

EVA ASHWOOD

Beautiful
DEVILS

FILTHY WICKED
PSYCHOS

BEAUTIFUL DEVILS

FILTHY WICKED PSYCHOS #2

EVA ASHWOOD

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

*For all the readers who are just waiting for a
morally gray anti-hero to put them on
their knees and murmur...
“That’s my good girl.”*

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Books by Eva Ashwood

WILLOW

MY HEAD ACHES.

Pain pulses through my temples, each dull throb feeling like it's going to split open my skull and spill my foggy brains all over the floor. My throat is dry, and it takes a solid second for me to unstick my tongue from the roof of my mouth. Even though my eyes are closed, I swear I can feel the world spinning around me, and there's a worrying flash where I think I'm going to be sick.

But eventually it settles, and I drag in a deep breath, trying to remember what happened to me.

My eyelids feel heavy, resisting when I try to open them, and I frown, disoriented.

Every time I try to piece together what's going on and where I am, the details slip away. A groan falls from my lips without my permission as I struggle to get my thoughts in order.

“Ah. You're awake.”

The deep voice comes from somewhere nearby, and I jerk slightly as my mind snaps into focus on the sound. It's gruff and gravelly, and when that sentence is followed by something in Russian that I don't understand, my first thought is that it's Malice.

He sometimes mutters things in that language, either saying something too horrible for me to know or something too sweet. It's always a toss-up with him.

Thinking it's him soothes the nerves that were rising in me, because if Malice is here, then I must be with them. With the three Voronin brothers.

That means I'm safe.

But does it?

The thought hits me out of nowhere, and I frown. Something important tugs at my brain, trying to get my sluggish mind to catch up... and when it does, that feeling of security melts away in an instant.

Everything that happened in the too-early hours of pre-dawn comes flooding back to me.

I remember being at the guys' warehouse turned garage-house. I remember starting to feel things for them. The banter with Ransom, the all-consuming moments with Malice, the weird little truce/bond with Vic over peanut butter, of all things.

I remember them fighting for me, killing for me.

Telling me that no one else would have me.

I remember the night my old boss Carl came knocking, demanding that I pay him off in sexual favors to keep quiet about the fact that I was at the brothel the brothers burned down after they killed Nikolai Petrov.

Vic killed Carl, but the fact that someone was hunting for the people responsible for murdering Nikolai meant I was a potential target. I was a witness to everything that happened that night, so they couldn't just let me walk away.

An uneasy kind of peace developed between me and the brothers once I came to live with them—the kind that was only in place because they couldn't risk throwing me out and I didn't want to piss them off by running away. But then things started to change.

We started to understand each other.

To trust each other.

To *want* each other.

Images of the night I had sex with Malice and Ransom flash through my mind, and as if on cue, the still-healing tattoo on my chest throbs a little. Malice marked me, and then he and Ransom fucked me while Vic watched and held himself under his usual control.

But remembering having sex with them makes the rest of it come back too, and it's just as painful to remember as it was to see it in person on Vic's computer the first time.

The sex tape.

The disgusting fucking video they put together, showing footage of me in every compromising position they could find. And the message that went with it, the blunt words calling me worthless. Dirty. Trash.

It hurts, and the pain lances through me like it wants to cut me open and bare my soul to the room.

That's why I ran away. Why I couldn't stay there.

Because if that's how they see me—if that's what they're telling people about me—then I don't want to be anywhere near them.

How could I ever have trusted them?

Tears prickle behind my eyes, and I groan again.

Whoever is standing nearby takes a step closer, their footsteps loud on the floor. Strong fingers grab my chin, digging into the flesh hard.

I suck in a gasp and slowly manage to open my eyes, forcing my unwilling body to cooperate. If it's Malice, if they managed to find me, then I have to leave again. I have to tell him to fuck off and leave me alone. That I don't want anything to do with them.

My vision swims for a second once my eyes are open, and I find myself staring into the face of a man.

But it's not Malice.

I don't recognize this man, but there's something almost... familiar about him. Something in his features that makes my

head hurt as it tries to remember where I've seen him before.

And then it hits me. Those dark, hooded eyes. That nose and the cut of his cheekbones.

He looks just like Nikolai Petrov.

But Nikolai is dead, so this is clearly his brother. *Ilya*.

My heart lurches at the realization, and fear pounds through me. The burst of adrenaline and terror that floods my veins pushes down some of the grogginess that's still clinging to me, and my heart beats wildly.

Ilya nods in satisfaction, his dark eyes tracking over my face.

"Good," he says. "There you are. I need you fully awake."

He steps away from me, and I finally take a look around at where I am. The room is dark, but it looks like I'm in some kind of abandoned building. It's old, with wood that's rotting in some spots. There are holes in the floor and the walls, showing exposed wiring and the bones of the building.

I jerk in the hard wooden chair I'm sitting in, and the ropes wrapped around me bite into my skin, holding my wrists behind my back and keeping my torso bound tightly to the chair.

All I get for my struggles is the rope rubbing my skin raw, and my stomach sours as I realize how much worse this is than waking up back in the Voronin brothers' warehouse.

This is bad.

Really, really bad.

Panic bubbles up in me, and I wriggle a little harder, trying to find any give in the restraints, but there's none. I don't have any room to go anywhere.

Ilya snorts under his breath, as if amused by my pitiful attempts to free myself. Turning his back on me, he strides over to a rickety table that's set up nearby. I can make out a few things laid out on it, and I crane my neck, trying to see what they are as a sinking feeling fills my chest.

Almost as if he can tell what I want to know, Ilya picks up a knife, holding it up so it glints in the light from the bare overhead bulb. Then he comes back over to me, getting close again.

“I have been tracking the bastards who killed my brother,” he tells me. Talking about Nikolai makes his Russian accent sharper, and I can’t believe I thought he was Malice while I was out of it. “We were not exactly close, but blood must be repaid by blood.” He glares down at me, and those dark eyes burn with something deep and sinister. “They hid their tracks well. I couldn’t find anything about his murderers. But then they made one mistake.”

Ilya pauses, like he’s waiting for me to ask what the mistake was or say something. But my mouth is too dry to speak, and I’m frozen in place, hating the way it feels to have that terrible gaze trained on me.

“They came after me,” he finally says, answering the question I never asked. “They attacked me at my hotel, and I managed to track them down after that. It was easy to pick up their trail once they thought they had gotten away.”

He takes a step closer as he speaks, raising the blade of the knife. I’m practically holding my breath, my blood like ice, afraid to move or even breathe.

The blade is cold when he runs it up my arm, slicing through the fabric of my shirt sleeve. At first, I just barely feel the edge of it, but when he gets to my shoulder, the blade nicks my skin, and I gasp sharply.

His blunt features don’t change, and he continues on, dragging the knife down between my breasts, slicing through the shirt and cutting me again.

The cuts aren’t deep, but I know they’re the kind that will scar, and as he leaves more and more of them, the little hurts start to grow into a bigger one that burns with every ragged inhale.

The worst part is that I know he’s doing it on purpose. He’s trying to bare my skin to his gaze and hurt me at the same

time. He's only cutting as deep as he wants to, and he could go much deeper. He could carve me up right here. He could kill me at any moment.

Each time the knife slices into my skin, I have to resist the urge to flinch. I don't want to move and make him cut me deeper. I don't want to bleed out in this shitty building.

Ilya keeps talking, holding a one-sided conversation with me as if it's nothing. His eyes are on the knife and on the flashes of skin he bares with it as he cuts away my clothes.

"I was working on my strategy, my plan to go after those men who killed Nikolai. To make them pay for what they had done. I was staking out their warehouse, trying to evaluate their weaknesses, when what did I see? A little deer came creeping out of their warehouse, and I saw an opportunity." A rough chuckle rumbles in his chest. "Because little deer are so much easier to break than wolves."

He drags the blade up my throat as he says the last words, and I don't even dare to swallow, quite literally held on a knife's edge of fear. But he doesn't cut there. Instead, he moves down my other arm, and I almost slump in place with the relief of not being killed yet.

Ilya's shadowy eyes flash to my face, and I want to turn away from him, but I don't. He's a predator, and I may be his prey, but I refuse to act like it.

"So I captured you," he continues. "You have the information I need to take out those men, and you will give it to me."

My head spins, my stomach dropping out at the clear threat in his tone. This man could kill me easily. He could torture me until I tell him everything he wants to know, every secret the Voronin brothers ever told me, and then murder me for my trouble. Then he'll go after the brothers, and he'll probably win. The three of them would fight like hell, but—

I want to shake myself out of that thought, because I shouldn't care. I shouldn't feel anything for them. This is the

bed they made, the risk they said was acceptable if it meant getting their revenge.

And now I'm caught in the middle of it.

The sharp tip of Ilya's knife cuts through enough of my shirt that it falls down on one side. Of course it's the side where the scarring is the worst, the side where my nerves are fucked up enough that the cuts don't hurt as bad.

Ilya's eyes linger on the rough patches of healed skin, and his lip curls.

"You are damaged. I wouldn't have thought those men would keep such a broken, pitiful pet," he sneers.

For a second, he looks even more like his brother than before. I have a vivid memory of Nikolai standing over me with a similar expression of disgust on his face the night he almost took my virginity.

Nausea roils in me, bile trying desperately to claw its way up my throat.

My nostrils flare as I suck in breaths of air, trying not to hyperventilate.

Ilya steps back, taking his knife with him. He strides over to the table to get something else, and I know it's going to be something else to torture me with. Something worse.

I jerk in my bonds, wriggling as hard as possible. I can't just sit here and let him do this. I can't just give up.

The chair shifts a little from my jostling movements, and as it does, I realize that one of the legs has a little give to it, wobbling under my weight. The chair seems to be as old and creaky as the rest of this place, and I grab on to that little spark of hope. Sucking in a breath, I work my hips from side to side, pushing down on the side of the chair that's damaged, putting that wobbly leg under more and more stress.

When the chair collapses, it shocks the hell out of me. The leg snaps off from the seat of the chair, dumping me on the floor.

The impact makes the old wood of the chair splinter even more, and with a quick jerk of my wrists, I manage to get free of it.

My wrists are still bound behind my back, but other than that, nothing is holding me anymore.

I'm running on pure adrenaline and self-preservation, and I manage to get my legs under me enough that I can stagger to my feet and take off running.

The old floor creaks and groans under my weight as I dash across the open expanse of the room. In the center of the space, there's a bundle of wires sitting next to a small hole in the floor where a few floorboards rotted away.

I avoid the hole, but my foot catches on one of the wires, and for a terrifying second, I think I'm going to fall. But it's not enough to slow my momentum. I yank my foot free, snapping through the tangle of wires. A couple of them hiss and spark at me, but I ignore it and keep running.

“Fuck.”

Ilya's deep voice curses behind me, and the sound makes my heart skip a beat.

All I can think is that I have to get out of here. I have to escape.

Fear and adrenaline are a hell of a cocktail, and they push me to keep going, my eyes darting frantically through the gloom of the old building to find a door or something I can shove myself through. I won't be able to work a handle with my hands tied like this, but maybe the wood of the door will be shitty enough that I can just slam myself into it and break my way through.

I spot something that looks like a door and start running toward it, only to yelp when a heavy body hits me from behind at full force.

I go down hard, hitting the dusty wooden floor hard enough to knock the air out of my lungs.

My chest heaves uselessly, stars dancing in front of my eyes as Ilya grabs hold of my legs with his thick hands. Squeezing my ankles tightly, he starts to drag me back toward the table where all of his instruments are laid out.

“Shouldn’t have tried to run,” he mutters darkly. “Now you’ll have to pay for that.”

RANSOM

MALICE and I stand in Victor's room while Vic sits in front of his computer. It's a familiar scene, and we've done this exact same thing hundreds of times over the years, usually watching him go through video footage or disable security in a building or something.

The atmosphere usually isn't this tense, though.

"Fucking *find* her," Malice bites out, and Vic sucks in a breath.

He doesn't turn away from his computer, but I can see one of his hands twitching on the mouse as he scans through the security cam footage he's managed to pull.

"That's what I'm doing," he shoots back, his eyes glued to the screen.

But it's not looking good so far.

Usually, it's not hard for Vic to follow a trail and find where someone went, tracking them down so Malice and I can go after them. But so far, we can't find even a glimpse of Willow.

Apparently living here with us taught her a few things—like how to avoid CCTV and security cameras if she didn't want to be found.

"She has to have gone somewhere!" Malice growls, letting out his tension by slamming his palm against the desk. "She didn't just fucking disappear."

“If she’s not in the view of a camera, I can’t find her,” Victor snaps back. “It would be easy if she’d just stayed on the fucking path.”

But she didn’t.

She didn’t, and she snuck out, and we have no idea where she went.

That’s the thought that’s probably spinning through all of our heads right now, putting us even more on edge than we have been lately.

Worry sits in my gut, heavy and dense. The gash I got from running from Ilya aches on my thigh, and I curl my hands into fists at my side, trying to breathe through it all.

Malice’s jaw is clenched so tightly that I’m surprised we can’t hear his teeth crying out for relief, and even Vic, who’s usually cool and impassive under stress, seems strung out.

His usual ramrod straight posture is slumped as he sits in the chair, flicking from camera to camera, hunting for some sign of Willow.

“Go faster,” Malice grinds out, and Vic inhales sharply.

“I’m going as fast as I can,” he says. “Or do you want me to rush and risk missing something?”

It’s times like this when the two of them are so obviously twins. Usually, they’re as different as night and day. Malice is all chaos and rage, stomping through life and lashing out at things that don’t go his way. Victor is cool, almost cold at times, all deadly precision and impassive intelligence. They look alike, with similar facial features and dark hair, but that’s usually where the similarities end.

When they get worked up, though, they radiate the same kind of energy. The same intensity that seems to grow and get sharper like a feedback loop while they bark at each other.

Since I know that nothing I can say will make Vic’s search go faster, I tune them out for the moment, thinking about Willow instead.

I replay the last moments with her, trying to think this through. She came up to my room with me after Malice and I got back from the failed hit on Ilya. We had sex—damned *good* sex—and everything seemed fine.

I held her in my arms like I've done before. Like I started doing every night since she first let me. Willow melted against me, and she seemed content.

Then I woke up, and she was gone.

At first, I wasn't worried, thinking maybe she'd gone to the bathroom. When she didn't come back right away, I assumed maybe she'd headed downstairs for a late-night snack.

But after several minutes of dozing and waiting for her to return, I got up to go look for her. That's when I realized she wasn't in the kitchen. Or the bathroom. Or the garage.

She wasn't anywhere.

There's no sign of anyone breaking into the warehouse either, so the only thing that makes sense was that Willow just... left.

"There."

I'm dragged out of my thoughts by the sound of Vic's voice. When I look back to him, he's leaning forward over his desk, his gaze intent on the screen in front of him.

There are a bank of several monitors set up on his large L-shaped desk, and there's a blurry image on the screen of one of them. A few taps from Vic on his keyboard brings the image into clearer focus, making it resolve into what's obviously footage of Willow, walking down a street in the dark.

She looks small and vulnerable, hunched in on herself, her blonde hair shining under the street lamps.

Something sticks in my throat just to see it, and I want to go back in time and rush to where she is, to protect her and make sure she comes back here safe. And then ask her why the fuck she left in the first place.

Vic tracks her movements on the camera while Malice and I crowd in behind him, practically holding our breaths as we watch the footage play out.

She makes it down the street, cuts through someone's yard, and disappears for a bit, only to reappear on the other side of the block, still moving quickly.

"What's that?" Malice asks suddenly, jabbing his finger at the screen.

I peer closer and see a dark shape lurking in the shadows, dogging Willow's steps.

It puts a bad feeling in my chest, and the feeling of dread is justified when we see a man step out of the shadows a moment later and move in on Willow.

He comes up behind her, and it looks like he says something in her ear before he grabs her roughly, holding something over her mouth and nose.

Victor taps at the keyboard again, his fingers flying over the keys as he zooms in on the image, but between the darkness and the way the man is holding himself, we can't see his face.

"Fuck!" Malice explodes. His tattooed hands curl into fists, and he looks like he would be punching something right now if the only things in his path weren't Vic's expensive computer equipment. "Goddammit."

Vic's jaw clenches, his blue eyes narrowing, but he doesn't say anything. My stomach twists into a knot as the three of us watch the screen. In the dark, slightly grainy footage, Willow tries to fight the man's hold and then slumps, going limp and unconscious in his arms.

"Who the fuck is that?" Malice demands. "What the hell does he want with her?"

It feels shitty to even think it, but only one thing makes sense here. There's only one person who could have been after Willow. Only one person who would have anything to gain from kidnapping her, knowing her connection to the three of us.

“Ilya,” I say, the name coming out bitter and twisted. “It has to be. Who else would want to grab her like that?”

Malice turns to me and gives me a grim look, and when Vic looks up, I can tell that I said what we’re all thinking.

“Fuck,” Malice snarls again.

“He must have found us,” Vic murmurs. “He must have figured out a way to trace you back here and then decided to go after Willow. She made herself an easy target for him, alone on an empty street and away from us.”

“Find her,” Malice snaps. “Fucking find her. Where the fuck did he take her?”

Vic just nods, turning back to his computer. He scans through the footage, but once Ilya and an unconscious Willow leave the view of that security camera, it’s impossible to find him again.

Malice urges Vic to keep looking, and he does, but I think we all know that someone like Ilya is better at stealth than Willow. He probably knew where to go to make sure there was no way we could track him.

“He’s gone,” Vic finally says, turning in his chair. “I can’t pick up the trail.”

Malice looks like he’s about to vibrate out of his skin, every muscle in his broad body tensed like he’s ready to explode. His gray eyes are wild, darting back and forth, and his breathing comes in short bursts.

I feel the same way, honestly. If we can’t find where Ilya took Willow, there’s no telling what could happen.

“We have to find her,” I say, running a hand through my hair. “We know what Nikolai was like, and if Ilya is anything like his brother, and he has Willow...”

I trail off, because I know I don’t need to finish that sentence. If I speak the truth of what could happen out loud, it might get Malice so worked up that he’ll actually punch a hole in one of Vic’s screens.

“I’ll keep looking,” Vic says quietly. He starts back at the beginning, trying to go through the footage slowly, looking for any hint of Ilya or Willow.

“Wait,” Malice says, snapping himself out of his rage for a second. Or more likely, tapping into it enough that it focuses his energy instead of making him catatonic. “Where did he grab her? The exact location.”

Victor goes back to where we saw Ilya take Willow, and watching it again makes even more helpless rage churn inside me than the first time.

“I think I can get a street name,” Vic says. “Hang on...”

He zooms in and out on the footage, adjusting the view as he searches for the markers he needs. When he finally rattles off a set of cross streets, Malice nods sharply before glancing my way and jerking his chin toward the door.

“We’ll go there and try to track Ilya on foot,” I say to Vic, picking up what Malice must be thinking of. “While you keep scrubbing through the footage.”

“Good. Go.” Our brother doesn’t even bother looking away from his computers as he agrees. “With any luck, he’ll have left something behind that you can trace. Call me if you find anything.”

“We will. You too.”

He nods, his fingers flying over the keys. Malice and I move to head out, but before we reach the door, Vic speaks up again.

“Malice...” he says, and then trails off, his expression tight.

Malice just nods. “I know,” he says. “Call me if you find anything. Anything.”

“Right.”

We turn and stride out of the room, and I do my best to get my emotions under control as we head down the stairs to the first floor. It says a lot that even Vic, who’s always been a master at hiding his emotions and compartmentalizing shit, is

this worried. Willow means something to all of us, and having her gone and in danger makes me feel fucking feral.

Malice and I gear up and head out, sliding into the car a few minutes later. He cranks the key in the ignition, and the engine purrs as we pull out of the garage. I let the silence linger for a moment as we drive, not wanting to ask the question that sits on the tip of my tongue. But the more I don't ask it, the more it burns in my mind, and I finally drag in a deep breath and glance over at my older brother.

“Do you think Willow is still alive?”

His jaw clenches, and his fingers go tight on the steering wheel, his knuckles blanching white from the pressure.

“Yeah,” he grunts. “For now.”

I don't need him to explain any further to know what he means. All this time, Ilya has been searching for information, trying to track down and figure out who killed his brother. Now he has Willow, the only witness to the murder, in his grasp. He'll use her just like we feared he would: as a means to get to the three of us.

It's what we worried would happen from the fucking beginning of all this. It's the reason we essentially stalked her and then had her move in with us when it became clear someone was poking around and asking questions.

When we agreed to go after Nikolai and avenge our mother's death, we knew there was a chance someone could catch wind of it and decide to come after us in retaliation. But we decided it was worth the risk.

Now, fear fills me at the idea of Ilya being involved in this. But it isn't fear about what will happen to me and my brothers if Nikolai's brother comes after us. Right now, I couldn't give less of a shit about that.

All my fear is for Willow. For the gorgeous angel who fell into our laps and then became so much more than a loose end.

She's stronger than she looks, I know that.

But up against someone like Ilya... I'm not sure if it's going to be enough.

WILLOW

MY CHEST HEAVES, and my nose is filled with the sickly sweet stench of rotting wood, mildew, and dust.

I'm lying face down on the floor now, where Ilya dumped me in a heap once he dragged me back to the spot where he had me tied up to the now broken chair. My heart races, both from the exertion of my escape attempt and from the fear of what will happen to me now.

I was so close, but not close enough.

Ilya has me again, and he's pissed off.

I twist and writhe in place, trying to get my wrists free of the ropes that still hold them tight behind my back. There's a little more give in them than there was before, now that the angle of my arms has changed since I'm not tied to the chair anymore.

Before I can try to make use of that bit of extra room, Ilya grabs me, rolling me onto my back roughly. I wince when my arms get pinned awkwardly behind my back, my weight resting on them.

Ilya's face is twisted into a mask of anger and disdain, and he cuts away the ropes wrapped around my torso. Then he slides his hands over me, his blunt fingers dipping into the spaces where his knife cut my shirt, touching my skin.

Revulsion rushes up inside me, making me feel sick, and I try to squirm away, but there's nowhere to go.

He cups my breasts, squeezing them painfully, dragging his palms over my nipples.

“You aren’t going anywhere,” he says, spitting the words out around his thick Russian accent. “You’re making my job harder, but I will see it done.”

