn before coming back to me.

“What the *fuck*?” Jared shouted as he looked around at us.

“Autumn,” Diggs snapped, but she just shrugged as if she hadn’t nearly ended someone’s life.

“I knew Willow would call her off.” Jerking her chin at where Jared was pressed against the wall, still staring wide-eyed at Chaos, Autumn added, “He needed to know what dog he was making fun of.”

“And who the hell are you?” Jared ground out, barely risking a glance in Autumn’s direction, just as Lincoln mumbled, “More of you every time . . .”

“Depends on who you ask,” Autumn said with a sigh. “Autumn Keane. Mob princess fugitive. Your enemy, considering you mocked Chaos. Imprisoned ally.”

“You pulled a weapon on Kieran,” Diggs reminded her.

“He was going to kill my brother,” she seethed. “He *killed* my brother.”

“We talked about this,” Conor cut in before Diggs could respond. “If you’re gonna toss your unjustified resentment at everyone, you’re going back to that room.”

Autumn kept her glare on Diggs for another few seconds before irritably waving her hand through the air. “Let’s see this fort.”

Diggs pulled me closer to him as Autumn and Conor passed, his grip on my hip keeping me in place even when Chaos followed them into the room just behind us, loud conversations and laughter spilling out before the door closed again.

“I’m sorry,” he began, but Lincoln spoke over him.

“Who was that?”

I felt Diggs' body tense against mine at Lincoln's dazed tone, and when he responded, there was a clear warning there. "You don't wanna go there, rockstar. You think *we're* bad people because of what you now know about us?" Diggs paused, waiting until Lincoln's stare shifted from the closed door to us. "We consider Autumn extremely dangerous."

"No shit," Jared said before loosing an exaggerated breath.

"More than what just happened with the dog," Diggs added. "Her family is known for being extremely volatile and brutal. So, she should be given a wide berth, and you definitely shouldn't look at her the way you were."

"Seriously, what the hell?" Jared asked, smacking at Lincoln's chest as he finished composing himself. "Someone unleashes a dog on me, and that's what gets you?"

"No, I—" Lincoln faltered before playfully shoving Jared back. "Fuck off, man, you know that isn't it. Just trying to keep up with their constant new additions."

But even if his voice hadn't wavered with the lie, the way his gaze quickly darted to the door again before falling away would've said enough.

A disbelieving sound left Jared, but he just cut an irritated look at Lincoln as he passed him on the way to the room. "I'm starving."

"Right," Lincoln said, head bobbing. Risking a glance at Diggs, he gestured to the door behind us. "Your brother and Einstein said this was all you, by the way. Pretty fucking cool."

"I know," Diggs muttered, but the words lacked that casual certainty he so easily exuded. Once Lincoln disappeared into the room, I understood why. "He has no idea what he'll be getting into going after a Keane."

"She's different," I said in Autumn's defense. "She wanted nothing to do with her family. But I—well, even though she clearly resented Lachlan just as much as the others, I got the distinct impression they were best friends on top of everything." I met Diggs' intent stare and fell into his arms. Resting my trembling hands against Diggs' chest, my stare unfocused as I remembered the tense moments in the darkened hallway with the Keane siblings.

"He only trusted her with being around me," I explained, "and they both made accusations as if they personally felt more betrayed by each other. I think she knew he needed to die, that there was no way around it. But she's clearly struggling because of how close they were."

"That . . . *that* I understand. I'll keep that in mind with her," Diggs said

before teasing, “You’re so much more okay with everything than I expected you to be. You sure you’re not from a long line of ruthless mafia families?”

My chest shook with amusement at the effortless way he could turn any situation into a joke. “Pretty sure.” I pushed against his stomach only to curl my hand against his shirt, keeping him close. “This isn’t the first time I’ve lived through a nightmare,” I reminded him, my voice solemn. “And this . . . God, as truly terrifying and awful as every moment of this week was, it was closure for what I’ve been living with. Is that twisted?”

“Not at all,” he said, quick to assure me.

I nodded absentmindedly before saying, “I’m not okay, but I am. There’s this weight on my chest for Kieran and his kids because I know it’s my—”

“Don’t.”

“It is my fault, Diggs.”