“Fuck you!” I hiss, all of my fear coming out as helpless anger.

“Ha.” Ilya’s dark eyes scan over my body, but there’s no heat in them. Just disgust and rage. “Maybe I *should* fuck you. You’re an ugly little thing, but I’m sure your pussy is tight enough.”

He pinches one of my nipples hard, giving it a twist, and I bite down on my bottom lip to keep from crying out in pain. His other hand comes down between my legs, cupping me through my pants.

“No!” I gasp out, struggling even harder as I try to squirm out of his grasp. “No, don’t—”

He chuckles, the sound rough and deep. “Believe me, you aren’t my type,” he assures me. “A scrawny, scarred little thing like you. But maybe splitting you open on my cock will make you learn your place.”

I was already almost lightheaded with fear, but the terror that grows in me as I hear him speak those words makes me feel dizzy and sick. Memories of his brother rush back all over again, that awful night all those weeks ago blending with this one until it’s hard to distinguish between them.

For a second, I’m back in that room at the brothel, sprawled out on the bed, trying to grapple with the panic that grips me. Nikolai’s hands are everywhere, ripping my clothes, touching my skin. The panic and the remnants of the drugs still in my system make it hard to keep a hold on what’s real and what’s not, and Ilya’s face keeps blurring and morphing above me—his one second, and Nikolai’s the next.

Ilya’s hand slides up my body, dragging over my chest up to my neck and then to the side of my face.

“Look at me,” he demands, gripping my chin roughly as he turns my head so I have to stare up at him.

My entire body is buzzing with adrenaline, and his fingers are close enough to my mouth that I lash out on instinct.

I twist my chin out of his grip and then bite down hard on one thick, calloused finger. The iron-tinged tang of blood on my tongue lets me know I broke the skin, flooding my senses and making me gag.

“Fucking bitch!” Ilya snarls, rearing back and snatching his hand away from my mouth.

Without his weight on me, I can struggle more, and I try to get away, but he’s too fast. He surges to his feet and hauls me up with him, wrapping one hand around my throat.

His hand is so big that he gets enough of a hold that he can lift me up by my neck with ease. My legs dangle uselessly, and I struggle against the ropes around my wrists, trying to suck in breaths of air while he tightens his grip on my neck even more.

Fuck. Oh god, no.

Whatever his plans were for me before, now he definitely seems like he just wants to kill me.

Between the panic and the fact that I can’t breathe, my vision starts to go blurry around the edges. I fight his hold as best as I can, but he’s too strong. Without the use of my hands, I can’t even clutch at his forearms or scratch at his skin to try to make him let go.

I’m choking, gasping for air that won’t come, and the darkness around us starts to grow heavier, blanking out my vision as my head swims.

Then something bright flashes in the darkness behind Ilya, catching my attention.

Fire.

A small flame has sprung up behind him, probably started by the sparks that flew up when I tripped over those wires. All this old wood is the perfect fuel for a fire, and as my body

shudders from the lack of oxygen, the light begins to glow brighter as the flame spreads.

All the old, rotten wood is going up, smoldering as soon as the sparks hit it, and the old, broken furniture piled in the corners isn't doing anything to slow it down.

The scent of ash and smoke is growing, making my eyes water—or maybe that's from Ilya's hand around my neck.

Ilya's attention is focused on me, his eyes narrowed as he holds me up by the throat, but the flickering light finally catches his attention too. He turns his head to look, and I see his eyes go wide for a second before he drops me to the ground in a heap.

I land hard, gasping for breath. My neck is a ring of pain, and it hurts to swallow. It hurts to breathe, but I make myself drag in gulps of air, trying to stop my head from spinning.

Before I can get my bearings and get my feet under myself to try to run, Ilya's got his hands on me again. He grabs me hard, yanking me to my feet, and jerking me in the direction of the fire.

"You savage little bitch," he growls out. "This will teach you a lesson."

It's like I don't weigh anything to him. He's so much bigger than me that he can drag me like a rag doll. No matter how hard I dig in my heels, I can't stop him from pulling me closer and closer to the flickering flames.

I never thought a fire could go up this quickly, but it's already starting to spread.

The heat is incredible, feeling like it's searing my skin even from this distance away. I choke on a lungful of smoke, and something rises up in me, a kind of terror that I've never felt before.

I was already afraid, already panicking, just being in Ilya's grip, but something about being hauled toward the fire makes it so much worse. My brain feels like it's shorting out, and the only thing that's playing on a loop in my head is *no, no, no*.

The sight of the shifting orange light dredges up barely there memories of fire from when I was little—the ones I’ve never been sure of. Maybe they’re real, or maybe it’s just something I’ve made up in my head. But either way, it’s like my body remembers this heat, remembers the fear of burning, and it all rises up inside me now, making me flail wildly as Ilya drags me toward the flame.

“No!” I scream, jerking in his hold and against the ropes that still bind my wrists. “No, let me go! *No!*”

“Shut the fuck up,” he snarls. “Maybe after I burn that pretty little face of yours to match the rest of you, you’ll tell me what I want to know.”

I shake my head violently, my heart going a mile a minute. The flames lick up around the wooden frame of a piece of furniture, and embers pop up into the air not too far from us.

I jerk back, trying to keep my distance, but Ilya keeps hauling me forward.

The flames fill my eyes, and all I can think about is burning. My lungs are thick with the smoke, and every breath I drag in hurts. My head spins, but the cold terror keeps my mind focused. I have to get free from him. I have to get away. I can’t let him do this.

I don’t want to die like this.

Chest heaving, I wrench at the ropes that bind my hands together. There’s more slack in them now, and I manage to find enough room to slip one of my wrists free from the loops. It burns where the rope has rubbed my skin raw, but I barely notice it. The thick cord drops away, and I flail against Ilya’s hold on me.

He curses, pulling me closer and pinning me against his body. I whimper, bucking against him—but then I feel something smooth against my hand.

There’s a switchblade sticking out of his pocket. It’s probably the same knife he used to cut me and my clothes, and I can only imagine what else he was planning to do with it.

But I don't let myself think about that. I just close my fingers around the handle, yanking it free.

The blade slides out silently, and I don't hesitate.

I lash out, desperate to make him let go of me. The tip of the knife sinks into his side, and Ilya jerks to a stop. He looks down at the wound and then back to my face, surprise and anger mixing in his eyes.

For a split second, I'm stunned as well.

I wasn't aiming for anywhere in particular, and I almost can't believe I managed to stab him. Blood blooms around the wound, spreading across his shirt.

"Fuck!" he roars.

He lets me go suddenly, reaching down to yank the blade out of his side. As soon as I'm free of his hold, I take off running in the opposite direction, fleeing both him and the fire.

My heart is pumping so fast it feels like it's going to beat its way out of my chest, and every desperate breath I take just makes my chest hurt worse. My body feels energized and weighed down by terror all at the same time, but I know I can't stop. I have to keep running.

My head is fuzzy, and my vision blurs as I run. Whether it's from the panic or the smoke, I can't tell. It's getting harder and harder to breathe, and I don't know what to blame for that either.

All I know is that I have to get away.

Ilya shouts behind me, his deep voice joining the crackle and hiss of burning wood. The fire is spreading, the old wooden building going up quickly as the flames gain strength, and the heat is overwhelming.

I make it back to the door I was almost at the first time I ran from Ilya and wrench it open to see a hallway with a set of stairs leading down at the end. There are other doors along the hall, but I don't even bother to try any of them as I run toward the stairs, trying to get down before the fire consumes the floor I'm on.

This must be an abandoned house or something. Very old and stuffed full of things that are primed to burn.

Behind me, I can hear the crash of Ilya's footfalls as he runs after me. I choke back a sob and realize that there are tears in my eyes, spilling down my cheeks as my eyes sting from the smoke in the air.

I wipe my face clumsily, careening down the steps so fast that I'm barely in control. One of the steps toward the bottom gives out under my weight, and I stumble hard, tripping and tumbling down the last four or five stairs in a heap.

On the way down, I hit my head on the banister, and I hear the wood creak and groan from the force. There's a second where my head spins and everything dances with stars as I look around, but the panic that rides me won't let me stop for long.

Keep going, Willow. Get out. Get out!

I haul myself up, panting hard, trying to get my balance back.

As I wrap a hand around the banister to steady myself, the sound of a crash comes from upstairs, loud and startling.

I jump, my heart lurching into my throat. Another crash comes, and this time, part of the ceiling nearby me gives way, sending burning beams hurtling toward the floor.

Shit!

I take off running again, the flames licking at the walls around me.

Dim streetlight filters into the dusty front room, and I almost sob with relief when I find a door. It's half off the hinges, crooked in the frame, and I wrench it open, stumbling outside onto an overgrown lawn.

The air is cool and clean out here, and I suck in grateful gulps, trying to get my bearings. My vision blurs again, going dark around the edges.

My head throbs from where I hit it when I fell down the stairs, but I don't stop. I stumble toward the road, desperate to

get away. Ilya must be coming. He's probably right behind me.

I take another step, but as I do, the ground seems to tilt, rushing toward me. I land heavily, the prickly grass rough against my palms as I sink down to my hands and knees. When I look up, everything is spinning around me. I can't tell if Ilya is coming out of the house after me. I can't focus on anything.

I blink hard, trying to stay conscious, to drag myself away from the dark abyss that's calling to me.

But all the strength is bleeding out of my limbs. Everything feels so heavy. My eyelids. My arms. My legs. The darkness bleeds over everything, filling me up.

Then my eyes roll back as my head hits the ground.

WILLOW

THE BREEZE TICKLES MY SKIN, and I feel someone grabbing my wrist. That snaps me back to consciousness, and I burst awake with a sharp gasp, trying to sit upright.

More hands join the first pair, pushing me back down, and I can make out a muted voice saying something.

A burst of panic erupts in my chest, because all I can think is that it's Ilya. He caught me and he's trying to hurt me again. I thrash in their hold, choking back a sob of pure fear.

"No..." I manage to rasp out. "No, get off me."

"Hey," the voice says, and as the sounds start to clarify in my mind, I realize it's not the harsh, accented grunt that Ilya has. It's a woman's voice, and she sounds gentle. "You're alright. You're safe."

I blink slowly, and it takes a few seconds for my vision to settle. My eyes feel gritty, still burning from all the smoke. But I can see well enough to recognize that it's not Ilya leaning over me. Instead, it's a woman with dark hair and a soft smile, dressed like an EMT.

Just a short distance away, I can make out the flashing lights of an emergency vehicle, and there are firefighters and more EMTs clustered in the area.

Relief hits me like a physical blow, and I sag back down, letting out a ragged exhale.

"What happened?" I ask, breaking off to cough up a glob of dark colored phlegm.

“Someone in the area saw the flames and called 911,” the woman says. “Can you tell me what happened?”

I nod. “There was a man. A big man. He kidnapped me and brought me here. I was inside—while it was burning. But I managed to run.”

“Hold on just a second,” she says. “Don’t move.”

Honestly, now that it seems like I’m safe, I don’t think I could move if I tried. My body feels wrung out, and everything hurts. I have no idea how long I was unconscious, but the panic that was urging me on before has run its course, leaving me exhausted and sore in the aftermath. Breathing burns my throat, and every time I cough it’s like a stabbing pain in my chest from the smoke inhalation.

I stare up at the sky, trying not to think about how close I came to dying.

The EMT walks over to the cluster of firefighters, and they’re close enough that I can make out snatches of their conversation.

“—says there was a big man ... kidnapped.”

“—a body, yeah. Upstairs. Big guy.”

“... dead?”

“Yeah. —burned up pretty bad. ... trapped... make it out.”

I suck in a sharp breath and then release it on a shaky exhale as I piece together what I’m hearing.

They’re talking about Ilya. It has to be.

No one else was in the building with us, I don’t think. And there was that crash I heard when I was running. The ceiling started coming down, so maybe something fell on him.

And that one firefighter said “dead.”

He’s dead.

I play the words over and over again in my head, trying to make them make sense. I understand what it means, that the burly Russian is gone and he can’t hurt me now, but there’s

some part of me that doesn't quite believe it. As if maybe it's another trick, and he's going to come charging out of the remains of the building any second and come after me again.

I squeeze my eyes shut, trying to breathe normally, but I can feel myself shaking. The panic that had receded is starting to claw at me again.

"You're okay," I whisper to myself. "It's okay, he's gone. You're safe."

But there's some kind of disconnect in my brain, and it's like the words don't penetrate. The wall of fear is too thick, and each breath I take gets shakier. I can tell I'm on the verge of a panic attack, emotions whirling in my chest like a hurricane.

"Hey, now." It's the EMT again. Her hand is soft and warm on my arm, but I still flinch away from her touch. "It's alright. We've got you. We're going to take you to the hospital so you can get checked out. You inhaled a lot of smoke, and you look like you're in shock."

Wrapping my arms around myself, I give a jerky nod. My teeth are chattering slightly, and I focus on keeping myself from being dragged down by panic as I let her and the others do what they need to do.

The cot I've been lying on is lifted into the back of the ambulance, and I dip in and out of consciousness as the ambulance screeches down the highway to the hospital.

"You're lucky you got out when you did," another EMT says. A young man with bright eyes. "From what the firefighters told us, that house went up fast."

"It was old," the woman replies. "It was only a matter of time."

Even though I'm safe, I can't shake the remembered feeling of the fire's heat on my skin. And knowing how close I came to being trapped in the collapsing building and burned to death just like Ilya was makes my stomach twist itself into a tight knot. Panic is still threatening to overtake me, and I close

my eyes again, welcoming the wave of dizziness that makes it hard to think.

Luckily, we get to the hospital before long, and everything from there is a flurry of motion. The EMTs hop out and wheel the cot out of the ambulance. I'm rushed into the hospital and wheeled down a sterile white hallway.

Voices call over each other as the EMTs hand me off to the hospital staff, and I'm hooked up to an IV drip and a few different machines.

A nurse takes my vitals, frowning when he sees the state of my neck and the cuts and bruises on my body. He slips out of the room and is replaced by a tall female doctor in a white coat a few minutes later.

She checks me over and then has two aides wheel my bed down the hall for an X-ray.

It's hard to keep track of everything that's said, and my head is still spinning. The doctor produces a small flashlight and asks me to follow it with my eyes, which I do to the best of my ability.

"Do you know what year it is?" she asks, and I nod, giving the answer.

She looks satisfied, and they take me back to the little hospital room.

"No broken bones," she tells me, standing near my bed. "Your neck is badly bruised, and you've got a few lacerations that are all cleaned up now. When did you hit your head?"

"I fell down the stairs when I was trying to get out," I explain. My voice doesn't even sound like me, rough and raspy from the smoke and almost being strangled to death.

The doctor nods. "Well, luckily you don't have a concussion, just a bump on the head. You were very lucky to get out of that with so few injuries. All things considered, you're fine."

Funny. I don't feel fine.

It's a relief that I won't need to be in the hospital for a long time and that nothing is broken from the ordeal, but when I close my eyes, I can still see the flames flickering, and I can still feel Ilya's hands on me, his knife dragging over my skin.

"The police are here," the doctor continues, and I blink at her, trying to focus. "If you consent to them doing a DNA analysis, they can hopefully confirm the identity of your attacker."

"Okay." I swallow and clear my throat. "I consent."

She smiles and nods, heading out to go tell the cops my answer.

Of course, I already know who it was. Ilya Petrov, brother of Nikolai Petrov. He was only after me because the Voronin brothers killed his brother and I was unlucky enough to be there when it happened.

I'm swabbed for DNA, and once they leave to go run it, exhaustion hits me hard. I drift in and out of sleep, nodding off only to wake up with a start every so often. I'm so tired, and every part of me feels worn down, but at the same time, there's still a spark of adrenaline driving me.

Everything that's happened in the last twelve hours is almost too much for me. I feel like I have whiplash from jumping from one emotion to the next. Before running into Ilya, the brothers' betrayal was the biggest thing on my mind, and I couldn't imagine anything being worse than that.

After being drugged and nearly raped by Ilya, that video I saw in Vic's room feels very far away. But I can still feel the hurt there, working its way into my heart like a dagger. It's all just been so much.

I let myself rest as much as I can, and even though the hospital bed is far from comfortable, it's better than being tied to a chair in a crumbling building. Someone brings me some water, leaving it on the table by the bed, and once they're gone, I gulp it down gratefully. My throat still hurts, and the cool water feels good against it.

Sometime later, a couple of cops walk into the room. One of them has the grace to knock on the doorframe as they enter, and I blink, startled out of my light doze.

“Ms. Hayes?” he says. “Sorry to disturb you. We won’t take up too much of your time.”

“Okay,” I murmur, glancing between the two of them.

“Can you give us a rundown of what happened?” the first cop asks.

“I was out for a... a walk,” I say, my words a bit halting. “And a big guy grabbed me. He knocked me out with some kind of drug, and when I woke up, I was in that house.”

“Had you ever seen or met him before tonight?”

I shake my head. Technically, it’s not even a lie. Before he abducted me, I’d only seen Ilya in a picture on Vic’s computer, and I’d never met him before. “No. Never. I didn’t know him.”

The cop nods, writing something down. “Do you have any idea why he took you?”

I shake my head again. “No. He didn’t really say much. Just that I couldn’t get away from him and he had plans for me.”

“Was there anyone else in the building with you?”

“No,” I tell them. “At least not that I could tell. I never left the room he kept me in until I was trying to escape.”

“How did you escape?” the second cop questions.

“A fire broke out because of some torn wires. The fire started getting bigger, and he was trying to—” My voice breaks off, and I cough a little. It’s hard to talk about it, even now that I know I’m safe.

“It’s okay,” the first cop says softly. “Take your time.”

I swallow hard and take another drink of water. “He was trying to drag me to the fire,” I tell them. “And I freaked out and managed to get away. I ran for the door and then slipped down the stairs, but I managed to get out.”

“You were lucky,” the second cop murmurs.

I nod, looking down at the hospital bed.

The door cracks open a bit, and another cop sticks his head in. He murmurs something in the ear of the one who’s been asking the most questions, and he looks over at me.

“We ran the DNA we were able to get,” he explains. “Your attacker was a man named Ilya Petrov.”

He looks at me like he’s waiting to see any kind of recognition on my face, but I just nod, gazing right back at him. Of course it’s not a surprise, but I don’t tell them I already knew that.

“He’s dead now, killed in the fire. He didn’t manage to make it out.” The cop pauses, still looking at me. Then he adds, “Ms. Hayes, your DNA was also flagged in our system.”

A frown tugs at my lips. “What do you mean?”

Is it something linking me to Ilya? Or the Voronin brothers? There shouldn’t be anything, but...

“It was a match for a cold case. A little girl that went missing a long time ago. We had the DNA provided from one of her parents to try to use as a match if she was ever found, but she never turned up anywhere.” He takes a step farther into the room, lifting his brows slightly. “Until now.”

For a second, all I can do is stare at him. Of all the things he could have said, that’s the last thing I was expecting.

One of my parents was still alive all that time ago? One of them wanted to find me?

The cop is still talking, and I wrench myself out of my thoughts to listen to him because I desperately want to know what he’s saying about this.

“Your parents are dead, according to our files, but you have a grandmother who’s still alive.”

A blood relative. Not my parents, but... a grandmother? Someone who knew them and maybe knew me before the fire happened?

Thoughts bounce around in my head, trying to solidify into something real. On top of everything else that's happened tonight, this new revelation is enough to make me wonder if I'm dreaming or hallucinating or something.

Is this really possible?

“Do you want us to contact her?” the cop asks me.

I nod immediately, my head moving before I even really consciously think about the answer.

I have a grandmother. A family.

A real one.

WILLOW

THE TWO POLICE officers who came into the room first stand up, and one of them nods to me.

“Thank you for your time, Ms. Hayes,” he says. “We’ll make that call to your grandmother.”

They file out, leaving me alone for a bit. Before I can sort through the tangle of thoughts and emotions crashing around inside me, a nurse comes in. She refills the water and asks if I need anything.

“Um, no. Thanks.” I shake my head.

“Alright. You’re set to be discharged soon,” she says.

I barely hear her, just nodding mutely as I pick absently at the blanket on the bed.

I have a grandmother.

Not just an adopted mother, a woman who never seemed to truly grasp what the word ‘mother’ was supposed to mean. Not just someone who used me for her own ends more than she ever took care of me. No, I have someone related to me by blood.

I keep coming back to that thought over and over again. It’s been a fucking horrible twelve hours, going from one awful thing to the next, and this single fact is like an anchor. I keep it close to my heart, as if it can keep me afloat in the chaos of my life at the moment.

I’ve always felt so alone. It’s always been just me, working and scraping and saving and getting fucked over by Misty and

trying to start over every time she did something shitty. Then, with the Voronin brothers, something changed for a little while. I felt like I found somewhere I could truly belong... until I realized I was nothing to them.

Just another diversion.

Just someone they could use.

But now I have some kind of family. The thing I've always wanted.

I remember being a kid and lying in bed after Misty did something shitty, getting lost in the fantasy that someday one of my real family members would show up and take me away from her.

As I got older, I started to realize it was probably never going to happen, but a little part of me hoped that there was *someone* out there. An uncle. A cousin. Something. Surely my parents had some family, and maybe they were still alive and would want to know what happened to me.

But no one ever came, and I didn't know enough about who I was before the fire to know how to reach out to anyone. So it was just me.

And now... that's all changed, in the blink of an eye.

An hour or so passes, and I jump slightly when there's another knock on the door.

"Come in," I call, and it opens to reveal one of the cops and an older woman.

"Ms. Hayes," the cop says, smiling a little as he gestures the woman inside. "This is Olivia Stanton. Your grandmother."

I suck in a sharp breath, staring at her. My grandmother hovers in the doorway for a moment, studying me in the same way I'm looking at her.

Her hair is mostly gray, but I wonder if it was once blonde like mine. I stare at her face, trying to see anything of myself in it. Our noses look similar, and there's something about her chin that reminds me of my own.

Olivia looks stunned. She blinks at me several times, then steps into the room, coming closer.

“Curtis,” she says softly.

I frown in confusion. “What?”

“My son,” she clarifies, reaching up to brush away a tear that falls from her eye. “I can see so much of my son in you. It... it really is you.”

Curtis. My father.