“If Kieran thought the same, he wouldn’t have checked on you throughout the night,” Diggs said, voice soft and low. “He wouldn’t have cared about saving you.”

“It doesn’t change that Keane Street was only there because of me,” I said gently but no less firmly, then hurried to continue because we clearly wouldn’t agree. “But underneath that heaviness and guilt is a peace I haven’t had in over a year. Because, even though Lachlan wasn’t the only one there the night my world changed, it was clear he was in charge, and *he* has been haunting me all this time.”

“And now he can’t,” Diggs said in understanding.

“And now he can’t,” I echoed.

My eyelids fluttered shut when Diggs pressed his lips to my forehead before lowering his head to mine. Holding me there in that moment like we had all the time in the world to stay right there.

“We’ll work on those things you shouldn’t be feeling,” he said when he released me. “For now, I still have something I want to show you.”

“The fort?” I asked, remembering Autumn’s words. But the question came out on an incredulous laugh as I thought about Diggs spending days building a fort.

Everything that came to mind was small, incredibly unstable, and definitely not built for two adults, let alone *all* of us.

“Tree . . .” Mischief teased the edge of his mouth as he released me to, once again, pick up the comforter he’d dropped during the Chaos showdown. “You say *fort* like it’s a ridiculous contraption.”

“I mean,” I began when he reached for the door, but the rest of what I’d been about to say caught in my throat, and my mouth fell open when I got my first look at the room.

A room that, just days ago, had contained couches, luxurious chairs, and a bar all centered around a massive screen. Nothing more.

This?

This was a fairytale.

“You did this?” The words left me on a breath as I stepped inside, joy lighting me up as I tried taking in every little detail.

“It’s what we do. Bring everyone together for a night or weekend inside a fort.”

At that, a stunned laugh tumbled past my lips. “This is not a fort.”

Diggs gestured above us, where curtains and twinkle lights were hung, covering the entire ceiling. All throughout the room, more curtains and lights fell like waterfalls, breaking up where mattresses and blankets were spread throughout the large space.

“Fort,” Diggs maintained proudly. Gesturing from the food-covered tables next to the bar to where all the chairs had been arranged in front of the screen, he said, “Once the kids go to bed tonight, we’ll turn on movies.”

“Do you sleep in here?”

An affirmative grunt rumbled from him. “As long as you’re okay with it.”

“Are you kidding?” Another laugh left me just as breathless as the other. “Diggs, this is incredible.”

He curled his arm around my neck and pulled me close. “Let’s feed you.”

I pressed a hand to his stomach as I looked up at him, a coy smile shaping my lips. “Stolen sandwiches?”

He winked, the action so subtle I nearly missed it. “Only the best.”

It was really something to see the way Diggs’ family and friends effortlessly returned to normalcy after such a life-altering incident. It could’ve been because they were used to these types of events—that they were something to be expected within mafia families. But I had a feeling it had more to do with all the babies and toddlers everyone was doting on.

Because tragedies happened. Different, more horrifying, tragedies

happened for the people I'd somehow found myself linked to throughout the years. But love kept you going. New generations kept you moving and put smiles on faces even when hearts were breaking.

I was sure of it.

The proof was in that room. In the laughter. In the fact that Kieran had even shown up. Granted, he'd stayed off to the side, not talking to anyone. But he'd scooped up his daughter from where Jentry and Rorie had been watching his kids and was clinging to her like a lifeline.

I rolled my eyes and gave Diggs an amused look as Cora rambled about being seconds away from calling out a search party for me, even though I'd been assured dozens of times that Rorie had covered for me with her.

"No search party needed," I told Cora and reached out to touch one of the hanging curtains that apparently spread out to create makeshift rooms. "I'll be back on Monday."

Diggs' fingers tightened against me in refusal, but I lifted an eyebrow to stop him when his lips parted.

"It was just this stupid virus, but I'm better."

"What kind of bullshit virus had you not answering your phone or calling me back? Girl, you missed almost the entire week," Cora informed me as if I weren't aware of that.

Then again, I was surprised it'd only been five days since I'd seen her. It'd felt like weeks had passed since that first morning I'd run into Lachlan and Chaos outside my apartment.

"I thought Mr. B&E had finally gone all Ted Bundy on you."

A soft, affectionate laugh left me as I searched the gray eyes intently studying me. "He was there, actually. He took care of me."

At that, Cora paused. "Details," she begged greedily. "Details—all of them. Right now, and please tell me they're steamy."

"There isn't a lot to say, Cora. It wasn't a good time for me," I reminded her. "But I wanted to assure you I wasn't dead since I had about three dozen messages from you."

She made a displeased noise but said, "Monday, right? I'll actually see you?"

Affection swelled in my chest at the underlying worry in her voice. "Promise."

"Then I'll bring muffins," she said as if my assurance were all she needed. "Now, get back to that hunk of a man so you can give me some *real*

details come Monday.”

Another hushed laugh left me. “Will do.”

“Monday?” Diggs asked once I ended the call, his brow furrowing. “You still need to heal.”

“I’ve been down here for hours,” I reminded him as I tapped my phone against his stomach. “I’m okay. I’ll *be* okay.” My lips parted to suggest he could always send Jessica to check on me from wherever she hid within the school, but the tease died in my throat, choking me as I remembered watching Lachlan drop her lifeless body to the ground.

“And what if it’s too early?” Diggs maintained. “What if Keane Street’s regrouping and readying to move against us? Monday’s less time than we gave them.”

“So, we just stay hidden away in here forever?” I asked gently, my eyebrows drawing close together as I tried figuring out this world of his. “I quit or lose my job that I *love*?”

“No,” he said softly but resolutely. “No, we’ll return to our lives. We always do, but we *just* hit them. We don’t know if Keane Street will accept what happened as our retaliation or if we’re now in an open war with them.”

I nodded absentmindedly before asking, “And what will that look like once we do return to our lives?” I stepped closer until I was pressed to the hard planes of his chest and tipped my head back to meet his stare. “More days of wondering when I’ll see you again and random nights of you slipping into my apartment?”

Diggs’ head angled as if refusing my words as they came. Sliding one of his hands up my body, he tenderly cradled my neck. His thumb brushing along my jaw when he said, “I’ll let you set the pace, but we aren’t going back to *that*.”

Dipping down, he stole a brief kiss before releasing me, and then he was carefully moving around, untying the cascading curtains closest to us until he’d made a miniature room.

Just us, a couch, and a blanket-covered mattress on the floor, all surrounded by layered curtains and the glow of twinkle lights.

“Oh my God,” I breathed as I looked around, a stunned laugh dancing across my lips when Diggs grabbed my hand and led me to the couch.

“I’ve only ever wanted to live in an apartment because owning a house meant *commitment*,” he began, drawing my attention back to him. “Since entering this family, I’ve never had a car and all my motorcycles only have

one seat as a reminder that I didn't want the weight of someone else's life on my hands."

Surprise pulsed through me at the depth of what he was saying—at how much more profound it made his earlier words.

"I didn't want to want you the way I did, and I hated that I couldn't stay away from you. I was terrified because I'd fallen so damn hard for you."

Not that I doubted him before, but I hadn't realized just how much he'd avoided relationships—avoided anything even remotely close to what we'd been from the beginning—until then.

"You wanna go back to your apartment, then that's what you'll do," Diggs said with an unsteady nod as his hand returned to its earlier position. Curled lovingly around my neck and tipping my head back so he could better look at me. "You wanna live together, show me the house, and I'll buy it."

My heart faltered before taking off, threatening to escape the confines of my chest.

"I'll get new bikes," he went on. "If those make you uncomfortable, I'll get cars because I need you with me." When a stuttered laugh left me, he dipped his head closer. "You wanna stay like we are, then we will. You want me to meet your parents? I'll do it—gladly. You wanna get married? Tree, say the word, and I'll get down on my fucking knees and beg you to be my wife."

"You're serious," I breathed in realization.

"I can feel you pressed against me even after I've left you. The sound of your sighs and laughter play in my head and amplify the fact that you aren't there. Your scent lingers on my skin, begging me to find you. Yes, I'm serious. I don't wanna go through the rest of my life without you."

A small part of my brain was shouting that it was crazy for him to say or suggest any of the things he had. It hadn't even been two months of him sneaking into my apartment and waking me in the middle of the night . . .