I don’t even know how to feel about finally learning my dad’s name after all these years. Or about having this woman here. I feel awkward, like I don’t know what to say or how to act. When I was a kid, I imagined throwing myself into the arms of a long lost family member and feeling safe and happy, but I obviously can’t do that now.

I’m just... so shocked to have her here. To be looking into the soft brown eyes of the woman who raised my father. Who knew my family. Who *is* my family.

The cop who ushered her in steps out, closing the door behind him, and Olivia sits down next to my bed, taking my hand gently.

Her hand is warm and dry, the skin a little wrinkled with age. She has a couple of rings on her fingers, and they’re warm against my hand.

“Um,” I hesitate, stammering now that I know it’s my turn to talk. “I’m Willow.”

Olivia smiles, her eyes crinkling at the corners even as more tears shimmer in them. “I can’t tell you how happy I am to meet you, Willow. Your mother named you Roselyn, but of course, I’ll call you by the name you’re used to.”

That’s another shocking bit of news on top of everything. That I used to have another name. It’s hard to imagine being anyone other than Willow Hayes, but it makes sense that I was someone else before.

“Can... can you tell me what happened to me?” I ask her. “I never really knew. I always assumed that my parents died in

a fire, but...”

I trail off, and Olivia nods.

“Of course. You went missing when you were little. Your mother did die in a fire, and in all the chaos, you went missing. We were never sure if it was a kidnapping or an accident or something else. Your father died a year or so after that.” She looks down at her lap with a soft sigh. “I think it was from a broken heart. He’d just lost too much.”

My heart clenches, emotions welling up in my chest. I don’t remember my father at all, but it’s so sad to think of him alone after losing his family. He wanted to find me, but he never did, and that must have hurt even more.

“His father—my husband—died a few years ago,” Olivia continues. “I wish he could’ve lived to see you. To know that you were still alive.”

There’s so much more I want to ask. I want to know everything about my parents. Everything about the life we had before the fire, and about what happened afterward. But I don’t even know where to start with those questions or how to ask them, or even if it’s appropriate to ask.

Before I can work it out, a nurse comes in, giving me a businesslike smile.

“You’re free to go, Ms. Hayes,” she says. “You’ve got the all clear. You’ll need to take it easy for the next few days, and if you have any complications, please don’t hesitate to call or come back to the emergency room. You went through a lot.”

I nod and thank her, waiting for her to leave before I start to slowly clamber out of bed. My old, shredded clothes were taken away, leaving me with a plain pair of sweatpants and a t-shirt with the hospital’s logo on it.

I step into the bathroom to get changed out of the hospital gown and then come back into the room to see Olivia still sitting in the chair by the bed.

“Uh, I guess... I should go home,” I tell her, shifting my weight awkwardly from foot to foot. I’m anxious to get out of this hospital, but I don’t really want to say goodbye to her yet.

I don't know quite *how* to say goodbye, either. I have no idea how to act around her.

"Where is home?" my grandmother asks, her brows drawing together. "The police told me you were adopted when you were fairly young. Do you live with your family?"

Something sour twists in my stomach at hearing my grandmother refer to Misty as my family. But I just shake my head. "No, I have my own apartment."

Honestly, it feels weird to be thinking of that place as home. I haven't been back there since the Voronin brothers charged in and made me come stay with them, and I barely even thought of it while I was at their warehouse. But now it's all I've got.

Olivia says something else, and it takes me a second to realize she's asking where my apartment is.

"Oh, it's the Lakeview Terrace complex," I tell her. Which is some kind of hilarious naming, considering there are no lakes or terraces anywhere near where my building is.

Judging from the face Olivia makes, she has no idea where that is, so I rattle off a few landmarks and the nearest cross streets. Her eyes widen a bit as she rises to her feet.

"Willow..." she says haltingly, twisting her fingers together. "The last thing I want to do is show up in your life and tell you how to live it. But I do know that's not the best area. I don't want you going back there alone. Especially not after you were just attacked."

Part of me wants to tell her I'm not worried about it. With Ilya dead, it's not like anyone else will be after me. But there are the Voronin brothers to consider, and if they find out I went back to my old apartment, there's nothing to stop them from barging in the way they always seem to do.

"I..."

"Please," Olivia says. "Let me take you to my house and put you up. Just for tonight, so you can rest up somewhere safe." She laughs a little, shaking her head. "Well, it's actually morning by now, but you still need to rest. I don't know all the

details, but it sounds like you've been through an ordeal, my dear girl."

She doesn't know the half of it, and hearing someone express this kind of care for me has me reeling. But she's right. It's been a long night, and the last thing I want right now is to be alone.

"Okay," I tell her. "Thank you."

She smiles at me, and it's full of relief, as if she wasn't sure if I would accept or not. It feels... odd to have someone be this happy that I'm going to stay with them. But I'm too tired to really process what I'm feeling right now, so when she ushers me out of the hospital room, I follow her.

We make our way outside, and I'm surprised to see that the sky is streaked through with the pinks and oranges of early morning. It really is morning.

It's wild to think that the whole ordeal with Ilya was only a few hours ago, and that me walking out of the Voronin brothers' warehouse didn't happen weeks ago.

In a way, I feel like all of that happened to someone else, and the me who's walking out of this hospital with her grandmother is someone else entirely. But since it still hurts to think of the three brothers, that's definitely not true.

"Willow."

A deep voice calls my name, and my footsteps stutter as my head whips up.

As if thinking about them has summoned them by some kind of magic power, the Voronin brothers are crossing the hospital parking lot, heading straight toward me and Olivia.

I blink, my skin burning hot before turning ice cold.

It's them.

They're here. They found me already.

The three of them are walking shoulder to shoulder, as brutally handsome and intimidating as always. Ransom looks relieved, Victor's face could be carved of marble, and Malice's

jaw is clenched so hard that the muscles in his cheeks are bulging.

I stand frozen in place, my heart crashing against my ribs. I guess I should have expected that once I was out of Ilya's grasp, they'd be able to find me. All Vic ever needs is a lead, and he can track down almost anyone.

But it's still a shock to see them.

My muscles tense up, my breath catching as my fight or flight instinct kicks into high gear. I have no idea what to do or say around them. Just a few hours ago, I was planning to slip away from Detroit and never come back. Never see them again. But now here they are, bearing down on me, closing the distance fast.

Olivia notices them a beat after I do, and she shrinks back a little, seeming alarmed.

Looking at the three brothers through an outsider's eyes, I can't blame her. They're all big and tattooed, and although Victor isn't quite as broad-shouldered as his twin, he looks like he could break a man in half if he needed to. They look just as dangerous as they are, power and confidence radiating from them in waves.

It's weird that somewhere along the way, I forgot how afraid of them I used to be. I never forgot who and what they are, but I started to feel comfortable around them.

That's gone now.

Now all I feel is nauseated and on edge.

The three of them stop a few feet away. With the way their gazes are locked on me, I know there's no way they'll just leave without me talking to them. And the last thing I want is for Olivia to get mixed up in all of this.

"Willow," my grandmother murmurs, moving closer to my side. She keeps one eye on the brothers, as if she doesn't trust them enough to take her gaze off them for a second. "Do you know these men?"

She seems like she's a minute away from calling for the cops inside the hospital, and I guess that makes sense. She's obviously wealthy, even dressed down the way she is now, and the brothers look like the kind of people who wouldn't hesitate to hurt her for what she has.

"Yes," I tell her, tearing my eyes away from the three of them. "I, um... just need a minute with them, if that's okay."

"Oh. Of course."

Olivia gives me small a nod as she speaks. There's still wariness in her eyes, but she doesn't stop me from stepping away from her and closer to the brothers.

I shoot them a look, and we walk a little distance away to a covered stretch of the hospital lawn. With every step we take, my heart rate increases a little more, and my pulse is racing by the time we come to a stop and turn to face each other.

Ransom gives me a once over, his gaze lingering on my neck. I know he's looking at the bruises from Ilya, a mottled ring of reddish purple that's getting darker as the early morning goes on.

"Fuck, angel," he murmurs, grimacing. "What did he do to you?"

He reaches for me, but I flinch back instinctively, not wanting him to touch me. "Nothing. It's fine."

A look of hurt and surprise flashes across Ransom's face, but he withdraws his hand and doesn't try to touch me again.

Victor looks across the way to where Olivia is waiting, typing out a message on her phone and glancing our way every few seconds.

"Who is that?" he asks.

The other two look over at her as well, and there's wariness in all of their faces—the same wariness that was in Olivia's expression when she first saw the three of them. Like they want to protect me from her.

That's fucking rich, coming from them.

“My grandmother,” I reply bluntly. There’s no point in hiding it. “Her name is Olivia Stanton. The cops found her after they ran bloodwork on me in the hospital.”

Ransom’s eyebrows dart up, and he glances from Olivia to me, like he’s looking for the resemblance. I know he has to be thinking of how I thought I didn’t have any family, and now my grandmother is here.

If things were different, maybe I’d talk to him about all the complicated feelings bouncing around inside my chest.

But they’re not.

And I don’t trust him with a single one of my feelings anymore.

Ransom’s expression softens a bit, understanding flashing in his blue-green eyes, but I turn away from him, not wanting to see it.

That’s how I fell into their trap in the first place—by letting these softer moments make me forget who these men really are. I don’t want any reminders of how I opened up to him. How I told him about my pain and my scars. How I trusted him.

“What the *fuck* were you thinking?” Malice cuts in. His voice is hard, and it’s almost a relief to look away from Ransom and into his older brother’s pissed off face. “Why the fuck would you just leave like that? You know how dangerous it is, especially in the middle of the goddamned night. How the hell are we supposed to protect you if you’re not there?”

He sounds angry as hell, and it reminds me suddenly of the anger that seemed to explode out of him when he found out about what Colin tried to do to me. His words pierce my heart, because I know none of it is true.

It’s all a fucking sham.

I fold my arms, trying to control the frantic beating of my heart.

“Why do you even care?” I snap back. “I know you never gave a shit about protecting me. So you can drop the fucking

act now.”

“What?” Malice jerks his head back almost as if I slapped him. His eyes flash with confusion for a second, and then the anger comes back in full force. “Is that what you think? After all that’s happened?”

“I don’t know what else I’m supposed to think!” I practically shout and then remember where we are and lower my voice. “You say one thing and then do another and expect me to just go along with it. To let you treat me however the hell you want and be grateful for whatever scraps of affection —”

I cut myself off, my throat going tight. Pressing my lips together, I shake my head as I try to rein in my wild emotions. The last thing I want to do is cry in front of them.

I refuse to let them know how badly they hurt me.

Malice and Victor exchange glances, and Ransom steps forward.

“Willow,” he says gently. “What happened? Why did you leave? I thought everything was good with us. I thought you were happy.”

“*I was!*” I blurt. “I *was* happy. I thought...” I swallow hard, my eyes stinging as I huff out a breath. “I saw your fucking tape.”

“What?” Ransom frowns. “What are you talking about?”

“The video. The one he put together.” I jab my finger in Victor’s direction. “I saw it in his room on his fucking computer. All the footage from my apartment when you were spying on me. Footage from that fucking golf course with Colin. What... what we all did together.” That part hurts the worst, each word scraping my throat like jagged glass. “I saw it, and I saw what you wrote about me. I know what you really think, so don’t show up now trying to pretend you ever cared about me.”

All three of the brothers go silent for a long moment, staring at me with surprised expressions. Even Victor’s eyes

widen for a second before his features shift to something more neutral.

“Willow,” Ransom says, stepping in even closer. “That wasn’t what you thought it was. We had to—”

“Ransom.” Malice’s voice is sharp, cutting him off. He shakes his head, and Ransom falls silent. All three of them share a look, communicating something silently, and although I can’t begin to guess what it is, it hurts and pisses me off even more.

It’s just another reminder that I’ve always been an outsider to them, never truly one of them. They have an entire silent language that I’ll never understand.

None of them speak up again, and I close my eyes for a second, feeling the ache in my heart start to grow even sharper.

“I’m done,” I tell them, my voice shaking a little. “You can find someone else to use and spy on and whatever else. Ilya is dead, so there’s no reason for you to watch me anymore. The threat is gone.” I lift my chin, staring at each of them in turn. “Kill me if you want, but I’m not coming back.”

“Willow—”

This time, I’m the one who cuts Ransom off, shaking my head. “I didn’t tell the cops anything. I didn’t mention you or that I knew who Ilya was or anything about Nikolai. Your secret is still safe. All I want is for you to leave me alone. Please. Just leave me *alone*.”

Before they can say anything else, I turn on my heel and start walking across the lawn, back toward my grandmother.

They don’t try to stop me, and for some reason, that hurts too.

I know I did the right thing. Going back to their warehouse with them, letting them back into my life, would just give them more chances to mess with my head. To convince me that they care so they can turn around and use me again. So they can treat me like their personal whore.

Still, it fucking hurts. I feel like my already battered heart is breaking with every step.

I can feel their eyes on me as I walk away, burning into my back, but I don't turn around.

“Are you alright?” Olivia asks when I return to her, concern clear in her eyes. “Who are those men? Are they friends of yours?”

“Um, sort of. They're just some guys I know.” I shrug, trying to keep my answer vague. “And yeah, I'm okay. I'm just... really tired.”

She makes a *tsking* noise, shaking her head as she gives me a sympathetic look. “Of course you are. You've been through so much. Let's get you somewhere where you can rest.”

She leads me to her car, a classy and fancy looking sedan, and opens the passenger side door for me. I slide onto the buttery leather seat and buckle up, trying to zone out and not think about the guys.

“Is it alright if I ask you some things?” Olivia asks as she drives. “I know you're tired, but I'm just so curious. You've been alive all this time, living your life, and I never knew.”

“Of course,” I tell her, because it would probably be rude not to. “What do you want to know?”

“Do you work in the city?”

I shake my head. “Not anymore. I used to be a waitress, because I needed the money for school but I got... uh, a grant so I was able to quit and focus on school full time.”

No way in hell can I tell her that the “grant” was from three dangerous murderers, paying me off to keep their secret.

“Oh, that's wonderful,” she says, smiling over at me. “You're twenty-two, right? Are you in your last year?”

“No, just my second. I started late because I didn't get my GED for a while.”

Her eyebrows furrow, and I already know what she must be thinking. Before she can ask about it, I launch into the explanation, telling her that I missed a lot of school because I had to work to help my adopted mother with bills.

Not that the money ever really went to that, but that's a whole other story.

My grandmother listens in silence as I speak, and when I finally finish telling her the very abbreviated version of my life story, I glance over to find her looking at me. Sadness and something almost like pride mingle in her expression, and when she reaches over to rest a hand on my shoulder, I startle in surprise. Her eyes are warm as she looks at me, and there's a kind smile tucked into the corners of her mouth.

"It seems like you've lived a hard life," she murmurs. "You're clearly a survivor."

"I... guess so. It wasn't easy, but I got by."

"You're still so young," she says. "And you've been largely taking care of yourself."

I nod because that's true. It's not like Misty ever really took care of me. On paper, she took me in and gave me a home, but I was the one who did all the work for it. I made sure the bills were paid, and I kept the place clean. I pulled her together when she was on a bender or when a john got shitty and tried to take advantage.

But that was just my life. If I spent too much time dwelling on how hard or bad it was, I would never have gotten anything done.

"I hope things can be easier for you going forward," Olivia says quietly.

As she speaks, she turns down a small, curving road. I blink, realizing that in the time we've been talking, she's driven across Detroit to an area I've never been to before.

It's quieter than the other parts of the city I've seen, with trees lining the roads and fancy iron gates set in front of large properties.

Olivia turns onto another road, and on either side are what look like acres and acres of smooth green lawn. It takes me a second to register that this isn't just another road—it's her driveway.

We crest a small hill, and what sits in front of us can't even really be called a house.

It's a fucking *mansion*.

It's all old brick and stone, the glass from what looks like a hundred windows glinting in the morning light. The gardens are a riot of color, and it looks more like a wedding venue or a historical building than a place someone lives.

This is so far out of anything I've ever experienced before that I have no idea what to think. The Voronin brothers had money when they needed it, but they still live in a warehouse turned garage turned home. And compared to the shitty apartment I was living in, this may as well be a castle.

It was clear from the moment I met her that Olivia has money, but this is on a whole different level.

My grandmother isn't just rich.

She's fucking *loaded*.

VICTOR

I SLIDE INTO MY CAR, buckle the seatbelt, and crank the key in the ignition, then peel out of the hospital parking lot. In this moment, I'm grateful that I drove to meet Malice and Ransom separately, once I figured out where Willow was. Malice's uncontrolled anger and Ransom's strung out expression were making me too tense. My own emotions are much closer to the surface than I usually allow them to be, and I need a few minutes alone to get myself under control.

Glancing in my rearview mirror, I see Malice's car right behind me.

After we watched Willow leave with the woman she called her grandmother, we all stared at each other in silence for a long moment before Mal jerked his head in the direction of our cars, taking the lead the way he always does. Now we're all heading back to our place—without what we came for.

Without Willow.

I keep turning what she said over and over in my mind, pressing my foot down on the gas as I methodically merge into another lane.

She saw the video.

She saw the note I wrote to X, calling her a whore. Calling her worthless.

From the very beginning, it didn't sit right with me to write those words about her. But I knew it was necessary. We all did. X was so attached to Willow being delivered to him as a virgin that the only way to break his interest in her was to

remove what he found so valuable. To turn her into trash in his eyes.

But that was just for the ruse.

She was never trash to us. She was never worthless.

Willow was never supposed to know about any of it, but she found out, and now everything feels fractured and out of control in the way that makes my skin hum unpleasantly.

I lose sight of Malice and Ransom in the rearview after a while, and I get home before them, pulling into the garage and cutting the engine.

Even just walking into the warehouse feels different. It's so obvious that something is missing. That something isn't right. Maybe it's just in my head, but it feels emptier than it did before.

Dead inside.

Like Willow took all the oxygen with her when she left.

She came into our lives like a butterfly, flapping its wings and causing chaos. Changing things little by little until she had rewritten so much of our everyday existence. Until she had imprinted herself on our DNA.

And now the butterfly is gone.

It's odd, considering how much I chafed against her being here in the first place, and I don't think I realized at the time how used to her presence I had gotten.

Before I can sink any deeper into my thoughts, the eerie silence in the warehouse is broken by the sound of a car door slamming. A second later, Malice and Ransom burst into the space, mid-argument.

“What the fuck is wrong with you?” Ransom demands, his eyebrow ring flashing as he wheels on Malice. “Why wouldn't you just let me tell her? Now she thinks we actually think all that shit about her, and she's never going to come back.”

“I did it to fucking protect her,” my twin snaps back. “It's not safe for her to know about any of that. It would've just

dragged her deeper into all this shit. We sent that video in the first fucking place to get X off her back. Telling her about him would just make her a potential target again.”

“So it’s better for her to just be out there, alone, thinking we think she’s a whore?” Ransom shakes his head, his lips pressed together. “No. I don’t believe that.”

“It fucking *is* better.” Malice’s tattooed hands ball into fists. “Because she was right. What she said at the hospital is true. Ilya’s dead, and that threat is over. We don’t need to watch her anymore, because there’s no one else to give a shit about Nikolai’s death. Which means she’s safe now.”

Ransom grinds his teeth, looking more like Mal than usual with his jaw clenched and anger rolling off him in waves.

I can understand how he feels. I’m still agitated myself.

Everything just feels... *wrong*.

I turn to head upstairs, and the two of them follow me, still arguing.

“What about what we said? How we promised we weren’t going to let her go?” Ransom asks. “You were right there, so I know you fucking remember.”

“For fuck’s sake, Ransom,” Malice growls. “You know good and damned well I just didn’t want to see her go to X and be used for whatever sick shit he had in mind. But use your fucking head for a second. Did you really think we could just keep her forever? Did you think someone like her was just going to fit into our lives with the way things are?”

Ransom doesn’t have an answer for that, but he glares at Malice anyway, fury burning in his green eyes. After a beat, he finally speaks again.

“You’re kidding yourself, Mal,” he mutters. “That’s bullshit, and you know it.”

I let them keep going at each other in the hall, walking into my room to log into my computers. Whenever the real world gets too intense, sitting down at my keyboard always helps me focus and pull myself back under control. It helps keep me

from spiraling into the chaos and darkness that always sit at the edges of my consciousness, just waiting for a chance to rush up and swamp me.

But as my computer screens come to life, my pulse jumps, my shoulders going tight as I sit up straighter.

Because the first thing that pops up is a message from X, responding to the one I sent him earlier—the one with the video of Willow.

I click to open it, glancing quickly at Ransom and Malice, who are still standing in the hall in front of my door.

“We got a reply,” I say, raising my voice enough to cut over the sound of their argument and get their attention. “Stop fighting and come look at this.”

Ransom breaks off mid-sentence as he and Malice both snap their heads in my direction, immediately on alert. They both come in and cluster behind my chair as I bring the message up, and all three of us read it in silence.

The message is short, and my fingers drum against the desk as my gaze scans the text.

It’s pretty obvious that X is pissed at us for what we did, and that he knows we ‘purposefully ruined her.’ But he doesn’t tell us to bring her to him anyway, so it seems like it worked.

All he cared about was her virginity. He doesn’t have any interest in her anymore.

Relief floods me at that, and I sit back in my chair, letting out an inaudible breath. I hated seeing the hurt in Willow’s eyes, knowing that it was because of us and what we did, but it’s better that she have her heart hurt and despise us for it than end up in X’s clutches. He would have sold her for her body or traded her virginity away to the highest bidder, and she deserves so much better than that.

There’s more to the message, and I look back at the screen as I refocus and keep reading. Since we failed to deliver Willow and ruined her in the process, X considers that job a failure, and he tells us that he has several other jobs he’ll need us to do to make up for it.

Malice snorts as we all finish reading, the sound full of disdain.

“Yeah, I’ll just bet he has more work for us. Asshole doesn’t even have the decency to say what these jobs are or how many or what. He just wants to keep us on the hook for as long as he can.”

“It’s not the best news, no,” I agree, counting out the beats as I tap my fingers against the smooth surface of the desk again. “But we knew going into it that he wouldn’t be happy about us defying him.”

“And at least it means our plan worked,” Ransom puts in. “He doesn’t want Willow anymore.”

There’s a note of satisfaction in his voice, but it’s mixed with something dull and heavy. Something like pain.

Because even though our plan worked and we managed to protect Willow...