But I'd fallen in love with him in that time. Wholly, unquestionably in love with him.

And if I hadn't already known just how unpredictable and life short could be from Mike's murder, this past week would've taught me that and more. Still . . .

"I can't marry you," I whispered and hurried to continue when rejection sliced across Diggs' features. "You told me once that you wouldn't tell me your last name because it was a lie." I studied the way understanding slowly

wove through his veiled pain. “I know your name is Evan, but I still don’t know the lie, and I don’t know the truth. I can’t marry you—I can’t do any of those things with you—when I don’t even know who you *are*.”

Diggs watched me for a while, head subtly nodding before he gently took my phone from where it was still clasped between my hands.

“It’s weird because, other than my family, you know me better than anyone ever has. So, there’s this part of me that just expects you to know, if that makes sense.” The muscle in his jaw twitched as he finished switching off a bunch of things on my phone. Once he had it powered down, he did the same to his.

I watched with rapt attention, feeling like my lungs were being crushed in an iron grip as the severity of what he was about to tell me slammed into me.

Because he was taking measures to ensure we wouldn’t be overheard . . . by our *phones*. Something he hadn’t thought twice of when telling me he was in the mafia. Something none of them ever cared to do when talking in detail about plans that were illegal in so many ways.

“How can your last name be worse than you being in the mafia?” I asked, eyes wide when I met his gaze again.

Amusement left him on a breath, but it was laced with something darker . . . something bitter. “Shouldn’t be,” he said as he set our phones aside and leaned forward so his arms rested on his legs. “But at one point, Mav and I were two of the most wanted people in the world.”

I wasn’t sure why his confession had a pit of dread opening in my stomach. Everything that came to mind as my thoughts raced didn’t make him out to be anything different than I already knew him to be.

Still, I held my breath as I waited for him to continue.

“Few weeks after we started seeing each other, you asked if I’d been in the military.” Diggs’ head bounced shakily as his shoulders jerked up. “Yes. The answer’s yes. Mav and I both went right out of high school. After our first tour, we were pulled for a black op, and everything just . . .” He mimicked a small explosion before letting his hands fall to hang between his legs.

“What happened?” I asked when he didn’t go on.

“We were sent to find and take out a known terrorist, but it ended up just being someone who looked like him. So, we called in the report, met up with our support guy there, and were headed to another town to meet with the rest of the team. We’d just cleared the outskirts of the city when a missile was

dropped on it.”

“Oh my God,” I whispered, and he made an affirming grunting noise.

“Next thing we knew, a team was there, forcing us to leave. And suddenly, Mav and I were Stateside. Bags over our heads. Being transported to a black site. The assholes there tried convincing us we bombed the city. We killed thousands of innocent people. We killed our support guy, who’d still been alive when we left.”

“I think I remember that,” I breathed, struggling to grasp the vague memory of my parents talking throughout multiple dinners about the devastation that’d happened overseas, caused by rogue soldiers. “Twin Terrorists,” I said suddenly. “It was all over the news.”

“We heard,” he muttered.

“That was . . .” I floundered for a moment as I thought. “I was so young.”

“You are young,” he mumbled, the tease in his voice so much more subtle than normal. With a nod in my direction, he said, “But it was fourteen years ago.”

Swallowing thickly, he added, “Few weeks after we were dropped at the site, Dare, Einstein, and Johnny showed up in our cell out of nowhere. Told us just how deep the government was trying to cover what they’d done, blaming us all the way, and offered us a new life. Not that they did it for us at the time. They’d needed an assassin—specifically an equivalent to Kieran—and Maverick and I were that.”

“And you’ve been with them since,” I said in understanding.

“They’re family,” he said as if it were as simple as that. “Einstein made sure we couldn’t be found, no matter what was run on us. But that couldn’t stop people from recognizing us from the news—not that the government publicly admitted they lost us. But our pictures had been out there for over a month, and we were on every list imaginable, so we laid low for the first couple of years. The only personal things we kept were our first names.”

I nodded slowly, my soul aching as I realized more and more how Diggs had shown me from the beginning how much I meant to him. Because he’d had to change his last name due to something catastrophic that had been pinned on him and his brother. He’d been forced to erase who he was and had refused to feed me the lie he’d been living for fourteen years.