We lost her too.

WILLOW

I WAKE up with my face pressed against the softest pillow I've ever felt in my life. It's like sleeping on a cloud, but one that's firm enough to contour to my face and cradle it gently.

I have no idea what time it is, and my head feels fuzzy. Every part of me is worn out and tired, and I'm sore all over—especially my neck, although the cuts on my torso and arms ache as well. With a soft groan, I roll over and blink up at the ceiling.

The room I'm in is unfamiliar, but I remember pretty quickly that I'm at my grandmother's house.

My grandmother:

How is this not a dream?

Less than a day ago, I didn't even know I had any living blood relatives. And now I have a grandmother.

I'm still reeling from that discovery, and the excitement of finding out I have a real family is tainted a bit by memories of everything that led up to my grandmother's arrival at the hospital.

Despite the luxurious softness of the bed, I didn't sleep all that well once we got to Olivia's house. My brain kept tormenting me with nightmares of Ilya hovering over me, cutting my skin and groping my body. I tried to run in my dreams, just like I did in real life, but his strong arms wrapped around me and dragged me toward the flames, the scent of smoke and charred wood thick in the air.

I suck in a deep breath, relieved that this room smells more like lavender and furniture polish than soot and ash.

As comfortable as the bed is, I force myself to sit up. Although the curtains are drawn, I can see light filtering in around them, and I have no idea what time of day it is or how long I slept, but I don't want to just lie in bed all day. And I definitely don't want to fall back asleep. Not with those memories lurking, waiting for me to close my eyes so they can drag me under again.

So I push the covers away and slide off the mattress, noticing that there are some clothes laid out for me on the chair off to the side of the bed.

I take them and head into the attached bathroom to shower and get dressed.

It's a beautiful bathroom, all gleaming tile and shiny accents. The shower is separate from the tub, and they're both huge. The whole space is almost bigger than my bedroom back in my apartment, and I stop to stare at it for a second, still coming to grips with the fact that I'm related to someone with so much money.

There are lights over the mirror, and I catch sight of my own reflection staring back at me. The mirror me grimaces, her lips pulling back in a wince.

I look worse than usual.

My skin is pale, but not in the way it normally is. Now it's almost like a pallor, making me look ghostly and sick. My soft blonde hair hangs lank and dirty, matted from sweat and smoke and being dragged across the floor. My eyes are a bit too wide in my face, and the bags under them are heavy and prominent.

The marks on my neck are dark and ugly, even worse now than they were when I first saw them at the hospital.

When I take my clothes off, I can see the bruises and cuts that Ilya gave me, adding to the mess of scars I already had from the fire all those years ago. The *first* fire I survived.

I also still have the tattoo that Malice gave me, right above my left breast. I clench my jaw when I look at it.

The night he gave it to me, I felt like it would be a permanent reminder of them. It was something I wanted, something to remind me that I wasn't alone, and that even if our time together ended, a part of me would always belong to them.

But now it feels like all the other scars on my body—a mark of something or someone that hurt me.

I stare at it for a long moment, tracing the stylized two and four with my eyes in the mirror. I still don't know what those numbers mean or why Malice chose them to put on me, and I guess it doesn't really matter now.

None of it matters, I remind myself bitterly, a new ache springing up in my chest. *None of it mattered to them, so you shouldn't let it matter to you.*

Shaking my head forcefully, I try to banish those thoughts. I don't want to think about the Voronin brothers at all. The sooner I can get them out of my head, the sooner I can get on with my life—whatever that might look like now.

I step into the shower, determined to enjoy a peaceful moment in this luxurious bathroom.

The shower head is one of those rainfall ones that I always saw being installed in the home improvement shows I like to watch. The water pressure is perfect, and it heats up to the right temperature in just a few seconds.

A far cry from the clanging pipes and long wait for hot water back at my place.

There's a cluster of fancy looking bottles along a built-in shelf in the shower, and I help myself to them, taking my time to wash my hair, wanting to get every trace of ash and soot out of it.

I scrub myself down, wincing when soap and hot water hit some of the fresher cuts, and when I step out to dry off, I feel a bit better.

More human, at least.

The clothes that were laid out for me don't fit quite right, as if someone just guessed at my size. And they're not really my style. The straight legged linen pants and the button-up shirt are more expensive and conservative than anything I usually wear, but they're clean, and that's all I need.

Once I'm dressed, I leave the bedroom and step cautiously into the hall.

A woman is walking down the corridor, and we almost collide as I pull the door shut behind me.

"Oh, shit!" I jump in surprise, my hand going to my heart as my pulse leaps. I'm still more jittery from last night than I realized.

"I'm so sorry," the woman says, a look of chagrin crossing her face. "I didn't mean to startle you."

She's older than me but younger than Olivia, probably in her late thirties. She has a basket of cleaning supplies in her hand, and as my heart rate starts to slow to a more normal level, I realize she must be a maid.

"It's okay," I tell her. "I should have been paying attention. Um. Do you know where my—um, where Olivia is?"

She smiles, giving me a polite nod. "Yes, she's downstairs. Would you like me to show you?"

"Oh, no, that's okay." I shake my head quickly. "I don't want to interrupt your work or anything. I can find her."

"As you like. Just let someone know if you need help," the maid tells me before continuing on down the hall.

I only have to walk a little way in the other direction to find the staircase. It's a sweeping thing, with dark wooden banisters on either side that have been polished until they gleam. The stairs are covered in a rich carpet, done up in maroon and gold, and I almost feel bad stepping on it as I head down.

'Downstairs' turns out to be the main floor of the house, and it's massive. The entryway alone is bigger than my

apartment, and a cut crystal chandelier presides over the whole thing, throwing rainbows across the walls and the floor as the sun streams in through the windows.

The walls are decorated tastefully with art, paintings of meadows and oceans that have clearly been done by expert hands.

I make my way cautiously through the house, trying not to feel like an intruder. When I find the kitchen, I poke my head in, locking eyes with another person who must work for Olivia as he sorts through produce in a bin.

He raises an eyebrow, and I wave awkwardly and leave before he can ask me if I need something.

After wandering down a few more hallways, I find a sitting room, and Olivia is there. She's seated in an armchair, a book in her lap. The room is bright, with large windows that line the walls, and there are plants hanging from the ceiling near the windows.

When she sees me, Olivia smiles and beckons me in. She looks me over, her gaze lingering on my neck.

"I'm glad to see that you're awake," she says. "I was just going to have someone go up and check on you to make sure you didn't need anything. How did you sleep?"

"Not the best," I admit. "Not because the room wasn't comfortable or anything!" I hurry to add, because I don't want her to think her hospitality wasn't good enough for me. "It was probably the most comfortable bed I've ever slept in. It was just... everything else."

She nods. "I understand. You've been through so much. It would be strange if you weren't still feeling the effects of it all."

I swallow hard, because she's right. There's so much weighing on my heart and mind right now.

Olivia gives me another soft smile and gestures to the sofa across from where she's sitting. "Have a seat, Rosely—Willow. Make yourself comfortable."

That's easier said than done, considering I haven't been in a place this fancy in my entire life. When I sit down on the plush sofa, it doesn't creak and groan in protest like the one in my apartment always did. There are no springs jutting up from the bottom, and no saggy cushions that dip in the middle.

It's comfortable as hell, and I lean back, trying to enjoy this while it lasts.

Olivia watches me closely, but she doesn't seem like she's waiting for me to fuck up or anything. Instead she looks pleased, like she's glad I'm settling in.

"You have a really nice house," I tell her awkwardly. "I've never been anywhere this amazing before."

"Thank you." She glances around the room, setting her book aside. "I've put a lot of time and effort into it. I'm glad you like it. I didn't want to come off as pushy or moving too fast when I invited you to stay the night here, since we've just met, but the thought of you going back to your apartment alone worried me. I wouldn't have been able to live with myself if something had happened to you and I hadn't at least offered you a place to stay."

I nod, glancing down at my lap. "I appreciate it. It was nice, waking up and not feeling alone."

When I look up at her, she's gazing at me with kind eyes, and I offer her a little smile back.

It's still so weird, to look across the coffee table and realize I'm looking into the eyes of my grandmother. Someone I didn't even know existed until hours ago. Already, she's done more for me than most people in my life ever have.

"Oh!" Olivia says suddenly, startling me. "Where is my head? You must be starving. Let me get you something to eat."

"That's okay. You don't have to—"

Before I can register a protest, she presses a button on a glass panel embedded in the coffee table. A few minutes later, the guy I saw in the kitchen earlier appears in the doorway.

“You called, ma’am?” he asks, dipping his head respectfully.

“Yes, my granddaughter will need something to eat,” she says. “And I could do with something as well.”

“Of course,” he replies. “What can I get you?”

He looks at me, and I immediately tense up, not sure what to say.

“Um... I’ll be fine with just coffee,” I say. “And maybe some toast?”

Shit, I’m not used to any of this. Is it like ordering at a restaurant? What if I ask for something that they don’t have? Of course, Olivia’s kitchen is probably as well outfitted and stocked as the rest of the house, but still.

Olivia chuckles, taking over. “Bring us a variety of those pastries that got delivered this morning,” she tells the man. “Some fresh fruit. Toast and eggs.” She glances at me. “Any aversion to meat?”

“Uh, no.”

“And some bacon, please,” she finishes. “We’ll take it in the dining room.”

“Yes, ma’am,” the staff member says, nodding again before striding away.

I’m still staring after him in shock when Olivia gets up from her seat and gestures for me to follow her to the dining room.

We walk down long, dark wood paneled halls, and I look around, taking in more fresh flowers and art. For someone with so much money and such a big house, none of the decor is over the top or pretentious. I like it.

When we reach the dining room, Olivia ushers me inside.

The table isn’t one of those long ones with too many chairs. Instead, it’s round and made of dark wood. There’s no table cloth, and the wood gleams and smells faintly of the same citrusy furniture polish that I smelled in the rest of the

house. There's a beautiful centerpiece in the middle of the table, bright blossoms floating in a large glass bowl of water.

I sit down across from where my grandmother has taken her seat, feeling so out of place here.

"Peonies," Olivia says.

"Excuse me?" I look up, confused.

She smiles and nods to the centerpiece I was admiring. "Peonies. One of my favorite flowers. I have them cut fresh every other day for this bowl. I don't entertain many visitors, but I love the look of them."

"They're beautiful," I tell her. "I've never seen anything like it before."

"I imagine fresh flowers are hard to come by in the heart of the city," she says.

I snort and then make a face. *Shit, that was probably very rude of me.*

"Yeah," I say. "There aren't a lot of gardens in my neighborhood. I thought about trying to grow some flowers on my window sill once, but I didn't really have the time to take care of them."

Olivia nods. "I have the benefit of having a very dedicated gardener. Otherwise I wouldn't be able to do it either."

"Is it just you here?" I ask her, curious. "I mean, do you live alone?"

"Yes. Except for the house staff. As I mentioned last night, my husband died a few years ago."

"Right," I murmur. "I'm very sorry to hear that."

Olivia nods. Her gaze drops to the table, a sad expression crossing her face. "Thank you. It's been... very hard without him. He was my partner in all things." She looks up at me, her hazel eyes softening. "I do so wish that he could have lived to see you. To know that you were alive and well all this time. He loved you so much."

My heart clenches, and that feeling of longing, of wanting a family so desperately, rises up in my chest.

“I wish I could have known him,” I whisper.

We’re interrupted by two women coming into the room with trays of food. They move around the table with practiced ease, putting a cup of steaming coffee down in front of me, along with little ceramic jars of milk and cream. There’s an honest to god crystal sugar bowl dropped off in the center of the table, and plates full of food.

There are more pastries than I know how to name, along with a platter of fresh sliced fruit. They also drop off a steaming plate of eggs, scrambled and fluffy, and two kinds of toast—one dripping with butter and the other giving off the spicy sweet smell of cinnamon. One of the women sets down a plate of bacon and then looks at Olivia.

“Do you need anything else, Mrs. Stanton?” she asks.

“No, this looks lovely, Amelia. Thank you.”

Both women nod and then disappear from the room as quickly as they entered.

For a second, all I can do is stare at the food, wide-eyed and suddenly starving. It all looks so good, I don’t even know where to start.

“Help yourself,” Olivia says, reaching for the fruit. “You must be famished.”

“I think it just hit me right now how hungry I am,” I admit. Following her lead, I grab the empty plate in front of me and load it up with a little of everything.

Olivia eats neatly, a cloth napkin in her lap that she uses to wipe her mouth after every couple of bites. Her plate is neat and orderly, each kind of food with its own little separate section, nothing touching or jumbled together.

I look at my own plate. Aside from the fruit, everything is pretty much in one big pile. I put eggs on the toast and take a bite, savoring the delicious taste.

We eat in silence for several long minutes, and once I've cleared about a third of the plate, I look up again to see Olivia watching me.

"Is it alright if I ask you about what happened last night?" she asks carefully. "The police told me the basics, but not much more than that. Just that you had been attacked and escaped from a fire."

I swallow a bite of Danish and then chase it with a swig of coffee.

"That's pretty much it," I tell her, my stomach twisting around all the food I just ate. "I was out for a walk... to clear my head, and the guy just grabbed me."

"And you didn't know who he was?"

I shake my head. I don't feel great about lying to this woman, who's been nothing but nice to me since she met me hours ago. But the last thing I want is for her to get dragged into the fucked up mess with the Voronin brothers.

"No, I didn't recognize him," I tell her. "I guess he just... wanted to hurt someone."

She blows out a quiet breath and shakes her head. "The people in this world. I'll never understand what makes them do the things they do. You must have been terrified."

"I was," I admit. "Especially when the fire broke out. He seemed like he wanted to use it to hurt me, and I... it almost felt like it gave me flashbacks to the fire I survived as a kid, even though I know I was too young to really remember it."

The churning in my stomach is getting worse, and my hands shake when I lift my coffee cup to my lips.

Olivia seems to notice, because she clears her throat, giving me a sympathetic smile.

"Let's talk about something else, shall we?" she offers. "Tell me more about your life. I'm so curious about what you've been doing all this time."

My fingers tighten around the coffee mug.

That's hardly a better subject, honestly.

There's nothing in my life that's been exciting or worthy of praise. Nothing that will impress this woman or make her proud to be related to me. Compared to the opulence Olivia lives in, anything I can say will just make me seem trashy and low class by comparison. Between my adopted mother being a hooker and me working in a strip club just to barely make ends meet, there's not much to say.

But Olivia looks so eager to get to know me, and I don't want to lie to her or disappoint her.

"Sure," I say, trying to find some place to start. "I mean, I never knew who my real parents were. I ended up in the system when I was pretty young, and I got adopted by a woman named Misty Hayes."

"And Misty was good to you?" Olivia asks, leaning closer, her breakfast forgotten.

I blink for a second, trying to figure out how to answer that.

"She did her best," I settle on saying, even though that's not really true at all. Or maybe it is, I don't know. Misty's best is probably a lot of other people's worst. "We didn't have a lot of money, like I was saying last night—er, this morning," I correct myself. "So we had to try to make ends meet however we could. Misty worked, I worked, but the money always seemed to just... never be enough."

Because my drug using mother would spend it on whatever she wanted and not pay the bills.

I don't say that either, but apparently, I don't need to.

Between what I've just told her and what I revealed on the car ride over here, Olivia has clearly gotten a sense that my life has been hard. Sympathy shines in her eyes, the soft wrinkles on her face deepening as she purses her lips.

I swallow another swig of coffee and keep going.

"As soon as I could, I enrolled in college at Wayne State. I've been working on my degree so that I can make a better

life for myself.”

I don't mention that I haven't been to classes in a while because the dangerous brothers I was living with didn't think it was safe for me to be out of their sight.

“That's wonderful,” Olivia replies. “I'm so impressed with your drive to improve your circumstances and not let the negativities of your life hold you back. That takes an incredible amount of strength.”

“I... I guess. I just really want to live a life I can be proud of.”

My grandmother smiles. “I haven't known you for very long, Willow, but I can see the determination in you so clearly.”

Her smile drops a little, and she turns her eyes back down to her nearly empty plate. She fidgets a bit with her fork, and for the first time since I met her, she seems ill at ease.

“Is everything okay?” I ask.

“Yes.” She takes a breath and looks up. “I'm just... so very sorry that I wasn't there for you. You needed your family, and you didn't have anyone.”

“Oh. It's okay,” I try to reassure her, shifting awkwardly in my chair. “You didn't know where I was. If you'd known, you would have been there, I'm sure.”

“I would have done everything in my power to bring you home, if I'd known,” she agrees, her refined voice taking on a fierce tone.

“I believe you,” I whisper.

It's almost impossible to comprehend how different my life would have been if she had known. I would probably be on a completely different path right now, and I don't even know how to begin to imagine the person I could've been if I had grown up with my real family.

But there's no use dwelling on it. It's not like there's a way to go back and change the past. All I can do is what I always do: keep moving forward as best I can.

“Um, is it okay if I ask you some things?” I ask, feeling suddenly shy.

“Of course.” She nods emphatically. “You must have so many questions.”

“Could you... tell me about my parents?”

Olivia folds her hands in her lap, hesitating for a moment before she speaks. “They adored you. When you were born, it brightened their lives in a way that only a true blessing can. Your mother had some... emotional issues, but your father loved her so much, and he tried his best to help her.”

My brows furrow. “I feel like there’s another ‘but’ in there somewhere.”

She sighs, a pained expression crossing her face. “Yes, there is. Unfortunately, her issues won out in the end. She started a fire in their home one night. The blaze spread quickly, and when the firefighters cleared the scene, they found her body burned in the ashes.”

My heart clenches, a chill washing over me.

“She set the fire?” I whisper, staring across the table at Olivia.

“I’m afraid so. Your father wasn’t home at the time, and although we never found your remains in the ashes, it was assumed that you had been killed as well. Now I have to wonder if perhaps your mother was able to surface from the darkness of her depression long enough to realize that she didn’t want her baby to die along with her. Enough to get you out before the house burned, even if she went back inside to let it consume her.”

My eyes burn, and I blink rapidly to push back the tears that threaten. Thinking of my mother, who was so troubled that she wanted to die but loved me enough to get me out and make sure I wasn’t burned with her, makes my heart ache.

I close my eyes and try to search for an image of her face, a memory of her voice. Anything. But there’s nothing there. Just the vague memories of flame and heat that I still don’t know if I made up.

“We may never know the truth of what happened that night,” Olivia continues. “Either way, there was a frantic search for you after that. The house was destroyed entirely by the fire, burnt all the way down to the foundation. They never found your remains, but we knew there was a chance that your body had simply been buried and couldn’t be found. We searched as well as we could.”

She reaches across the table and puts her hand over mine, and I realize that it’s shaking slightly.

“I hoped for a very long time that you were still alive, by some miracle. That the reason we couldn’t find your body was because you had survived. I can’t tell you how happy I am that my prayers were answered. And... I would very much like to be a part of your life now, Willow. If you’ll let me. It sounds as though you’ve been through quite a lot, and I’d like to help you in any way I can, with whatever I can.”

I swallow hard, suddenly overcome with emotion. Everything has been so much, from the moment I got out of Ransom’s bed and saw that sex tape of myself, to being kidnapped, to meeting Olivia, to hearing this story. It’s been one thing right after the other.

Before, all I wanted was to flee Detroit. To put as much distance as I could between me and the Voronin brothers, to make it so that they could never find me again.

But now?

I don’t want to go.

The only family I have in the world is here, and she’s offering to help me—something no one else has ever really done before, at least not without expecting something in return.

“I... I’d like that,” I tell her after a long moment. “Right now, I just want to keep going to school. I had to miss a good bit of it recently, but I really want to finish my degree.”

A relieved smile pulls at Olivia’s lips, and she gives my hand a squeeze. “Of course. I think I can help with that.”

WILLOW

I GUESS I've always known that people with money, power, and privilege live a different life from the one I'm used to, but getting things done with Olivia at my side really drives home how true that is.

After finishing breakfast, the first thing we do is drive to my campus.

As soon as we get there, I feel a pang of longing. It's surprising how much I've missed it since the brothers decided I wasn't allowed to go back.

"Are you sure about this?" I ask my grandmother, turning to look at her as we walk toward the dean's office. "I've missed a lot of classes, and I know that's not something they'll just let slide."

Olivia just smiles at me, her chin held high. "You're a good student from what you've told me. And the school exists to serve good students. We'll make this right."

My stomach twists with nerves. I'm almost certain that the dean is going to tell her that there's nothing he can do, that I've missed too much and wasted my chance here. But it's clear Olivia doesn't mean to take no for an answer.

"The dean is very busy today," his receptionist tells us when we walk in. "He's not taking walk-ins."

"We have an appointment," Olivia says crisply. She's polite, but her tone makes it clear she's exactly where she's supposed to be.

“Name?” the woman asks, pulling something up on her computer.

“Olivia Stanton.”

If the woman recognizes the name, she doesn’t show it, but she nods when she finds Olivia’s name on the list of appointments for the day.

“Ah. My apologies, Mrs. Stanton,” she says. “Just give me a moment.”

She gets up and goes to tell the dean that we’re here, and a few minutes later, we’re shown back to his office.

Dean Carmichael has a reputation around campus for being the no-nonsense brain of the school. He gets things done, but people rarely see him—unless they’re being kicked out or receiving some kind of accolade.

Olivia breezes into his office like she owns the place, settling herself into one of the leather-covered chairs across from his desk and motioning for me to sit in the other one.

“Mrs. Stanton,” Dean Carmichael says. “How may I help you today?”

His gaze flickers over to me for just a second, but then he looks right back to Olivia, making it clear who he thinks is more worth listening to here.

I guess he’s not wrong.

“I’ll get right to the point,” Olivia says. “This is my granddaughter, Willow Hayes. She’s a student here.”

The dean looks back to me and then goes to type something on his computer, probably pulling up my file. “I see.”

“Due to some unfortunate and unforeseen circumstances, my granddaughter had to miss more class than she would have liked at the end of this past semester. I’m here to see what we can do to get her back on track.”

I have to work hard to keep my expression blank and neutral. *Unfortunate and unforeseen circumstances* is

definitely one way to put it. Olivia hasn't asked for the specifics of what kept me out of school, and I haven't offered too much of an explanation. And I'm grateful she hasn't pushed for more.