“I can’t remember your name,” I said regretfully. “I can barely remember my parents talking about it over dinner every night.”

“It doesn’t exist to me anymore,” he said firmly as if I hadn’t already

understood the gravity of his and Maverick's situation. "My old life, my parents, none of that exists."

"You aren't going to tell me," I said in understanding.

He lifted a hand to his chest before letting it fall between his legs again, something like frustration leaving him when he said, "I can't."

And I knew in the way his voice twisted around the words that it wasn't because he thought I would betray him—that I would out him and Maverick. This was the kind of burden that he'd locked deep long ago, prepared to take it to his grave.

"Then tell me the lie."

Diggs studied me for a while before answering, "Pierson."

I nodded as I took in the way his features twitched, showing his obvious dislike for the name. "Okay, Evan Pierson," I whispered. "Are you gonna make that face if I take that last name?"

The way his irritation shifted to primal need in an instant had heat spiking in my veins and unfurling low in my belly.

"Because when I marry you, I intend on doing exactly that."

"I'm gonna need you to repeat that." The demand rumbled from him and had a soft smile creeping at the edges of my mouth when he reached for me. Gently curling an arm around me and pulling me against him until I was straddling his lap as he sank back against the couch.

"Which part?"

"Think you know."

I fought the smile now threatening to break free and wove my fingers into his hair, tipping my head close to his when I echoed, "When I marry you . . ."

"When?" he asked, voice a hoarse confirmation.

"When," I said and released a trembling breath when his hands skated up my bare stomach, taking the shirt I was wearing as he went. "This room is full of people."

"No one goes near blocked-off areas," he assured me.

I was sure I should've felt some sort of insecurity, knowing the rest of his family would have their assumptions of what was happening in this small space. But Diggs had successfully removed the shirt and dropped it beside us. His hands were on my breasts, testing their weight and teasing my nipples as he leaned forward to pull one of the hardened buds into his mouth. And I no longer cared about anything other than that moment and him.

Releasing me with a torturous scrape of his teeth along my nipple, he

lifted his head to mine. His mouth hovering just over my own as he whispered, “Set the pace, Willow.” The words sending a heady rush down my spine.

Or maybe that was the kiss that immediately followed.

Soft and slow. Tender and full of adoration. But the hand that was slowly curling around my neck and the way he swiftly bit down on my bottom lip, hard enough to draw blood, had my pulse racing and my body aching for his.

But I knew in the way he kept us there, never taking it any further, that *set the pace* had meant more than just our relationship—our future. It meant right then. He was taking cues from me to see what I could handle after everything we’d just been through.

But I could handle him. I could handle *this*.

Loosely curling my hand around the one on my neck, I gently trailed my fingers over his wrist and up his arm before breaking the kiss and shifting off his lap. Pushing from the couch, I held his carnal stare as I reached for my shorts.

“You’re overdressed,” I whispered as I slid the material down my legs, my movements halting when he grabbed the back of his shirt and pulled it over his head.

I wasn’t sure I would ever get used to the sight of this man. His obvious strength. The control in each movement. The large symbol marking who he was on one side of his torso and the devastating story decorating his other side and back that he bore like shame.

He was beautiful.

And sitting there then, with only a pair of sweatpants on, heated stare devouring me, it was all I could do to continue undressing. Because he was just as I’d suspected from that very first night.

Wickedly charming. Sinfully handsome. Undoubtedly dangerous.

“You’re still dressed,” I said when he reached for me and pulled me back to straddle his lap. His mouth immediately falling to my neck as his hands slid around my hips, pressing me harder against his erection.

“Didn’t bring condoms down here,” he muttered before giving a teasing bite to my jaw.

My eyelids fluttered shut and a whimper scraped up my throat when he trailed his fingers down the crease of my bottom, continuing farther and farther until he was teasing my entrance. Keeping his fingers just out of reach when I arched back, seeking that pleasure and smiling against my skin at the

needy sound that left me.

Making me ache for him . . . ache for *more*.

And I realized as he tipped his face to mine that, in any life, the only certainty we had was that moment—anything could happen in the next. But in this new world Diggs had opened my eyes to, we were lucky to have even *that*. Worrying about social norms was laughable when I knew with absolute certainty that the man holding me was all I would ever want.