I've already told her a good amount of the truth about my life and how things have been since I was adopted, but I really don't want to get into everything that happened with the Voronin brothers. That's just... a whole different level, and a part of me wishes I could forget it all myself.

"Usually, when someone has missed as much class as Miss Hayes has, they have to retake the semester," the dean says, steepling his fingers. "She didn't complete her final exams for any of her classes, according to the records here."

"I understand that." Olivia nods once. "But that isn't an acceptable solution."

"It's the only one we have."

My grandmother smiles, and it's still polite and refined, but there's a sharper edge to it. "So you're telling me that if a student had to miss class because of an illness or a death in the family or some sort of emergency, then you would force them to retake an entire semester's worth of credits?"

Dean Carmichael blinks, clearly not used to people challenging him. "Well, not always. Of course not. But those are extenuating circumstances."

"Ah, so then you're implying that the reasons my granddaughter missed classes aren't good enough to allow her to make up what she missed?"

For a second, he seems at a loss for words. I get the sense that if he were talking to anyone else, he might say that her vague reasoning isn't enough. But something clearly gives him pause when it comes to arguing with my grandmother.

So he switches tactics.

"What would you suggest, Mrs. Stanton?"

Olivia folds her hands in her lap. "You have a summer school program, yes?"

“Yes,” he allows.

“Willow will take classes this summer then. She’ll make up for what she missed and can start next semester with no penalties.”

I have to stop myself from openly gaping at her. She radiates so much confidence that it’s almost impossible to imagine the dean denying her request.

And in the end, he doesn’t.

After glancing at me one more time, he finally nods. “Alright. As long as she keeps up her attendance this time, we can allow her to make up what she missed over the summer. But she’ll need to register for classes right away. The summer session starts very soon.”

“Of course.” Olivia gives him a pleased smile.

We leave his office and go right to the registrar’s building, where my grandmother makes sure I’m signed up for all the right classes. She prepays my tuition as well, overriding my protests with a reminder that she’s making up for all the years when she couldn’t spoil me the way a grandmother is supposed to.

And it doesn’t stop with her getting me back into school either.

A couple of days later, we go to tour apartments, and she tells me to pick the one I like the best and not to worry about how much the rent costs.

Every single one makes the apartment I’ve been living in look like a hovel, and as strange as it is to have this kind of freedom to choose a place without stressing about money for once, it’s also kind of fun.

I use the knowledge I’ve gained from watching home improvement shows to pick one with the kind of amenities and features I’ve always dreamed about, and we sign the lease that same day.

“It’s beautiful,” I breathe, standing in the living room. It’s still empty for now, but full of potential. “I’ll have to get up

earlier, since it's a few more stops away from campus, but it's so worth it."

My grandmother frowns. "You've been taking the bus to school?"

I nod, and the next thing I know, we're in her car, heading to the nearest car dealership.

"Olivia..." I say as we trail behind an eager salesman who can clearly spot money when he sees it. "This is too much. You've already done so much for me. I'm fine taking the bus, I promise."

"I'm not trying to buy you, Willow. Or win your affection with gifts."

"No, I know that. I only mean that you don't have to spend so much on me. I can't ask you to do this."

She reaches out and puts a hand on my shoulder. "You aren't asking, so you don't need to worry about that. This will hardly break the bank for me. Remember what I said? Consider this twenty-two years of missed birthday and Christmas presents. I just want to make up for lost time."

There's something wistful in her tone, and I know she's probably feeling guilty for not being around before. She wasn't able to help me when I was struggling, and that probably weighs on her.

It feels strange to have someone care so much, after so many years of basically having to care for myself, but I'm grateful for it. For *her*.

We're still strangers in so many ways, but we're starting to get to know each other more and more every day, and I like that.

I end up with a sleek silver car and a bunch of new furniture for my new apartment by the end of the week. It feels so weird to park in a lot and not have to worry about my stuff getting stolen, but every time I walk into the new apartment or sleep in the bed with the plush new mattress and sheets, something warm spreads through my chest.

Is this what it means to have a family? To have a safety net?

A few days after moving in to my new apartment, I go back to school to start my summer classes.

The campus is much emptier than it usually is, since most of the students are gone—either off working their summer jobs or on vacations or visiting their families.

Of course, the first group I see when I pull up to park my car is April and several members of her little clique, walking across the lot, talking and laughing.

Fuck. I didn't think she'd be taking summer classes.

I guess I shouldn't be surprised though. She's got a competitive streak a mile wide, so if this helps her get ahead of other students, no wonder she's here. Plus, it's not like she has to work a summer job like I would have if my circumstances hadn't changed.

Taking a deep breath and resolving to ignore her and her posse, I slide out of my car and press the button on the key to lock it.

The beep gets April's attention, and she glances over at me. For a second, her gaze passes over me and I can tell she doesn't realize it's me. But then it hits her, and her eyes widen almost comically.

I look a lot better now than I did last time she saw me, all things considered. The bruises around my neck have mostly faded and are covered by makeup, and I'm wearing nicer clothes, bought for me by Olivia. I'm walking away from a nice car, and my head is held high.

April nudges one of her friends hard in the ribs, and they all turn to gape at me as I walk past them.

“What the hell happened to her?” April murmurs to one of her friends, and I'm still close enough that I can hear it. “Am I hallucinating or something, or is that Willow Hayes looking halfway decent for once?”

“Maybe she got a good job,” one of them guesses.

“Yeah, right. She probably had a relative kick it and give her all their money,” another says, and they all laugh at that.

“Holy shit.” The first girl lets out a gasp. “That’s not that far off, actually. Check out this article I just found.”

Slowing my steps, I glance over my shoulder as April and the others cluster around the girl and her phone.

“Cold case solved. Missing member of the Stanton family reunited with matriarch,” April reads out loud. She glances my way, and I quickly start walking again, pretending I haven’t heard her.

“That’s her picture,” one of her friends point out. “That’s Willow.”

“No way.” April scoffs, her voice growing more faint as I leave them behind. “That’s insane. The Stantons are one of the richest families in the fucking state. There’s no way a nobody like Willow is one of *them*.”

Whatever else they say gets lost as I follow a pathway around a building, heading toward my first class. Nerves twist in my stomach, and I chew on my lip as I glance at the few other random students walking nearby.

All of this still feels like a dream. Having a rich grandmother—hell, having a grandmother at all—feels like something I could wake up from at any moment and find myself back in my shitty apartment, living my shitty life.

I shake my head as I reach the building where my first class will be held, slipping into the room and settling down in a seat. It’s quieter than it would be if it was the regular semester, and I’m grateful for that.

When I walk down one of the rows, my cheeks flush as I remember sitting in this same room and Malice walking in like he owned the place, even though he stood out so completely.

I was sitting in the back, and he...

No.

Nope.

Don't go there, Willow.

I refuse to think about Malice and the things he did to me while he was sitting next to me in this room. I won't think about his hand sliding between my legs, or the way his fingers...

Fuck.

My face is hot all over again, and I shake my head to clear it, letting out a messy breath. It's a good thing there's like one other student in the room right now, and he has his headphones on. I don't need anyone else to see me blushing about something that happened in the past and will never happen again.

I don't want to think about Malice. Or any of them.

I need to focus.

Being back in school feels so good. It's one thing I missed the most when I was living with the guys, and I'm so grateful to Olivia for making it possible for me to make up my classes. It's always meant a lot to me, this dream of graduating with a good degree and changing my life for the better. It's going to be my ticket to freedom from the shit I grew up with, a way to leave it all behind and become someone better.

It's not hard to throw myself back into it, taking notes and listening to lectures and feeling *normal* for the first time in weeks.

Once classes end, I head back to my car and drive to my new apartment, feeling good. I hum along to a song on the radio, grateful that I don't have to take the bus or worry about a drug deal going down outside my building when I get home.

After taking the elevator up to my unit, I unlock my front door and step inside.

I'm about to head toward the kitchen, thinking about reheating some leftovers for dinner, when movement out of the corner of my eye catches my attention.

I glance toward it, and my heart stops.

Malice is standing in the middle of my living room.

WILLOW

MY HEART KICKS BACK into gear suddenly, crashing against my ribs as it pounds at a quick pace.

Malice.

What the fuck is he doing here?

He stands like an imposing statue in the living room, the sunlight from the large windows pouring into the room and bathing him in a halo of warm gold. His muscled, tattooed frame looks out of place in this elegant apartment, especially considering he must've broken in. The contrast between him and his surroundings makes him look even more rough, dangerous, and wild.

For a long moment, we just stare at each other.

I'm at a loss for words, half from the shock of seeing him here and half from the riot of emotions rushing through me. Even after everything that's happened, there's still a part of me that feels glad to see him—and I hate that.

Then Malice's gaze drops to my neck. His tongue flashes out, licking his lips, and I catch my breath softly, trying not to follow the motion with my eyes.

"Your bruises are almost gone," he says. His voice is rough, and he sounds almost... relieved. Like he actually cared that I was hurt.

His voice snaps the tense silence, and I swallow hard, stiffening my spine. I can't afford to get dragged into this mess with him again. I can't afford to let my guard down. When I

told them all I was done before, I meant it, and I have to stand firm to that.

I call up all my anger from the night I saw that video, letting it burn hot and bright in my chest.

“Yeah, they are. I’m lucky I got out with just some scrapes and bruises,” I tell him coolly. “No thanks to you and your brothers.”

Malice’s jaws clench, a flash of anger darkening his gray eyes. He stalks toward me slowly, not looking away, staring me down the same way a predator watches its prey.

“You don’t know what you’re talking about, Solnyshka,” he murmurs. “We did everything we could to find you. As soon as we realized you were fucking gone, we all lost our shit. Vic was scrubbing through footage, Ransom and I were trying to track you on foot. Don’t you know that we would have protected you if we could have? We were going out of our fucking minds trying to get to you before Ilya could hurt you.”

I want to take a step back, to put distance between us as he comes closer, but I make myself stay put. This is *my* fucking apartment, and I’m not going to let him intimidate me like this. I take a deep breath and hold my ground, lifting my chin as I glare back at Malice.

“Well, in the end I didn’t need you,” I bite out. “So I guess it doesn’t matter.”

“Why the fuck did you leave?” he demands, his voice rising. “Why did you go where we couldn’t protect you? Why would you do that?”

He sounds angry, which isn’t all that unusual for him. But there’s also something almost... desperate in his voice. Like he *needs* to know what happened, like it’s tearing him up inside.

My throat tightens, making it hard to breathe. Hard to swallow. Malice is close enough now that I can make out the tiny flecks of dark blue in his irises. He’s closer than he’s been since the night I left, and my heart slams in my chest.

“I already told you why,” I force myself to say, my voice raspy. “Why the fuck would I stay with people who think I’m worthless? Who fucked me like a whore and treated me like one too? Worse than one, because at least whores get paid. You three just saw me as nothing but a hole to stick your dicks in. You used me. You *lied* to me. Of course I couldn’t stay there. Why the fuck would I?”

My chest hurts, as if calling him out for what he and his brothers did is bringing me right back to the night when I realized they’d betrayed me. Tears burn in my eyes, threatening to fall, but the last thing I want to do is cry in front of him. I won’t give him the satisfaction of knowing how badly he hurt me.

Ducking my head, I stare down at the shiny wood floor of the living room. I drag in a deep breath, trying to clear my mind and get ahold of myself.

Calloused fingers slip under my chin, and I blink in surprise when Malice tilts my head up, making me look at him.

There’s something almost gentle in his eyes, mixed in with the intensity, and it stops me in my tracks for a second—long enough for him to speak again.

“That’s not true.” His voice is low and rough. “That’s not how we see you.”

I swallow hard and then swallow again, almost shaking with the force of the emotions I’m feeling. How can he still make me feel so much? So much pain and longing all jumbled up together? Why couldn’t the bruises on my heart have healed as quickly as the bruises on my neck?

“Then why did Victor put that video together?” I whisper, my lips trembling. “Who did he send it to? What was the point of it?”

Malice’s jaw stiffens. The emotions I could’ve sworn I saw on his face a second ago disappear as his expression hardens, and he looks away, not answering my questions.

I let out a ragged breath, feeling like there's a hard lump in my chest where my heart should be. I take two steps back from Malice and then walk around him altogether, putting more distance between us.

"Why are you here?" I demand again, turning around to face him. "This thing between us is over, don't you get it? Ilya is dead. There's no reason for you to be here. There's no fucking reason for you to be in my life anymore!"

"You're right." Malice nods once, his gaze never leaving my face. "There's no reason for me or my brothers to be in your life anymore. We *shouldn't* be in your life."

The simple honesty in his voice twists like a dagger in my gut, even though I just said the same thing. I cross my arms over my chest, goosebumps scattering over my skin as I hug myself tightly, clenching my jaw as if that could keep out the pain.

"Then go," I tell him, jerking my chin toward the door.

But he doesn't move. He stays right where he is, rooted to the spot and still staring at me.

"There's no reason for us to be in your life," he repeats. "Except I can't fucking stay away."

My breath hitches, my mouth falling open slightly. "What are you—"

"I've been watching you all week," he continues, stepping toward me. "I know I shouldn't, but I can't stop myself."

I hate hearing him say that. I hate the way some part of me is glad to know that I'm like an addiction to him—because he and his brothers feel like one to me too.

But most of all, I hate that he can still break through all the walls I put up around my heart.

"Stop saying that. Stop fucking with me!" I blurt, and it comes out ragged and almost pleading. I try to draw on my anger again, to make it clear that I'm done with this, but it's not as easy as it probably should be.

Malice comes closer, looming over me as he stops less than a foot away. He stares down at me, emotions playing over his face. I can't stop myself from gazing back at him, trying to catalogue the emotions and make sense of them all. Trying to see past the mask I'm sure he's wearing to all the lies and deceit that I know lurk beneath.

“Willow...”

Instead of the nickname he gave me all those weeks ago, he says my real name softly—and it snaps something inside me.

“No!” I shout. “No! Don't fucking do that!”

All my emotions bubble up at once, spilling over until I can't hold them back. I curl my hands into fists and beat at Malice's chest, for all the good that does. It's like hitting a fucking stone wall, but that doesn't stop me.

“Don't say my name like you give a shit about me!” I shove at him, wanting him to move. Wanting him to crumble. Wanting him to... I don't even know what. “Who the fuck do you think you are? I told you we were done. I told you I wanted you out of my life! Get out! Leave. Me. Alone!”

All the anger and hurt pour out of me as I yell at him, hitting him with every sentence, every condemnation. Tears well in my eyes and trail down my cheeks, my breaths coming in harsh bursts as I unleash everything I'm feeling in a torrent.

Malice catches my wrists in his large hands, his fingers forming bands that might as well be made of iron, stopping me from hitting him. He stares down at me with eyes that burn, but he doesn't say anything.

“*Why?*” I demand again, struggling against his hold. I hate the way my voice trembles and cracks at the end. I hate how weak I sound. “Why would you make that video of me? Why would you do it?”

Malice's fingers tighten around my wrists, almost to the point of pain. It looks like he's wrestling with himself as I stare up at him, his nostrils flaring as his jaw hardens.

Then, suddenly, an answer bursts out of him.

“We did it to protect you, alright?” he growls. “Because we didn’t have another fucking choice!”

That stops me short, and I blink in surprise. “What? What do you mean?”

He lets out a ragged breath. “I didn’t want to tell you. Hell, I probably still shouldn’t tell you. But we used that footage to try to keep you safe.”

I shake my head, tugging against his hold on me. “I don’t know what you’re talking about, Malice.”

“I know. Just... *fuck*.”

He lets go of my wrists, but I don’t run away from him this time. I just keep staring up at his face, waiting for it all to make sense.

“There’s a man we work for,” Malice finally says, the words coming slowly as if he’s still wrestling with himself over whether or not to tell me more. “We owe him something pretty fucking big, so he gets to demand favors from us in return. We do jobs and shit for him. I guess at some point, this fucker found out that you were living with us, and he decided he wanted you.”

“Me?” My brows draw together as a shiver runs up my spine. “Why would he want me?”

“More specifically, he wanted a virgin,” Malice returns, giving me a look. “So we had to make sure you weren’t one so he wouldn’t want you anymore.”

It feels like an invisible fist squeezes my heart as he says that, and I wince, pressing the heel of my hand against my sternum.

I’m still trying to wrap my head around the fact that there was more to this than I knew. Some guy they work for wanted me, and Malice and his brothers made that video to protect me. To keep me from falling into the other man’s hands.

But... they still lied to me. They still kept secrets from me. If I hadn’t happened to wake up in the middle of the night and

seen that video on Vic's computer, I never would have known what they'd done.

Even worse, it means that the night that meant so much to me, when I felt wild and free... they planned that. They orchestrated the whole thing for a completely different reason. Not just because they wanted me the same way I wanted them. Not just because of the connection I thought existed between us.

Even if they don't truly believe all the things I saw in that message Vic wrote, it still hurts. To be used. To be lied to and made to think one thing while something else entirely was going on.

They may not think I'm trash, but they treated me like an object.

I step away from Malice again, dropping my hand away from my chest. I have to force myself to take measured breaths, and the room feels like it's spinning around me a bit.

"Get out," I tell him.

Malice draws in a sharp breath. I can see that he doesn't want to leave—it's written in every line of his body. He moves to take a step toward me again, but I shake my head, my shoulders tensing.

"No," I repeat, my voice low. "Just go."

For an interminable moment, he stares down at me, the two of us frozen in place. Then, finally, he turns on his heel and leaves.

Once the door closes behind him, I sink down onto the couch, my knees giving out beneath me. Burying my face in a pillow, I let the sobs I've been holding in burst free.

WILLOW

ALL THREE OF the Voronin brothers are draped over various pieces of furniture in their living room. Ransom is reclining on the couch, looking languid as a god, while Vic and Malice sit in chairs, using them like thrones. Malice gestures me closer, and I go to him on my knees, my heart pounding and my clit throbbing as I crawl toward him.

He reaches down and grabs a handful of my hair, and I moan at the pain that sparks over my scalp. That tingle of pain runs down my body, pulling my core tighter, making my body ache with the need to be touched.

I want him. I want all of them, and there's no hiding it now.

Not when I'm undone like this. They can see everything, all of me, and I don't even want to hide it in this moment.

"Good girl," Malice growls, and the dominant note in his voice makes me shiver. "You can start by sucking my dick."

My pulse speeds up as I get his pants undone and pull out his cock. It's rock hard and hot in my hand, the velvety, tattooed skin sliding against my palm as I stroke him.

I dip my head and take the tip into my mouth and then glance up, wanting to see the look on his face when I wrap my lips around him.

I expect to see intensity, heat, and desire burning in the stormy gray depths of his irises. Maybe even triumph in there somewhere.

But instead, there's nothing.

No heat. No emotion.

I've never seen Malice of all people look flat and blank before, but he's reacting to me sucking his dick the way someone might react if they were watching the weather.

I blink, my stomach clenching—and then I'm on the couch with Ransom. His hands run up and down my body, tweaking my nipples, dragging reactions out of me. He pulls me down onto his pierced cock, and I moan out loud, my head tipping back as I feel him punching through the last shred of my virginity.

It feels so good as we rock together, the heat and friction growing between us. I can feel Vic's eyes boring into the side of my head as Ransom fucks me, but when I glance over at him, it's the same as it was with Malice.

Nothing.

He's dead-eyed, as carefully neutral as always, but somehow even more removed than usual.

When I turn my head to look back to Ransom, he's the same way. His hands are tight on my hips, and he keeps pulling me down, making me take more and more of his cock, but there's nothing there in his expression. He might as well not even be present.

There's no glint in his blue-green eyes, no teasing smile. Nothing.

Once Ransom comes, filling me up with his release, he passes me off to Malice. I'm out of breath, body keyed up and sore, draped over the arm of the couch.

Malice fills the space between my legs with his body, staring down at me.

"This is what you wanted, isn't it?" he asks, his voice cold. "I knew you were a perfect little slut, deep down."

There's no emotion in his words, and the emptiness in his eyes finally breaks me. Tears start to trickle down my cheeks, and a sob gets trapped in my chest. My heart aches as he

presses his thick cock into me, filling me up and fucking me hard and fast.

My body reacts to it, my pussy soaking wet and tightening around his cock over and over again while he makes me take it. His fingers bite into my skin as he keeps me where he wants me, and the gasps and moans spilling from my lips are the same as they would if this were normal.

But it's not.

Nothing about this is normal. Nothing about it is good.

It all means nothing.

I may as well just be an empty body. A hole for them to pass around and fuck. They don't give a shit about me, and that knowledge hurts all the way down to my bones.

Malice comes inside me, and I slump back onto the couch. My heart is racing and I fight to breathe, trying to get the tears under control as they stream down my face.

Vic gets up and joins Malice and Ransom, and the three of them surround me, staring down at me. I know what I must look like, fucked out and messy. I'm naked, my arousal and Ransom's and Malice's cum mingling on my skin, trickling out of me to smear across my thighs.

I keep waiting for something to register in their faces. Some sign that they feel anything about this. About me. A flicker of heat, or even disgust at this point, would be better than the empty blankness I see in their expressions.

It feels like they're closing in on me, and the pressure is too much. Staggering to my feet, I hastily grab my clothes and push past them as I head toward the door.

None of them stop me, and in the back of my mind I can hear the words I read in Vic's message repeating over and over again.

"Worthless."

"Whore."

Over and over and over.

I run as fast as I can to get away from them, stumbling through the front door. But instead of ending up on the street, I find myself in the abandoned house where Ilya brought me.

I hit the ground hard, and before I can get up and get away, there's a heavy body on top of me.

"No!" I scream, thrashing and trying to get away. When I finally manage to look up, it's to see the cold, cruel eyes of Nikolai's brother as he holds me down.

"Maybe I should fuck you," he sneers, his thick accent turning his words even harsher. "You're an ugly little thing, but I'm sure your pussy is tight enough."

He grabs me, hauling me up to my feet, and I struggle to get away, but he's just too strong. His hand is huge as it wraps itself around my throat, and he lifts me like I weigh nothing.

Like I mean nothing.

Those fingers bite into my skin, cutting off my air as I fight to get him to drop me.

But it's no good. He's too strong.

The looming feeling of death grows stronger and stronger, and the scent of smoke floods my nose.

The fire.

It's big and out of control, consuming all the rotten, splintered wood behind Ilya. The flames leap and snap, the light flickering and making Ilya's shadow rise up behind him like a dark beast.

My heart feels like it's going to beat out of my chest, and the word 'no' plays on repeat in my head, even though I can no longer speak.

I don't want this.

I don't want to die like this.

I don't—

My legs twist in the sheets as I snap awake in bed, drenched in a cold sweat.

It takes a second for me to realize where I am, my new apartment still a bit unfamiliar. It doesn't help that things have been in such a state of flux lately, with me going from the guys' warehouse to my grandmother's place to this new apartment so quickly.

In the daytime, this apartment is a dream. It's nice and spacious, all clean lines and tall ceilings. But at night, it almost feels *too* big. It's too open, and it makes me feel exposed somehow.

I push my hair out of my face, grimacing as the blonde strands stick to my forehead with sweat.

My heart rate gradually starts to slow, returning to normal as I lie on my back and stare up at the vaulted ceiling.

It's late. I should try to go back to sleep, but even though I'm no longer feeling as panicky as I did when I woke up, I don't know if I want to close my eyes again. I'm worried that if I do, I'll have another nightmare. The thought of seeing the Voronin brothers and their blank expressions is almost as painful as the idea of reliving the attack from Ilya all over again, and I just can't do it. Not right now.

I feel gross, covered in sweat and shaky. I guess going from an intense and heartbreaking sex dream to a nightmare of almost being killed will do that to a person.

"Dammit," I breathe, scrubbing a hand over my face. "You're such a fucking mess, Willow."

Shoving the covers back, I slide out of bed, then pad down the hall to the bathroom. Usually, I run the shower as hot as I can stand it, luxuriating in the fact that this building has water heaters that don't take a full ten minutes to heat up only to give you five minutes max of hot water.

But this time, I let the shower stay cold, hoping the icy water will shock my system out of all the emotions still swirling inside me.

The anger, the fear, the hurt.

I just want to wash them all away, even though I know it's not that easy.

Still, I do feel a bit better after the shower. After toweling off, I head back to my room and get dressed in a fresh sleep shirt and some loose pants.

My phone is on the nightstand, and it lights up with a message as I walk back toward the bed. I frown at it, reaching down to pick it up.

It's just after three a.m. Who would be texting me in the middle of the night?

I swipe the screen to unlock it, and a little jolt of shock shoots through me when I see who the message is from.

VICTOR: *Can't sleep?*

My hand tightens around the phone, my lips pressing together. Victor Voronin doesn't ask idle questions, and there's only one way he would know that I'm awake right now.

They're watching me here just like they did at my old place.

A whole new rush of anger fills me, and I open the message, typing back a curt reply.

ME: *Do you have fucking cameras here too?*

VICTOR: *Yes.*

The answer comes quickly, and as usual, there doesn't seem to be a hint of remorse. That only makes my blood boil more, and I glance around the room, trying to spot them. But of course I can't, so I return my attention to my phone and tap out another text.

ME: *Did you put them here?*

VICTOR: *No, Malice did. When he came to see you.*

Of course. Of *course* it wasn't just to see me. It wasn't just because he couldn't stay away. There was an ulterior motive to it. A way for them to exert their control, even when I told them I don't want anything to do with them anymore. I send a message back, my fingers flying over the screen.

ME: *Jesus. You don't know when to leave well enough alone, do you? Where the fuck are they?*

To my surprise, Victor doesn't refuse to answer or try to talk his way out of it. He tells me where they all are, listing the locations where he had Malice put the tiny cameras.

Stomping around my apartment, I go through each room and take them all down, then stash them in a drawer and pick up my phone again.

ME: *Is that all of them?*

VICTOR: *Yes.*

ME: *You sure about that? Why should I believe you?*

VICTOR: *Because I didn't lie to you. I told you where Malice put them.*

That soothes some of the anger in me, but not all of it. It's so *them* to do this, even when I've made it clear as fucking day that I don't want them in my life anymore. That thought crashes around the inside of my mind until I can't stop myself from asking.

ME: *What do you want with me? I told you we were done.*

VICTOR: *Do you want the truth?*

ME: *Of course I do. Why else would I have asked?*

VICTOR: *We're worried about you.*

I furrow my brow, taken aback by that.

ME: *I'm fine. You don't have to worry.*

It takes a minute or so before Vic's reply comes through, and for a second, I think he's decided to leave well enough alone. But of course, that's not the case, and he answers eventually.

VICTOR: *Are you?*

I frown, putting the phone down for a second to really think it through and consider my emotional state at the moment. I do feel so lucky to have found my grandma and to have her in my life now. Being part of a family—an extremely wealthy one, at that—is like nothing I could ever have

imagined, and I'm grateful for everything Olivia has done for me since we met.

But at the same time, so much has happened in such a short time, and I feel like I'm not on solid footing at all. It's been one thing after another, and I haven't really had time to process any of it. Maybe that's why I'm still having nightmares every night.

I'm objectively so much better off than I was before, but the truth of it is, I'm also a little... sad.

I stare down at the message on the screen, reading those two words from Vic's last text again. I can imagine the way he would say it, the way he'd look at me with that practiced neutrality in his expression, only a little hint of his true feelings behind his eyes.

I consider not responding at all, but that's probably just as damning as the real answer, so instead, I type out the truth.

ME: *I'm not sure.*

Victor doesn't harp on it. He doesn't ask if there's anything he can do or what's wrong. He probably just files the information away, the way he does with every little thing he observes.

Instead of asking what my last answer means, his next few texts are a series of questions, as if he's trying to fill in the pieces of what's been going on that he's missed.

VICTOR: *So you're back in school? How are classes?*

VICTOR: *Is your grandmother treating you well?*

VICTOR: *Is your new apartment like all of your home improvement shows?*

I answer each text, although I'm not even sure why, really. I probably shouldn't be talking to him at all, considering I told Malice to get out and that I didn't want anything to do with them since they lied to me.

But there's something soothing and comforting in answering Victor's questions. It calms me down, in spite of everything.

I tell him about my summer classes and how Olivia walked into the dean's office and got him to agree to her terms without ever raising her voice. I tell him about her house, so massive that it's basically a mansion, and all the fresh flowers everywhere. I roll my eyes at the comment about my home improvement shows, remembering how Victor was so disdainful of them when he was at my apartment before.

That was the last night I ever spent there.

Surprisingly, Vic is much more communicative over text than he's ever been in person. It's as if with a screen between us, he hides less of himself.

VICTOR: *Ransom ate some of my peanut butter yesterday. Because Malice ate the last of theirs.*

I can't help but chuckle at that, imagining how upset Vic must've been to find his private peanut butter jar tampered with. Knowing Ransom, he probably tried to hide the evidence, but that's not easy to do when your brother has the observation skills that Vic does. I bet he noticed immediately.

Biting my lip to hold back a grin, I crawl back into bed, settling in with my phone in my hand.

ME: *One of the first things I bought when I stocked my new place was the good peanut butter. None of that crunchy bullshit in this house.*

I don't admit that I thought of him when I bought it, or that I bought the exact same kind he used to have.

VICTOR: *Glad to hear it. And you don't have to worry about anyone (Ransom) eating it out of the jar with a spoon. I think I might be jealous.*

That draws an actual laugh from me, and I cover my mouth quickly before I remember that Victor can't see me anymore with the cameras down. For some reason, I don't want him to know how much this conversation has made me smile.

But even so, I don't stop texting him, even as my eyelids start to get heavy. I curl up on my side, tapping out messages as I cradle my phone in my hand.

It's still there when I eventually fall asleep.

RANSOM

THE CHOP SHOP is as empty as it has been for the last few days. Business has been slow ever since our dust-up with Ethan Donovan and his crew, so I'm just in here tinkering with my bike. Honestly, it's more for something to do with my hands than because the bike needs anything specific done to it.

Donovan is clearly still holding a grudge against us, and his effort to cut into our business has been successful enough that we haven't had many customers at all lately. If it gets much worse, we might have to resort to taking on a few other types of jobs for a while.

Malice said he ran into one of dad's old associates a while ago, Darius Ledger. Maybe he'd be able to put us in contact with some people who need the kind of work we do, although I think we all consider that a last resort. Darius was always an asshole, from what I remember.

We'll figure something out like we always do. *Just have to be patient.*

Unfortunately, that's harder to do than usual, considering how out of whack everything feels lately. With business down, we're all just milling around the warehouse like fucking zombies. Willow is gone, and her absence is like a gaping hole in our lives.

It makes everything seem wrong.

I know Malice went to talk to her the other day, which surprised the fuck out of me. He was the one saying it was for the best that we cut ties with her because she doesn't belong in

our lives and all that. But he was also the one to break down first and go see her at her new place.

Of course he was. I shouldn't be surprised at all, really.

Mal always tries to put on a front like he's too tough to give a shit. And he *is* the toughest motherfucker I know, that's real. But when he cares about something—or someone—he cares with his whole fucking heart. I know, because I'm one of the few people in the world he feels that way about.

Logically, everything he said when we got back from the hospital still holds true. It probably *would* be better to just let Willow disappear from our lives. She'd be safer, and we could get back to dealing with all the shit we had on our plates before our world collided with hers. It would've been safer to not explain to her why we did what we did and just let her hate us forever. But Malice apparently couldn't stop himself.

The thought of Willow hating us and thinking that we thought that shit about her hurt him the same way it hurt me.

And fuck, it hurt.

The look on her face as she threw those accusations at us outside the hospital? The shame and pain in her eyes? The way she flinched away from me when I went to touch her? Goddamn. Just thinking about it now makes a rock settle in my gut.

Especially considering how close we were getting before all of that shit, when she used to melt into my touch and look at me with warmth and trust in her gorgeous brown eyes.

She'll probably never look at you like that again, asshole, a vicious voice in the back of my mind tells me.

My fingers tighten around the wrench in my hand, and I yank it hard to the left. As soon as I hear metal popping, I know I torqued that shit too hard, bending the part I was working on.

“Fuck!” I snap.

Irritation roils inside me—at myself, at all of this. I let the wrench drop to the floor with a clatter and stand up, stretching

the kinks out of my back.

Working on a car or my bike always used to soothe me. It used to take my mind off whatever other shit was going on. But right now, it doesn't seem like anything can make me feel less on edge.

I scrub my hands through my hair and let out a deep breath, trying to pull myself together. When I look up, Vic is walking into the garage.

He takes one look at the tools on the floor and then shifts his gaze back to me. He doesn't say anything, but he doesn't have to. I know that look on my brother's face well enough.

"Yeah, yeah. I'll pick it up later," I tell him, rolling my eyes. "I can't be fucked right now."

Honestly, arguing with Vic about the cleanliness or organization of the shop would be a welcome distraction from going around in circles in my own head, feeling shitty about Willow and possibly fucking shit up on my bike.

"I'm not here to lecture you," Vic says, and his tone of voice definitely implies that he feels like he shouldn't have to. Then his expression shifts a little as he adds, "We got a message from X."

Fuck. Goddammit.

I let out a sigh and nod. "Yeah, okay."

He turns and strides out of the garage, and I follow him, leaving the scattered tools where they are.

We make our way back upstairs to Vic's room, and as we walk, it's pretty obvious that my older brother is using some of the coping mechanisms that he only brings out when he's having an off day.

His fingers tap rhythmically on his thighs in even patterns, and his lips move silently, showing that he's counting each tap. The kitchen has been cleaned to within an inch of its life, and the shelves where Malice and I keep our stuff in the bathroom are neater and tidier than they've ever been before.

It's pretty clear that Vic is falling back on old habits, letting his OCD tendencies hit a fever pitch because he's coping with something. With the loss of Willow. This is how he shows that he misses her and her presence here.

Malice has probably noticed it too, more tuned in with Vic by virtue of them being twins, but neither of us has said anything about it.

We're all dealing with this mess in our own ways.

Speaking of Malice, he's already waiting in Vic's room, sitting on the edge of the bed, staring down at the floor.

When we come in, he gets up, and Vic shoots him a look before going to straighten out the blanket where it was crumpled under Malice's ass.

"Can we get on with this shit?" Mal asks, sounds like he's at the end of his rope too.

Vic goes to sit down at his computer, then pulls up the message on the screen so we can all see it.

It's not really anything out of the ordinary. X has another job for us, but there's a note at the end that says if we don't do this and to the letter, he'll consider our contract broken.

None of us need him to be more explicit than that. The contract being broken means that Malice will go back to jail. We're clearly on thin ice after we defied his orders about Willow.

"Cocksucker."

Malice huffs out a breath, his hands curling into fists at his sides. His jaw is tight, and I know he must be running through the many reasons he doesn't want to go back to jail in his head.

Considering some of the shit he went through while he was locked up, I can't blame him for that. There's stuff Vic and I probably don't even know about, which means it has to be worse than the stuff we do. And the shit Mal has told us is pretty bad to begin with.

The bulk of the message is X going over the details of the job, and I frown, my brows pulling together as I read.

Usually, our mysterious benefactor just wants us to fetch things for him. Files and data and shit like that—and I guess people, if we count when he wanted us to deliver Willow—covering our tracks with arson from time to time.

This seems more... sophisticated than what he usually asks of us. And definitely trickier. Usually we deal in stealth, slipping in and out without ever being seen. But for this, we'll have to get close to the target, Richard Galvin, if we want to get what we need out of him. Especially considering that Galvin isn't just some criminal or minor thug.

He's a wealthy businessman here in Detroit, and he's not going to be easy to get close to.

"Well, shit," I finally say after we've all finished reading, letting out a breath. "Something tells me X is still fucking pissed at us, so now he's making us play his game on hard mode."

Vic leans back in his chair, frowning. "This isn't going to be easy. I can get info on this Galvin guy from a distance, but someone's going to have to physically get close to him if we're going to pull this job off."

"Yeah, sure." Malice snorts, running a hand over his tattooed forearm. "I'll just walk up to him at his fucking country club or whatever. 'Top of the goddamned morning to you, sir,' and all that."

Vic shoots Malice a look, but Mal is too busy glaring at the computer screen to notice. Considering that it's his future on the line if we fuck this up, I can understand why he's so on edge.

"Okay," I say, cutting in before any of us can spiral too far. "Let's think about this logically. Vic could find out where this guy lives, and we could break into his house."

"I could," Vic agrees. "But a man with that much money probably has very tight security. And I'd need to know the

system he's using and probably have remote access to hack past it."

"And something tells me we can't just burn his shit down on our way out," Malice throws in.

"Alright, so what other options do we have?" I ask, folding my arms.

Mal frowns. "He's gotta have an office, right? We could try going there. Public building, so the security would be less tight, and Vic could have easier access."

"Yeah, but then it's a lot fucking harder to cover our tracks," I point out. "Too many potential witnesses, and Vic can't wipe us from someone's memory the same way he can wipe security footage."

"Yeah, okay." Malice rubs a hand over his jaw. He's usually clean shaven, but he's got the shadow of a beard right now, another testament to the fact that his head is all over the place. "So we gotta try to get to him somewhere neutral. Someplace public, but where we can blend with the crowd more easily."

"Let me see if I can find out anything about his schedule," Vic offers. "Maybe someone with that many connections has a busy social calendar, and we can figure out a routine to catch him in."

Mal and I fall silent, letting Vic do his work. His fingers fly across the keys of his keyboard, the soft clacking sound filling the room as he searches through pages of information that he calls up.

After a couple of minutes, he nods. "Got something. There's a new wing opening at the Museum of Contemporary Art soon, and Galvin's name is on the guest list for the unveiling gala."

Malice and I trade looks. That could be a very good opportunity for us to do what we need to do.

"It's an exclusive event though, isn't it?" I ask. "I'm sure it's black tie and probably invite only. They're not just letting people walk in off the street, right? We need a way in."

“We could knock out a couple of caterers,” Malice suggests. “Get in that way.”

I make a face. It’s messier than I like, with the possibility of unwanted collateral damage if the caterers manage to fight back before we take them out. There’s also always the risk of someone finding their unconscious bodies before we finish doing what we need to do.

“Too sloppy,” Vic says, speaking up before I can voice the words myself. “That would have to be a last resort.”

Malice growls under his breath, flexing his fingers. “What else is there? It’s not like we’re getting on the guest list ourselves.”

“Give me a second.” Vic starts tapping away again, brow furrowed as he does his research.

Malice takes to pacing the room as we wait, nervous, irritated energy radiating from him. But he doesn’t get to make more than one rotation before Vic sits back, drumming his fingers on the edge of the desk.

“What?” Malice demands. “What did you find?”

“I found a connection between us and the Museum of Contemporary Art. Or a possible one, anyway.”

“What do you mean?” I ask, leaning forward to peer over his shoulder.

“Olivia Stanton has been a donor to the museum in the past,” Vic says, his voice low. “And not for a small sum either, there are several substantial donations. She’s not on the guest list for the event right now, but I’d be willing to bet she has an invite. That could be our in, if...”

He trails off, staring at his screen.

“If Willow will help us,” I finish for him.

“Yes.”

“No,” Malice counters immediately. “We can’t get her involved in this. She’s already too deep in it just knowing

about X and his shit. If we start asking for her help with things, then she could end up right back in danger again.”

“You’re right.” Vic is still gazing straight ahead, but I have a feeling he’s not really looking at the screen anymore. “But if we don’t do this, then we have to come up with another plan to get into this event. Or some other way to get to Galvin. And it’s not like we have a lot of time.”

“Yeah, X is already pissed as fuck at us,” I murmur. “If we start dragging our feet, he might take it as us refusing to do this job. And then...”

“Yeah, I fucking know,” Malice snaps. “Okay? I know. I just don’t think it’s a good idea.”

I draw in a breath and let it out, then shake my head. “Well, we don’t have any others, so unless someone’s got something hidden up their sleeve, I’m gonna go see Willow.”

Vic just nods, gaze still fixed on his computer monitor, and Malice’s jaw goes tight all over again. Something flashes through his eyes, and I have just enough time to clock it as jealousy before it disappears.

I don’t know what he’s so jealous about, considering he’s the only one who’s seen her in person since she told us all to fuck off, but maybe he knows I have a better chance of convincing her to help than he does.

Whatever’s going on in his head, he doesn’t say anything, so I turn and stride out of the room. Now that I’m set on a plan of action, I don’t waste any time, heading back down to the garage and getting on my bike.

At this time of day, Willow will be at school, so I ride over there, grateful that Victor has still been keeping tabs on her, even though she pretty explicitly told us not to. Knowing her schedule helps a lot.

I park my bike near the curb and head for the building I know she’ll be coming out of soon. I don’t have long to wait. As soon as I approach, the doors slide open, and students come out in twos and threes, chattering amongst themselves.

There are fewer of them than before, since it's summer, I guess, so it's easy to spot Willow when she comes walking out.

She's stuffing a book into her bag, but as she reaches the bottom of the stairs leading up to the building, she hesitates, going still. As if some kind of deep-rooted instinct has alerted her to my presence, she looks up, her gaze going to me. She stiffens at the sight of me, and it sends a pang through my heart.

I hate that. I hate seeing her retreat this way. For a little while, she would soften when she saw me, a smile on her face and light in her soft brown eyes. Even when it was against her better judgement, she still seemed happy to see me.

Now there's what feels like a chasm between us, and it makes my stomach tighten unpleasantly. But I don't let that stop me from doing what I came here to do.

I step forward, falling into step with Willow as she starts moving again, walking away from the building.

"How was class?" I ask, glancing sideways at her. "You must be happy to be back in school."

Willow swallows hard, not looking at me.

"What are you doing here?" she murmurs, her voice quiet. It's pretty obvious that she's not thrilled to see me.

"Can we just... talk first?" I ask, suddenly not in a hurry to bring up the business I came here to discuss. I haven't seen her in way too fucking long, and now that I'm standing right beside her, I just want to soak up her presence for a few more minutes.

She doesn't answer, but she doesn't tell me to fuck off either, so I take that as a win. I look down at her, noticing the way the wind stirs her delicate blonde hair, the strands catching the light and glowing like gold.

Fuck, she really does look like an angel.

"How have you been doing?" I ask quietly. "I hear your grandma's been making sure you're taken care of. I'm really

happy for you, you know? You found your family, someone you can belong with.”

Willow’s tongue darts out of her mouth, licking her lips. She finally glances at me and nods. “It’s been...”

But she cuts herself off before she can finish that sentence, shaking her head. It’s like she’s remembering that she’s not supposed to talk to me, and it feels shitty as fuck to be shut out this way. But it’s not like I can blame her.

Her face hardens, and she takes a deep breath and lets it out.

“Why the fuck are you all still following me?” she demands. “Why are you so intent on being in my life? I told you I’m done with all of this.”

“Do you really not know the answer to that?” I ask. I turn to face her, unable to stop myself from reaching up and touching her cheek.

Tears well in her eyes, but she goes stiff all over again.

“Don’t give me that.” She jerks her head back. “You *hurt* me. Seeing myself like that... seeing every horrible thing I’ve ever thought about myself typed out and sent to someone else? Seeing Vic describe me as *worthless*? How do you think that made me feel?”

She shakes her head, and the tears spill over, falling down her cheeks.

“I know,” I tell her softly. I brush those tears away and step in even closer. “And I’m sorry, angel. I’m so sorry. We just couldn’t think of another way. Maybe it was wrong what we did, but I can’t regret trying to protect you. If X had gotten his hands on you... there’s no telling what you would have suffered. The last thing any of us wanted was for you to have to go through that.”

When Willow doesn’t jerk away from me, I keep going.

“You have to know that none of us think you’re worthless,” I say, cupping her jaw as I hold her gaze, hoping she can read the truth in my eyes. “We don’t and we never

have. You were so beautiful that night with all of us. So wild and free. You should never feel bad for that. You should never feel dirty or less than because of what you like.”

Willow swallows hard, and she still doesn't pull away. Her eyes shine with more unshed tears as she looks at me, and I can feel something building between us.

It's not quite the same as it used to be, but it's not the open anger and hostility that was there when we approached her at the hospital. The connection that always sparked between us is still there, and when I lick my lips, Willow's gaze drops down to follow the motion.

She sways a little, leaning a fraction of an inch closer to me, and I want to kiss her so damned bad.

But I don't.

Bit by bit, Willow softens into my touch. Some of that awful stiffness bleeds out of her, and she looks less angry and hurt and more tired than anything.