“I set the pace?” I asked as I reached between us, locking onto his gray eyes that narrowed in warning when I started working the bands of his sweatpants and boxer briefs past his hips and down his thighs.

“Tree—”

“I heard you,” I assured him softly. “I also heard everything else you said. If you want a certain kind of life for us, tell me now.” I gripped his thick cock in my hand, pumping him slowly, and watched as his eyes rolled back before locking on me again, all stormy clouds of love and barely restrained desire. “But if I thought the rest of my life should be lived cautiously, I would’ve never brought you back to my apartment that first night.”

His hands flexed against my hips when I settled over his length, keeping me suspended above him. His voice low and ragged when he said, “I’ve never . . .”

“Same.” I brushed my mouth across his, my breath coming out shaky when his length pressed against me, giving me the cruelest tease of what was to come. “But this is you. This is me. This is a love that exists despite every force against it. This is that future you told me about if you still want it.” I stole another soft, slow kiss, then leaned back enough to ask, “What do we have to lose but time?”

For long seconds, Diggs kept us there. Straddling the line of reason and passion. Both of us seeming to wait for the other when I’d already laid it all out there, leaving it up to him.

And then he moved.

Crushing his mouth to mine and forcing me onto him, filling me in one swift movement. Silencing my cry as I stretched around him in a way that was at once familiar and new.

“*Fuck*,” he growled against the kiss when I began rolling my hips, needing that heady feel of him moving inside me. Needing *more*. “Feel so fucking good.”

With an affectionate squeeze, he released me. Letting me control the

movements as his hands roamed over my body. Gliding along the dips and curves, taking his time to tease and worship the parts of me he already knew so well, all while his mouth moved against mine in time with the rocking of my hips.

Slow. Tender.

Torturing me with the wicked way his tongue stroked mine and his teeth nipped at my lips.

“Diggs.” His name left me on a shuddering plea when his hand once again drifted. Purposefully. Intentionally. Heat licking up my spine and spreading low in my belly as his fingers inched closer to that forbidden place.

“Jesus, the way you clench around me.” A rough, breathless laugh left him and danced across my lips. “This is already not gonna last long—not when I have you like this for the first time. But keep doing—*fuck*.” The curse left him on a groan, low and drawn out, when a shiver ripped through me.

But he was teasing me. The tip of his finger pressing into that tight hole just slightly before he withdrew. Sending my body into a frenzy and creating the most blissful kind of agony I could imagine.

My movements grew restless as I silently begged him for more. Trying to get closer all while he maintained that boundary. But I wanted the high. I wanted the indescribable bliss only Diggs could provide. And I knew how much more powerful it got when he did *that*.

Just as a plea started leaving my lips, a whimper tangled in my throat when he pressed two of his fingers inside me, pumping them as I sank onto his cock. Leaving me speechless as that intoxicating feeling of fullness stretched every piece of me so tight it felt like I would shatter with my next breath.

And when he took control, I did.

One hand gripped my jaw and forced my mouth back to his. The other kept me grounded to him as he pumped his fingers in and out of that tight hole and thrust his thick length into me with primal abandon.

Lighting a fire in my veins as he pushed me over that ledge. Sending me into that coveted bliss. Taking every piece of me that I would willingly give for the rest of my life.

Diggs’ movements turned savage as mine melted into trembling incoordination.

His grip on my jaw became almost painful, and I welcomed it. Welcomed the way he demanded every part of me.

And when his body tensed as he came inside me, I wondered how I could've ever doubted his love for me or that he would fight for me until the end.

His soul was imprinted on mine. My heart had fallen into rhythm with his somewhere along the way of falling in love with him. There was no denying or reversing that.

"Marry me."

My pulse faltered at the rough plea before wings took flight inside me. Making me feel dizzy in the most incredible way. "I already said I planned to," I reminded him, my voice soft and slightly shaky from the invigorating high still dancing through my body.

"Now."

When I opened my eyes, he was intently watching me. Eyes burning with a love so profound that it rocked me. "Are you using your incredible orgasm-giving ability to coerce me into marrying you?"