She lets out a breath, leaning into my touch a little, even though I'm sure she'd deny it. “Why did you come here, Ransom? Tell me what you want. Please.”

“We need your help with something,” I answer honestly.

That breaks the spell almost immediately. That stiffness crawls right back up her spine, and she draws back from me, opening up the distance between us again.

I hate it, but I don't press her for more. I understand why she's so wary of me and my brothers right now, and like I said, I can't bring myself to regret what we did. So I'll just have to live with the consequences of it, even if it means Willow hates me forever.

At least she'll be alive and in one piece to do it.

“What do you need help with?” Willow asks, surprising me by not turning on her heel and stomping away. There's a coolness to her tone, and it's clear she doesn't trust me at all, but at least she's still listening.

“There’s a new wing of the Museum of Contemporary Art opening soon, and we need an invite to the unveiling event. We think you can help get us in.”

“An art museum opening?” She blinks, looking confused. “How can *I* help with that? I don’t know anybody who…” She trails off, her voice dropping as she figures out what I’m getting at. “Oh. You want me to ask Olivia.”

“She’s definitely been a donor of the museum before,” I say, nodding. “Which means she’s probably on the invite list or can manage to get one if she wants.”

“I don’t know if she has an invitation or not. We’ve never talked about the art museum. Why do you need to be there, anyway?” Willow narrows her eyes at me, looking even more suspicious. “It doesn’t seem like your scene.”

“It’s… complicated, but all you need to know is that it’s part of a job for X.”

She nods, taking that in. For a moment, she chews on her bottom lip, and it’s even harder to keep my distance and not soothe that lip with my tongue.

“Will anyone get hurt?” she asks.

I shake my head. “No. This isn’t that kind of job. The whole point is that no one should even know anything weird is going on. We wouldn’t have asked if we had another choice, believe me. The last thing any of us wants is for you to get dragged into this shit with X. But…” I take a breath. “If we don’t do the job, our contract with X will be voided. Malice will go back to prison.”

I don’t elaborate on that, and it doesn’t seem like I have to. Something flashes through Willow’s eyes, a glimpse of the old determination that used to flare up from time to time.

I’m prepared to say more to try to convince her, to lay out my case for why we need her help, but before I can, she nods once.

“Okay,” she tells me. “I’ll see what I can do.”

WILLOW

RANSOM SMILES, and it lights up his handsome face. I don't think I realized how much I missed looking into his ocean blue-green eyes, but I let myself stare for a bit, caught up in the way the colors seem to shift.

“Thank you,” he says. “Seriously. You're saving our asses here.”

He reaches up and tucks a lock of hair behind my ear, his fingers lingering a bit before he pulls back.

It's just a small moment, just a brief point of contact, but it feels good. It's hard not to lean into it, not to chase more.

As if he can read my mind, Ransom grins and drops his head, pressing a gentle kiss to my cheek. He doesn't go for anything else, and it takes every fiber of my being to stay stiff and not melt into his touch.

I can't encourage this. Not when I'm trying to keep my distance from him and his brothers.

Finally, he pulls away. His eyebrow ring glints in the light as he tilts his head a little, and after one last lingering look, he heads back to his bike to leave.

I watch him go, feeling rooted to the spot. My emotions are so fucking conflicted, such a tangled mess that I couldn't sort through them if I tried. Logically, I understand that what they did was meant to protect me. Malice told me that this X guy wanted a virgin, and Ransom made it pretty clear that whatever X planned to use me for, it wasn't anything good. So they did what they did to keep that from happening to me.

Still, that doesn't take away the pain of what I saw that night in Vic's room.

What hurts most now is that they didn't tell me. They didn't *include* me in any of it or let me make the decision for myself. Instead, they tricked me. They made me think that fucking me was something they genuinely wanted, that we had reached a point in our... relationship, for lack of a better word, where we all craved each other the same way.

But it was a lie.

That stabs into my heart every time I think about it.

I guess if I was sticking to my guns about not wanting to have anything to do with them anymore, I shouldn't have agreed to help them. At the end of the day though, I can't stand the idea of Malice going back to jail.

I don't know what all he went through in there, but I remember him talking about how he was in prison when their mom was killed and how that fact eats at him. I remember the look in his eyes and the tension in his body when he talked about it. It makes my heart hurt even worse to think about him having to go back there and not having his brothers.

After struggling to focus through my final two classes of the day, I head to my car and pull out of the student lot. But instead of going back to my apartment, I punch the address to my grandmother's house into the GPS that's built into my car.

We've been getting to know each other more and more, and Olivia told me I basically have a standing invitation for dinner or a weekend getaway at her place anytime I want to visit.

It's not often that I meet new people, and I've always been a bit awkward and shy, but seeing Olivia's enthusiasm for having me in her life really helps. I never feel like I'm imposing, and when she says she wants to see me any time, I really feel like she means it.

I park at the house, and one of the house staff opens the front door after I ring the bell.

“Welcome back, Ms. Hayes,” she says, inclining her head politely.

“Oh. Um, thank you,” I reply, nodding back. I have no idea how Olivia handles having people defer to her all day with such grace and poise. “Is my grandmother here?”

The woman nods. “Would you like me to go get her for you?”

“Yes, please.”

She nods again, ushering me into the sitting room before heading off to fetch her boss.

I take a seat on the plush sofa, trying not to fidget while I wait.

Luckily, it doesn't take long before Olivia comes in, and she smiles warmly when she sees me.

“Willow,” she says, sounding pleased. “What a lovely surprise.”

“I'm not interrupting anything, am I?” I ask, suddenly unsure.

“No, of course not. And even if you were, seeing you is much more important.”

My cheeks heat up at that, but if she notices my awkwardness, Olivia doesn't mention it. She sits down near me, tucking a small tendril of gray hair behind her ear.

“So,” she begins, “how are things? How is school going?”

“Really well,” I tell her, unable to keep the excited grin off my face. “I'm catching up faster than I thought I would, and it feels so good to be back on track. Thank you again for talking to the dean.”

“Of course.” She lifts one eyebrow conspiratorially. “Between you and me, putting old rich men in their place is something I quite enjoy doing now and then.”

That startles a chuckle out of me, and my grin widens. I'm sure she's had plenty of men talk down to her in her life, but

she clearly knows how to deal with them. Dean Carmichael never stood a chance.

“And your apartment is still working out alright?” Olivia continues, her expression turning more serious. “Is there anything else you need?”

I shake my head. “No, you’ve already done so much. The apartment is wonderful, and having so much space all to myself is amazing. You don’t have to worry.”

“Well, it’s a grandmother’s right to worry about her granddaughter,” she points out, one sculpted brow rising again. Her tone is crisp, but the smile on her face makes it more teasing than anything. “And I have so many years of worrying to catch up on.”

“I know. But I promise I’ll tell you if there’s anything I need. Right now, I’m better than I ever thought I’d be.”

“Excellent.”

“Actually...” I lick my lips, trying to segue smoothly to the real reason I came by. “There was one thing I wanted to ask you.”

“Anything. What’s on your mind?”

“Um, I heard there was a new wing opening at the Museum of Contemporary Art soon. Some people were talking about it at school the other day. I’d love to go to something like that. It sounds like it would be really interesting.”

I hold my breath, waiting for Olivia to call me out on my lie or laugh at the idea that someone like me would have any interest in art.

But instead, she seems to light up. Her eyes sparkle, and she clasps her hands in her lap, beaming at me.

“Oh, I didn’t know you had an interest in art. That’s wonderful. I’ve donated to the museum in the past—a few times, actually. The work they do is wonderful.”

I breathe an internal sigh of relief, sitting forward a little. “Is it too late to get an invite, do you think?”

My grandmother laughs. “With the amount I’ve given them, I could ask for an invite the night of, and it wouldn’t be an issue. I’ll take care of it.”

“Thank you so much.” I hesitate, then add, “Would it be too much trouble to ask to get a few other people on the list as well? I have some friends who would really love to be there too.”

“Not at all.” She waves a delicate hand. “Just tell me how many, and I’ll take care of it.”

Somehow, I wasn’t expecting it to be this easy, but Olivia really does seem delighted to do it, and that makes me relax a bit.

With that favor out of the way, I can enjoy just spending time with her, and when Olivia invites me to stay for dinner, I agree.

Almost like magic, one of the staff members shows up a short while later to tell us that dinner is served, and Olivia leads me to the dining room.

“How do they do that?” I ask, staring in awe as roast chicken and potatoes are laid out on the table.

Two more plates, heaped with buttery dinner rolls and steamed green beans smothered in garlic butter sauce, are brought out and dropped off. Olivia chuckles when my stomach growls loudly.

“My staff is wonderful,” she says. “And I think they enjoy a chance to show off a bit when you come over. They’ve gotten used to me and my dinners for one.”

I glance around at our elegant surroundings. “I would have thought you’d have dinner parties and things all the time in a place like this.”

Her smile goes a little sad around the edges, and she sets down her fork. “I used to, when your grandfather was alive. But it seems like too much trouble to socialize much these days. My heart just isn’t in it anymore.”

“Oh,” I breathe. “I’m so sorry. I shouldn’t have brought it up.”

“Nonsense. And who knows, with you in my life now, maybe I’ll find some of that spark again. I would love to show you how beautiful a garden party can be in late summer.”

“I’ve never been to anything like that before,” I tell her. “I wouldn’t know what to do.”

“I’m sure you’d do just fine,” she says firmly. “And now I definitely want to throw one.”

The conversation flows easily as we eat. She asks about my classes, and I find myself talking about them with more openness than I ever have before.

Misty never wanted to hear about anything I was studying. In her mind, going to school was just something that kept me from working. When I decided to apply for college, she called it a waste of time, and I had to literally hide the money I managed to tuck away for application fees.

Once the dinner dishes are cleared away, a member of the staff brings out a cheesecake topped with fresh, bright strawberries and whipped cream. She cuts generous slices for each of us, and I savor every bite.

“Take some home with you,” Olivia says after we finish. “Otherwise I’ll just end up eating it all, and I don’t need it at my age.”

“You’re not that old,” I tell her, but I accept the wrapped up container when it’s handed to me.

Olivia walks me to the front door, and before I leave, she pulls me into a hug.

“Drive safely,” she says. “Text me to let me know you got home alright.”

“I will,” I promise.

My apartment is several miles east of Olivia’s mansion, closer to the heart of the city, but I don’t mind the drive. I decide to take surface streets rather than hopping on the freeway, and I roll the window down and turn up the music,

already thinking about busting into the leftover cheesecake as soon as I get home.

I'm humming along to a Beyoncé song as I pull up to a stoplight, but when I glance out the window, the notes die in my throat.

Oh my god.

At first, I think I must be seeing things, but even after I blink, the sight before me doesn't change.

Misty is sprawled out on the bench of a nearby bus stop. My adoptive mother looks half out of it, slumped over and alone.

Someone behind me honks, and I jump, startled. I look up to find that the light turned green while I was distracted.

"This isn't your problem, Willow," I mutter under my breath, taking my foot off the brake and driving through the intersection. "She's not your problem anymore. You've saved her so many times, and for what? For her to steal from you and lie to you and treat you like dirt. You don't need that anymore."

My fingers curl tighter around the steering wheel as a little voice in the back of my head whispers, *But she's still your mom.*

I hate that. I hate that I can't ignore it.

That I can't ignore her.

She probably wouldn't help me if I was in that situation, but I can't just leave her there to get hurt or worse.

I make a U-turn at the next intersection and drive back to where I saw her. She's still slouched on the bench, and I pull into the bus lane and hop out quickly.

"Mom? Mom. Misty!" Calling her name gets no response, and I hurry over to her, putting a hand on her shoulder to try to shake her awake.

"...the hell?" she finally slurs, blinking and looking up at me. "Willow? That you?"

“Yes. Come on, you can’t stay here.”

“I can stay wherever the fuck I want. You’re not...” She trails off, sliding down a little more on the seat, almost dumping herself onto the sidewalk.

I roll my eyes and get a grip under her arm, managing to haul her up from the bench and toward my car. She stumbles, clearly strung out on something and not capable of walking on her own, but with a little help, she manages to get into the passenger seat in one piece.

I breathe a sigh of relief once the car doors are closed and we’re on our way, and instead of heading back to my apartment, I head in the direction of Misty’s house.

Maybe the walk to the car snapped her out of her high a little, because she seems more alert as I drive. She glances around at the car we’re in, petting the leather seats and pulling out cup holders.

“This is fancy,” she murmurs. She jabs at a couple of buttons on her door. “Real fucking fancy. Where did you get it?”

I chew on my bottom lip, trying to decide what to tell her. It’s been weeks since we’ve talked, so she has no idea what’s been going on in my life—and I’m not sure I *want* her to know, to be honest.

“It was a gift,” I hedge, trying to keep my answer vague.

Misty’s eyebrows shoot up toward the roots that are showing at her hairline. “You get yourself a sugar daddy or something?”

“No,” I shoot back, my voice sharper than I mean for it to be. “I... my grandmother got it for me.”

“You don’t have a fucking grandmother. I’m the only one you’ve got.” She leans her head against the headrest, huffing out a breath.

I shake my head. “Not anymore. She found me, and she’s back in my life.”

When I glance over at Misty, she's staring right back at me, her eyes wide. Clearly, she wasn't expecting that.

"You really found someone in your family?"

I nod. "Yeah. It was a surprise to both of us. But we've been meeting and talking and getting to know each other."

I'm definitely not going to mention that we met because I was in the hospital after getting kidnapped. That's so much more than Misty needs to know.

"And she's been buying you stuff," my mom murmurs, her eyelids drooping again. She runs her hand along the buttery leather of her seat. "She must be doing pretty well for herself."

"I guess," I reply, still trying to avoid revealing too much. "I think she just wants to help me. Since she missed out on most of my life."

Luckily, we pull up in front of Misty's house before she can ask too many more questions. She doesn't move to get out of the passenger seat, and I have to help her out, draping one of her arms over my shoulders. She dips and sways as we walk, nearly tripping over the curb as we head up the drive.

"Do you have your keys?" I ask her, and she mumbles something, patting her pockets.

With a sigh, I dig out my own, trying not to think too hard about the fact that one of the reasons I kept the key to her house on my key ring was because of moments like this.

We get inside, and of course the place is a mess. My adoptive mother never did care too much for chores and cleaning up, and more often than not, I was the one who broke down and did it.

"Can you get up the stairs on your own?" I ask her.

"I can try," she says, heading in that direction. There's a lot of muted cursing, and I sigh and head into the kitchen to get her some water.

The sink is overflowing with dishes, and I have to dig through the cabinets to find a clean cup to fill with water from

the tap. Once I have it, I go upstairs, finding Misty sitting on the floor in front of her bed instead of in it.

It's a struggle to get her up and out of enough of her clothes that she'll be able to sleep, and then another battle to get her to drink the water.

"You look good," she murmurs as I finally set down the empty cup, reaching out to touch my hair. "Better than you used to."

"I guess I have time for myself now," I say. Neither of us mentions that Misty was part of the reason I didn't have time for myself before.

"You're somebody now. Classy. Grown up."

I shrug, chuckling softly. "I guess so. I'm even going to the opening of the new wing at the modern art museum soon. Look at me go."

The words are laced with a bit of sarcasm, but I realize as I speak that I sort of mean it. The Willow who lived with Misty and spent all her time working and trying to escape this life would never have been able to do something like that.

To my surprise, Misty starts to tear up as she settles into bed. "That's what you should've had from the start. Nice cars. Art museums and stuff. Not this. I was a bad mom to you."

It seems different from the usual love bombing she used to do, trying to act like she was a good parent before or after she fucked me over. This seems... genuine.

Which is weird for her.

"Mom..."

She shakes her head, cutting me off.

"No, I was. I was shit. I just want what's best for you, you know? You're smart. Smarter than me, that's for damned sure. If this lady—your grandmother—if she can help you, then you deserve that. I'm glad you found her."

My heart aches to hear her say all of that. Despite everything she's put me through over the years, there's a part

of me that still loves her. That will probably always love her. For the longest time, she was all I had. And even with how hard our lives were sometimes, it was better than having nothing.

“You did your best,” I tell her.

“Maybe, maybe not.” She reaches up again and brushes a hand through my hair. “But you were always there. You’re a good kid, and I love you for that.”

I blink back sudden tears, swallowing the lump in my throat. I don’t even know if I remember the last time my mom told me she loved me. Not sincerely, anyway.

Before I can say anything, her hand is falling away, and she turns her face against the pillows, her breathing evening out as she falls asleep.

I stand there for a bit, watching her, and then let myself out of the house and get back in my car.

It’s a quiet drive back to my place, and when I get there, I make myself a cup of tea and settle on the couch with the cheesecake Olivia sent me home with.

I can’t stop thinking about my mom and the way she looked at me. The tears in her eyes and the things she said are still fresh in my mind, and my emotions are churning.

There have been so many times when I told myself I was done with her, done putting up with being walked all over and done letting her use me. But every time, I came back when she needed me. I never thought she understood that she was a bad parent, especially with the way she held it over my head that she was all I had in the world.

I can’t completely forgive her for everything, but I do love her.

Does that make me a fool? Does it make me weak?

The cheesecake feels dry in my throat as I stare at the TV, turning things over and over in my mind. I remember having a conversation with Victor about being used by people who are

supposed to love you and take care of you, and before I can think better of it, I'm reaching for my phone.

I know I shouldn't talk to him, and I definitely shouldn't be texting him about personal stuff, but... I can't help it.

ME: *Do you think it's possible to love someone when you know they're not good for you?*

I send the message off, biting my lip. Maybe he'll ignore it. Maybe it's a dumb question, the kind that will just irritate his analytical mind.

But my phone buzzes in my hand a few seconds later, and I look down to see that he's replied.

VICTOR: *I don't know. But that's why I trust logic over feelings.*

It's a very Vic response, and I let out a soft sigh.

ME: *I wish it was that easy for me.*

VICTOR: *I wouldn't say it's easy, exactly.*

VICTOR: *When I was younger, even in the times when my dad was the worst, some part of me still loved him. Even when he hurt me. Even when I should have hated him.*

VICTOR: *It made no sense. But emotions never really do.*

He's definitely right about that. My head and my heart always seem to be on two different wavelengths. Knowing that someone is bad for you, that they've hurt you and they could do it again, should be enough to make you stay away.

But it's never that easy.

I hesitate for a moment, then text Vic again.

ME: *I got the tickets for you guys. For the museum wing opening.*

ME: *I'll see you there.*

WILLOW

A LITTLE OVER A WEEK LATER, I stand in my apartment in front of the full-length mirror on the back of my bedroom door. The dress I'm wearing is so much nicer than anything I've ever worn, and I'm half afraid to even move in it, afraid that I'll rip it or something.

Olivia helped me pick it out, since I told her I have no idea what to wear to something like the opening of a new wing in a museum. Of course, she knew exactly where to go and managed to find something that I felt beautiful in, in a matter of minutes.

The cost of it almost made my eyes pop out, but Olivia seems so happy to be bringing me into this world with her that I let her buy me the dress without argument.

And I have to admit, I do look good in it.

It's made of a material that's both heavy enough to feel substantial and light enough to move with me. The jade green color brings out my eyes and adds some warmth to my skin, and best of all, the cut of it covers my scars—at least the ones on my shoulder and legs. The dress still shows more skin than I'm used to, plunging a bit in the back, and I try to twist to see just how much of myself I'm showing off, but I just end up turning in circles.

The slit up the side shows off my good leg, all the way above the knee, and I blush a little at the flashes of skin that show in the mirror when I move.

It manages to be sexy and classy at the same time, and I almost can't believe that the girl looking back at me from the mirror is *me*.

Taking a deep breath, I run my hands over the dress one more time, smoothing down nonexistent wrinkles and nodding at my own reflection.

"Okay. Here we go."

Turning away from the mirror, I grab my purse and head downstairs to my car.

When I arrive at the museum, there's a short line of cars around the front, and since I can't see anywhere to park that's not closed off, I join the line. When I get to the front of it, a man in a red vest comes over with a smile. He looks at me expectantly, and I roll down my window.

"Hi, I was, um, wondering where I park," I say, trying to sound more confident than I feel.

His eyebrows draw down a little, but he doesn't lose the professional veneer. "It's valet parking only tonight, ma'am. So I'll take your car."

Oh. Right. Valet.

"Of course," I say, trying to hide how out of place and awkward I feel. I grab my purse from the passenger seat and slide out, allowing him to take my place in the driver's seat and go park the car.

As the valet disappears, I join the trickle of people walking up the stairs to the museum, gripping my bag nervously. I don't know anyone here, and everyone else seems to be gathered in twos and threes, chatting and laughing. They all look so glamorous and glittering, and even though I'm dressed the part, I definitely still feel like I don't belong here.

There's a woman at the door, checking names on a list, and when I get to her, she smiles at me.

"Good evening," she says. "And welcome to the Museum of Contemporary Art. May I have your name?"

“Willow Hayes?” I tell her, and I hate that it sounds like a question. Olivia took care of getting my name and the guys’ names on the list, so I know I’m on there. But some part of me is still waiting to be turned away and reminded that I’m not really part of this world.

But of course, the woman just gives a sharp nod as she puts a check mark next to my name.

“Perfect,” she says. “Enjoy your evening, Ms. Hayes.”

Stepping past her, I walk into the museum, and it takes my breath away for a second. It’s a beautiful space, and not just because of the art on the walls. Despite having lived in Detroit all my life, I’ve never had an opportunity to visit before.

I wander the front room a bit, taking in the paintings that line the walls. Some of the people gathered in little clusters talk about the art in soft voices, bringing up things like brush strokes and the “quality of the colors.” I have no idea what any of that means.

Chewing my bottom lip, I lift my chin and glance around, trying to find my grandmother. A group of people come through the front doors, and I turn to see if Olivia is one of them.

But it’s not her.

Instead, it’s the Voronin brothers.

Malice, Ransom, and Vic would stand out anywhere, I think. They don’t really do ‘blending in.’ But tonight they’ve made an effort, and the effect is... amazing.

All three of them are dressed in suits that must be tailored to fit their muscled frames so well. I’m pretty sure they don’t make suits off the rack that could handle the breadth of Malice’s shoulders the way the one he’s wearing does.