His body shook with a hushed laugh. "If it works."

I pressed my lips to his for an unhurried kiss, a moan sounding in the back of my throat when he removed his fingers from me. "I don't know how things work in the mafia, but you haven't even met my parents yet."

Understanding rumbled in his chest, but he just studied me for a while. "That'll be complicated," he finally said. "Not often insiders are brought in . . . makes it even more difficult when they have a life on the outside. Not with teaching—that's different."

"With my family," I said as a sliver of fear and dejection wove through me.

"Jentry and Aurora are here . . . right now," he added in confirmation, "and they never should've been."

I considered his words for a while before asking, "So, is that it? I have to say goodbye to my family?"

"No," he said quickly, trying to assure me. "It'll just be complicated. I'll meet your parents, and we'll see them whenever you want. But we have to be careful. Any wrong step, and we've made them targets."

I nodded unsteadily as I remembered words Lachlan and Autumn had told me. "I think they already are," I said after a moment. "Unless Lachlan hadn't told anyone else about them. But he was using them against me."

Diggs' eyes briefly took on a faraway look, his head slowly dipping in a nod as he did. "We'll take care of it. If you want, we can put people in

Richmond to watch them. But weddings,” he went on, capturing my stare to make sure I understood the gravity of what he was about to tell me, “we usually keep them small and unexpected, if we have them at all. Otherwise, we’re giving too much to enemies. A party to crash. A chance to catch us off guard. People to put on lists.”

My head moved absentmindedly as I took in what he was saying and considered the options, but then I noticed his expression. The worry there. The acceptance. As if with each new thing he revealed about his life, he was sure that would be the thing that made me walk away.

“I can handle you,” I whispered firmly. “Not having an actual wedding is nothing compared to something truly terrible like, God, I don’t know . . . if you were in the mafia or something.” A laugh burst from me when he dug his fingers into my side, my words dancing from my lips when I teased, “Could you imagine?”

“Marry me,” he repeated as he banded his arm low on my back, somehow still being mindful of the wounds there, and pulled me close. Making me rock against his hardening length and forcing a stuttered whimper from me.

“You already know I will.”

“You haven’t said when.”

“And I won’t,” I breathed as I captured his lips. “Like you said . . . small and unexpected.”

A hushed laugh left him, doing wonderful things to my body due to the position we’d never moved from. “Not unexpected from the people getting married.”

“I like the way you find me, even though I’ve never once hidden from you,” I told him as my hips started another slow, steady rhythm. “One day, you’ll find me, and I’ll be in a dress. That’ll be the day.”

“That so?” Curling his hand around the back of my neck, he wove his fingers into my hair and pulled me close, giving me the best view of the longing in his eyes and the whisper of mischief at the edge of his mouth. “I’ve never been so eager to find someone . . . and I will find you.”

EPILOGUE



THREE MONTHS LATER

DIGGS

“You find him?”

“Yeah,” I muttered as I stepped out of my SUV, gaze skating over the house as I instinctively drew in deep breaths. Searching for anyone who shouldn’t be there, threatening the peace I’d found and refused to give up.

Dare exhaled slowly as if already knowing he wouldn’t like what I was about to tell him, but still said, “Don’t say Richmond.”

“Richmond,” I confirmed. “Watching their place like he was planning it all out.”

“Got it,” Dare said after a second. “I’ll let Conor know. Now, get back to Wake Forest.”

“Just got home,” I informed him before ending the call and starting toward the house Willow and I had moved into about a month before.

There was still a part of me that refused to believe it and the car in the driveway were mine because they meant things I’d always refused to take part in—meant putting people in danger. But the woman inside had made the decision to buy them easy, and she was patient as fuck with me while I continued working through those fears.

She made me crave the normalcy of coming home to her and vice versa. Of sitting on the couch and hearing about her day and the kids in her class. She made me crave the simple act of reaching across the center console and capturing her hand so I could bring her wrist close to get another hit of that lavender and vanilla. Of venting to her while we cooked because I thought Dare was letting Jentry, Autumn, and the rockstars know too much about our lives for outsiders—and getting her thoughts on our current big issue . . . Kieran.

I squeezed the back of my neck as I climbed the porch, thoughts pulled between Kieran and Dare. Because I knew Kieran needed to be stopped before he fucked everything up . . . I knew that.

But if it were me, if Willow had been killed right in front of me, I’d be doing the same damn thing.

Kieran was hardly around anymore and hadn’t set foot in ARCK since Jessica died. On top of that, he’d taken his sleeping kids to Jentry and

Aurora's house every night the past couple of months before vanishing.

Despite my reservations with Jentry being given too many details about our world, we'd all been thankful when he'd given us a heads up on Kieran's disappearances.

But no one had ever been able to follow or find Kieran Hayes when he wanted to stay hidden except Jessica. Until tonight. And I'd found him outside Keane Street's den of sin, looking like a man who'd been watching his next kill—biding his time before he struck.

Again . . . something we couldn't let happen because Keane Street had left us alone since the night we'd gotten Willow back. Last thing we needed now was a war after we were finally picking up the pieces of the last attack.

Settling back into our lives but not getting too comfortable. Rebuilding the Borello house to be an even better fortress than before. Moving forward.

"Tree," I called out as I shut the front door behind me, my fingers pausing on the deadbolt and my head slanting when I realized the one person I expected to be there wasn't the *only* one.

But my thoughts were still so weighed down with the Kieran bullshit and the drive I'd just made in record time that I struggled to figure out if I knew any of the other people waiting within the structure as I quietly started across the entryway, reaching for my gun as I did.

Just before I grasped the handle, Willow's "In the loft," rang out from upstairs. Beautiful, light, carefree.

And it had my suspicions growing.

I glanced around the house as I moved in her direction, quickly taking in everything. Making sure nothing was worryingly out of place and cataloging all the new decorations she'd put out while I was gone, taking our home from fall to winter.

But when I made it upstairs, I faltered.

Nearly fell to my fucking knees.

Because there she was, waiting for me in a flowy white dress. Looking like a goddess with her blonde hair falling to her waist in waves and those green eyes so damn bright.

Filling the rest of the space? Nearly my entire family—Dare included. Bastard.

I struggled to swallow around the knot in my throat as I met Willow's excited stare again, my chin dipping when I said, "Found you."

"Small and unexpected," she offered as a breathtaking smile crossed her

face.

An appreciative hum rumbled in my chest as I gently grabbed her wrist, my thumb trailing over the rebel symbol she'd tattooed right over her pulse point. "So, you want this for the rest of your life?" I asked, the tease weighed down by my overwhelming need for her and this moment.

Her smile shifted. Softened into something that gripped my heart because it was love and devotion. It was trust and understanding. It was everything I'd never wanted and could no longer live without.

"I can handle you." Slipping her hand into mine, she confidently whispered, "And I'll handle you and this life forever."

THE END

For now . . .

Our favorite Rebels aren't going anywhere. Look for them in the *Henley* series and *Keane Street* series—up next!

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We've already met Henley's bassist in the *Rebel* series, now it's time to meet the rest of the members. Between their rockstar lifestyles, getting tied up with the mafia, and their new, fiery band assistant who has a habit of throwing food at frustrating men, this series is sure to be filled with nonstop drama and action.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Cory – Truly, I couldn't have done this without you. We had such a wild year while I wrote this story, but life is always fun as long as I'm with you.

Nicole – Do you realize what you've done? My heart. But, really, beside that—thank you, thank you for dealing with my endless calls and texts. You're the best.

Molls – As always, you're the better half of us, and I'm so thankful to have you on my side.

Shelly – Our writing sprints are everything. I'm not sure this book would be finished without them! You're such a rockstar.

Kristin – Not me laughing over the reason for this being your story . . . I love you, Chewbacca!

Caitlin – You're wonderful. Thank you for your amazing insight on this story.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Molly grew up in California but now lives with her husband and daughter in the oh-so-amazing state of Texas. When she's not diving into the world of her characters, some of her hobbies include hiking, snowboarding, traveling, and long walks on the beach . . . which roughly translates to being a homebody and dishing out movie quotes with her hubby. She has a weakness for crude-humored movies and loves curling up in a fluffy blanket during a thunderstorm . . . or under one in a bathtub if there are tornados. That way she can pretend they aren't really happening.

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