I’m used to seeing them in jeans and t-shirts, sometimes streaked with grease, and they look handsome in a totally different way all dressed up like this. Most of their tattoos are covered, and if they’re armed, it’s impossible to tell.

Even so, the air of danger that always seems to surround them is still there. I guess that's the kind of thing that can't be covered up or disguised no matter what kind of veneer you put on it. Brutal power still radiates from them, and I see a few people—women, mostly, if I'm being honest—follow them with their eyes as they stride into the museum.

This isn't the brothers' turf, but they still walk in like they own the place, and I find myself unable to look away from the imposing sight.

Almost in unison, their eyes snap to me, as if my attention on them has sparked theirs right back. All three of them take me in, and my breath gets stuck in my throat as their footsteps slow a little, their gazes running up and down my body.

Ransom grins, slow and sure, one side of his mouth quirking up higher than the other in a way that makes him look sexy and rakish. Malice's eyes seem to burn as he stares at me, and it's as if he can see right through me, making my stomach flutter. Victor's gaze is more assessing. There's no obvious heat in his expression, not the way there is with Malice and Ransom, but there's something approving in the way he studies me, as if he's already found the most beautiful piece of art in the entire museum.

I don't move, but the three of them change course, heading toward me. They stop a few feet away, and it's as if the entire room full of well-dressed people around us fades away. The hum of conversation grows muted and indistinct, and all I'm aware of is the three men in front of me.

Ransom's smile widens, his tongue piercing flashing as he wets his lips.

"You look fucking gorgeous, angel," he says, and the sincerity in his voice makes my cheeks heat.

"Thank you," I murmur, glancing down at the shiny marble floor while I try to get my blush under control.

"No, thank *you*." Malice's voice is a low rumble. "You really came through for us."

There's something in his tone that makes me glance up at him—but I immediately regret it, because as soon as our gazes lock, I can't look away. He's clean shaven tonight, unlike the last time I saw him when he had a bit of a shadow on his jaw, and the dark ink of his tattoos peeks out from beneath the collar of his shirt.

“Of course,” I murmur. “I know it was important.”

He doesn't look away, and although his expression doesn't change, something shifts in his eyes. His gorgeous gray irises churn like a stormy sky about to erupt with rain, and I swear I can feel my skin prickle with the electric hum of lightning about to strike.

It takes an almost physical effort to wrench my gaze away from his, and when I do, my eyes meet Victor's. His irises are almost the reverse of Malice's, blue flecked with gray instead of the other way around, but just like his twin's, they reveal so much more than the expression on his face.

“That dress fits you well,” he says, nodding at it. “The asymmetry suits you.”

Ransom snorts a laugh. “What kind of lame-ass compliment is that, Vic? No woman wants to hear that ‘asymmetry suits her.’”

But I'm already smiling, strangely pleased by the fact that Vic likes my outfit.

“No, it's a good compliment,” I tell him. “Thank you.”

Malice and Ransom share a look, and I'm pretty sure they're both about to start teasing Vic. But before they can, we're interrupted by Olivia's arrival.

She enters the museum looking gorgeous and understated at the same time in a silvery dress that makes the white in her hair stand out. It's clear that she's very comfortable in this environment, moving with purpose across the large space as she heads toward us.

“Willow,” she says warmly, clasping my hands and pressing a kiss to my cheek in greeting. “And these must be your guests.”

Her eyes flicker over the brothers, and I can tell she recognizes them from that night outside the hospital. She shoots me a curious glance, looking between me and the three of them as if trying to figure out what the dynamic is between us.

A flush of heat rushes through me, and I pray that my cheeks aren't turning red.

There's no way in hell that my grandmother would ever guess I've had sex with two of these men while the third one watched. And I'm sure as fuck not going to tell her.

But I don't want her to worry that I'm not safe around them or anything, especially considering that I'm sure she picked up on the tension between all of us when they came to the hospital. She's definitely aware that my life before I met her was on the rougher side of the tracks, so I'm assuming she thinks the brothers are just a part of that old life.

Which they are, in a way.

Except I can't seem to leave them behind the way I meant to. Can't seem to make a clean break between us.

They occupy too much space in my head and heart.

"Mrs. Stanton," Ransom says, nodding his head politely. "Thank you so much for getting us on the list for this event. We're huge fans of the museum, and it's amazing to be here for the unveiling of a new wing."

"Of course," Olivia replies, and I'm relieved to see that she doesn't seem too wary of the brothers. "I'm very pleased for Willow to get to have experiences like this, and I'm happy to let her share that with her friends."

"We appreciate it," Vic says.

Malice says nothing, but he turns down the intensity of his expression a bit, and honestly, that's a miracle in and of itself. He seems content to let Ransom do the talking, which makes sense, since that's the role Ransom usually plays. He knows how to talk to people better than the twins do.

In fact, Ransom must've done a bit of research before they arrived tonight—probably aided by Vic—because he talks knowledgeably with my grandmother about the new wing and several of the well-known pieces in the museum, credibly selling the three of them as amateur art aficionados who would want to come to this sort of event.

Vic and Malice nod along where appropriate, and I mostly stay quiet, marveling at how weird it is to be standing here between my grandmother and the Voronin brothers. Two facets of my life that couldn't be more different.

“Well, I hope you all have an enjoyable evening,” Olivia says to Ransom after a couple of minutes. “And I hope you won't mind too much that I need to steal Willow away for a bit.”

“Oh, of course not.” Ransom nods, still smiling. “Have a good evening, Mrs. Stanton.”

Olivia puts a hand on the small of my back and steers me away from the guys. I half expect her to have something to say about them or to ask me more questions once we're out of earshot, but she doesn't.

“You look lovely,” she says instead, her smile taking on a little more warmth now that it's just us. “I knew that dress was perfect for you.”

“Thank you.” I smooth a hand nervously over the soft fabric. “I still feel a little weird being here, but it's nice to be part of it.”

“Comfort comes with time. And connections. Speaking of which, let me introduce you around.”

I nod, and she takes me over to a cluster of people standing by a large statue of a woman wearing a gauzy dress. Most of them are older, Olivia's age or a bit younger, and they all seem delighted to see her.

“Olivia!” one of the older men exclaims, smiling broadly. “I saw your name on the guest list for tonight, and I was simply ecstatic.”

“He was,” the woman next to him confirms. “He has talked about nothing else.”

“Can you blame me? Olivia Stanton’s name on a list means the party will be worth going to.”

Olivia laughs politely. “Your enthusiasm is as flattering as ever, Bradley,” she says. “I’d like to introduce my granddaughter, Willow Hayes. Willow, this is Bradley Derrington, Heather Johansson, and William Fleck.”

“It’s nice to meet all of you,” I say, smiling and trying to mimic Olivia’s ease with talking to people.

Thankfully, we don’t stay with that group long before she’s whisking me away to meet more people.

It’s amazing how many of the guests at the gala Olivia knows. I guess that’s what she meant about having connections. Or maybe there’s some secret club that all the rich people in the city belong to, and that’s how they all know each other.

It’s a bit of a relief when she finally introduces me to some younger people, closer to my own age than hers.

Some of them are girls who give me the same vibes that April and her band of bitches do, but because I’m with Olivia, they seem to think I’m one of them.

With them is a guy who eyes me up and down and makes no effort to hide it. When I shift and the slit in my dress flashes some leg, his brown eyes zero right in on it, and I don’t like the slimy feeling it gives me. He’s clearly rich, dressed in a nice suit and wearing a watch that probably costs as much as my car. He has classic features, artfully styled brown hair, and a chiseled jaw, and he holds himself like someone used to getting what he wants.

“Troy Copeland,” he says, holding out his hand for me to shake. At least he manages to meet my eyes when he says it.

I don’t want to shake his hand. I don’t even want to touch him, but with Olivia standing there smiling, I don’t have much choice. So I shake his hand and go to pull away, only to have him hold on for an extra second or two, staring right at me.

“Nice to meet you,” I say, finally pulling my hand back and barely resisting the urge to wipe it off on my dress.

“Likewise.” He brings the glass of whiskey he’s holding in his right hand to his lips, taking a sip without breaking eye contact with me. “I’ve heard a bit about you through the grapevine. You have a pretty amazing story.”

I blink. Maybe his comment shouldn’t surprise me, considering April and her friends found some kind of article about the long-lost Stanton heir having returned. My sudden reappearance in Olivia’s life is clearly common knowledge, but it still catches me off guard to have someone mention it. I’m not really sure how to respond.

“Oh.” I shrug. “Um, I don’t—”

“Olivia? Is that you?”

Before I can say anything else, someone calls to my grandmother from nearby, and she takes my elbow, whisking me off to another group. I let out a little sigh of relief, summoning up a friendly smile for the new people I’m about to meet.

I guess the upside of being a social butterfly is that you never have to get trapped in a single conversation for too long.

This group of people is a mix of ages, some older and some younger, and once again, everyone seems pleased to be meeting Olivia Stanton’s granddaughter.

“I’m Joshua,” one of the young men says, offering me his hand.

I take it warily, but to my relief, he just shakes it normally and then lets me pull away. He seems much less creepy than Troy did, which makes me relax a little.

Someone else calls Olivia’s name, and this time she steps away to speak with them, leaving me alone with the group.

“Are you enjoying yourself?” Joshua asks, gesturing to the room around us.

He doesn’t carry himself nearly as pompously as that Troy guy did, but it’s clear he’s probably just as rich. His clothes are

expensive, and he looks comfortable in this atmosphere. His hair is a little shaggier, blond with pale gold highlights running through it, and he reaches up and pushes it out of his face as he speaks. His eyes are a soft gray, and when he smiles, it seems natural and easy.

“I am,” I reply, nodding back. “It’s a little overwhelming, I’ll admit. I’m not used to meeting so many people at once.”

Joshua grins at that. “These things are definitely like that. It’s a chance to see and be seen. My parents had me meeting people and shaking hands when I was barely five.”

“That must make it easier for you now,” I point out. “At least you’ve had a lot of practice.”

“True. I can imagine how you must feel. We’ve all heard about how Olivia Stanton’s long-lost granddaughter resurfaced. And now you’re diving headfirst into high society. That must be overwhelming.”

I listen for any hint in his tone that he’s mocking me or getting ready to tell me that I don’t belong here, but there’s nothing to indicate he feels that way. He just seems genuinely curious about me.

“It is,” I admit. “I’m so grateful for everything Olivia has done for me, but I still feel like my head is spinning most of the time.”

Joshua smiles, revealing that one of his front teeth is slightly crooked. There’s something almost endearing about that. Everyone here looks so perfect, their clothes and makeup impeccable, and I wouldn’t be surprised to learn that a lot of them have had some kind of plastic surgery. But despite the fact that I’m sure he’s got the money, Joshua hasn’t gotten that tooth fixed.

It makes him seem more human, which relaxes me even more.

“It will get easier eventually,” he promises. “You can pretty much go off of a script with these people most of the time. You just tell them what they want to hear and then go on about your business.”

“That’s easy for you to say,” I tell him, lifting a brow. “You were born into this. You already know what they want to hear.”

He laughs, ducking his head a little. “Okay, that’s fair. I’ll stop trying to act like I know what you’re going through and start trying to get to know you instead. Have you been to Mrs. Stanton’s house?”

I nod. “House is an understatement.”

“It really is. I haven’t been there since I was a kid, but I remember feeling like it was a castle. My parents are very jealous of her success.”

“What do your parents do?”

“They’re in finance.” Joshua says. “I am too. I got my master’s degree last year and just started working for the family business. Are you a student?”

“At Wayne State,” I reply, not sure how that will sound to someone like him. He probably went to one of the best schools in the country or something, ready to follow in his parents’ footsteps.

“Ah. I’m surprised your grandmother didn’t push for something... different,” he says.

“You mean better.”

He smiles again, and it’s sheepish. “Maybe a little.”

I shrug one shoulder. “She just wanted me to be happy, and I’ve been happy where I am. I had to take a... leave of absence last semester, and she helped get me back on track.”

He slides his hands into his pockets, all casual grace. “Well, I’m sure she’s glad to have you close by.”

“She is, I think. I—”

The back of my neck prickles, and I break off, glancing over my shoulder.

Malice is standing on the other side of the room, his gaze locked on me and Joshua, and I swear I can feel the weight of it even from here. He looks like a bull ready to charge across

the space and destroy everything in the room, and my heart lurches in my chest as I tear my focus away from him.

Turning back to Joshua, I pick up where I left off, determined not to let Malice get under my skin. But even as I nod along and laugh at Joshua's jokes, I'm viscerally aware of Malice watching us.

Watching *me*.

MALICE

I'LL FUCKING KILL HIM.

Possessiveness roars through me like a feral beast as I watch Willow talking to the fucker with the pompous face and annoying laugh.

I could take him out right now. It would be so easy.

He's tall, but he looks like he'd go down like a pile of wet cardboard if someone threw a punch at him. These rich fuckers who've never had to fight for anything in their lives don't know how to hold up once they're out of their depth, and I want nothing more than to stalk over there and snap the guy's fucking neck.

Willow laughs at something he says, and the fury in me climbs even higher. I curl my hands into fists, my shoulders going tight. Everything in me is screaming at me to go over there and rip Willow away from him.

To bring her back where she belongs.

I stare at her, watching as she talks, my eyes narrowed. She reaches up to tuck a lock of blonde hair behind her ear, and my hand spasms a bit, my nails starting to dig into my palms. I've never been good at letting off steam peacefully, and the need for violence is growing in me.

"Malice." Victor steps up beside me, murmuring in a low voice. "Galvin just walked in. We need to move."

Fuck.

I drag in a deep breath, and my chest is so tight that it feels like there are shards of broken glass in my lungs. But my brother is right. We're here to do a job, and it doesn't include murdering upper crust assholes who get too close to what's ours.

Although I wish it did.

"Yeah, alright," I growl, my voice raspy as Ransom comes to stand beside Vic. "Let's do this."

Reluctantly, I tear my eyes away from Willow and give my attention back to the reason we're here in the first place, focusing up as I do.

"Just like we discussed," Victor tells me with a small nod. He slips a hand into his pocket where he's got the device we brought with us.

Two days ago, I picked it up from a drop point designated by X. It's a little bug that will be used to listen in on and record Richard Galvin, and we have to plant it on our mark before he leaves the gala. Once he goes, we'll need to follow him and record him, since the range on the device isn't that big.

We've gone over the plan plenty of times, each taking the roles that come most naturally to us. Ransom and I will create a distraction while Vic does the fine detail work, slipping in and planting the device on Galvin.

We nod to each other and spring into action, moving like a team the way we always do. There's no need to keep tabs on where Vic goes as he melts into the crowd of people, because we know he's going to take care of his part in this.

We just have to focus on ours.

Galvin is an older man, tall and well-dressed, and he moves through the crowd, stopping here and there to speak with people. Ransom and I move along with him, cutting through a small group admiring a fucking vase until we're in front of Galvin.

It has to be subtle, and he can't know he's being purposefully held up, so we move with the flow of people until

we get to a bit of a bottleneck as part of the crowd moves into another wing. Then we slow down to almost a stop, making sure Galvin can't get past us easily.

“Did you try the champagne?” Ransom asks, turning to me. “You'd think they would spring for something a bit better at a function like this, but I guess not.”

I fight the urge to roll my eyes because there's no way in hell my brother would know good champagne if it bit him in the ass. But instead, I play my part, nodding along.

“It's not about the drinks. It's about the art,” I deadpan, nodding to one of the paintings on the wall near us. “You can't tell me a chance to see this collection isn't worth a bit of bad champagne.”

Ransom's eyes glitter with amusement, but his expression stays serious.

“Maybe.” He heaves a sigh, grimacing. “And I suppose there's something to be said for the company too. As in, misery loves it when it comes to how bad the spread is.”

“If you wanted dinner, we could have stopped before we got here,” I say, letting irritation creep into my voice. “We're not here to eat.”

Behind us, Galvin mutters something under his breath, but neither of us pay any attention to him. We let our fake argument build, our voices growing a bit more urgent, although we keep the volume at a normal level—we need to convince Galvin it's not worth interrupting us, but we're not trying to draw the attention of everyone at the gala. We just have to keep him distracted until Victor gives us the signal that he's planted the device.

Fortunately, we don't have long to wait.

Just when Galvin's irritation at being held up by us seems to be reaching a boiling point, we hear Vic murmur a soft, “excuse me” as he brushes past him and then moves off into the crowd.

That's the signal, so after another moment Ransom and I stride away too, leaving Galvin free to continue on into the

other wing. I glance at him out of the corner of my eye to make sure he hasn't noticed anything strange, but he's already admiring another piece of art, having no idea that he's been bugged.

Ransom and I do a quick loop around the room before meeting up with Vic, who gives us a subtle nod.

"It's done," he murmurs. "Now we just have to stay until Galvin leaves so that we can tail him."

I nod, since that was the plan from the beginning.

Now that the first stage of the job is done, my attention immediately snaps back to Willow, just the way it always does. I glance back over to where she was standing before, but she's not there. I don't see the guy she was with either, and I narrow my eyes as a fresh wave of possessive fury fills me.

If I find the two of them together somewhere...

He really will be a dead man.

"Keep an eye out for Galvin," I mutter to Ransom and Vic. "Let me know if he makes a move."

Before they can say anything, I stride off, looking for Willow.

There's a need under my skin, burning and insistent. It's primal and possessive, and it won't be satisfied until I see her.

I make my way around the room, scanning the crowd for her soft blonde hair or a flash of her jade green dress—the dress that hugs her delicate body so fucking perfectly that it makes me want to kill every fucker in this place just for having seen her in it.

For a few moments, I don't see her, and my mind starts to churn with thoughts of what I'll do to that asshole she was talking to earlier if he's somewhere alone with her.

But then something draws my attention upward, and I look up to the second level of the new wing. There's a walkway on the second level that surrounds a massive open area in the floor, bordered by a thick marble railing. It allows people on

the second level to look down and see those beneath them, and vice versa.

I spot Willow up there almost immediately, tucked into a little nook by the marble railing, gazing down over the crowd below. And she's alone.

Good.

Seeing that she's not talking to that other fucker anymore eases some of the crushing tightness in my chest, and I head up the stairs quickly.

I keep to the carpeted runner that covers the walkway, muffling my footsteps, but as I come up behind Willow, I can tell the second she notices me. Her posture changes, her shoulders stiffening up, and I'm certain she knows it's me. She's just as aware of me and my brothers as we are of her, despite her insistence that she wants to pretend shit is over between us.

I move in closer, coming up to stand behind her, my chest almost brushing against her bare back. When she doesn't move away, I lean down, dropping my head so I can murmur in her ear.

"Who was that man you were talking to?"

I don't exactly mean for it to come out like an accusation, but it does anyway. There's a hard edge to my voice, agitation still churning under my skin.

"It's none of your business," Willow whispers back, keeping her gaze fixed straight ahead.

"That's not true." Her scent invades my nostrils as I breathe her in, and it feels like a fucking drug. My voice drops low as I add, "Everything about you is my business. It became my business when you begged for my cock. When you let me put my mark on you."

She goes even more tense as she takes in those words, and I can almost feel it when she swallows hard. She doesn't turn to look at me, and her fingers curl against the thick marble railing like she needs to hold on to something.

“Yeah, well, I’ve been looking into tattoo removal,” she mutters.

That grates on me, making my chest ache as if someone has punched a hole through my ribs. I remember the almost savage pride I felt, looking down at her and seeing that mark above her left breast. The thought of her wanting to remove it makes me want to pin her down and mark her all over again—more permanently, this time, in some way she can never erase.

I don’t just want to mark her body.

I want to leave a brand on her soul.

I step in even closer so that we’re actually touching. I can feel the heat of her body where the dress she has on dips down in the back, showing off skin, and I wish we had fewer layers between us. I want to lay claim to her right here and fucking now.

“You’re lying,” I hiss, letting my lips brush the shell of her ear. “And even if you did get that tattoo removed, you can’t erase the mark we made on you that easily. We’re under your skin... just like you’re under ours.”

Willow sucks in a breath, which only has the effect of pressing her back even tighter against my chest.

“Yeah,” she says, and it comes out strained and bitter. “You want me to be your good little slut.”

It sounds like a curse, with the way she says it, but her words go right to my cock all the same. It throbs in my pants, and even though I know I’m supposed to be playing the part of a distinguished gentleman tonight, I feel more like an animal as the need to claim her rages inside me.

I wrap an arm around her, splaying one hand low on her stomach. She squirms against me, and that just makes me harder.

Luckily, the marble railing in front of us is thick and ornate enough to block the view of my hand on her from anyone who might happen to look up.

Good. Because I don’t plan on stopping here.

“That’s exactly what I want,” I murmur roughly. “I’ve never seen anything as fucking gorgeous as you leaking Ransom’s and my cum. And then sitting up to lap at Vic’s cock like you were starving for him. You have no idea.”

Willow shivers, but she makes no move to escape my hold.

“Shut up,” she whispers, her voice breathless.

“Why?” I scrape my teeth over her ear, making her shiver in my hold. “I thought you said you want me to tell you the truth. And there’s no lie in anything I just said, Solnyshka.”

My cock is hard as steel by now, and my control is rapidly disintegrating—not that I had much of it to begin with. Keeping one hand on Willow’s stomach, I let the other one trail over her upper thigh through the slit in her dress, then slide it between her legs.

Willow’s pulse picks up. I can feel her heart pounding harder where I’m pressed against her body, and I could almost swear I feel it in her pussy too, her clit throbbing beneath my fingertips as I graze them over her. I drag one finger along her slit through her panties, feeling the dampness of the fabric there, and a groan vibrates in my chest.

Fucking hell. She’s already wet for me.

“That’s what I thought,” I murmur, teasing the edges of her panties before slipping my fingers beneath them. “It doesn’t seem like you mind being called a slut right now.”

“I said *shut up*,” she bites back, but judging from the way her hips press forward to grind against my hand, she needs this as badly as I do.

“Do you really want me to do that?” I press, stilling the movements of my hand but not pulling away yet. “Do you really want me to stop?”

She doesn’t answer. The only sound between us is her ragged breathing.

“Last chance,” I warn her, my voice strained. “You tell me to stop, and this ends now. But I don’t think you will,

Solnyshka. Because like it or not, I know you better than you think. And you fucking love this.”

“No, I—”

I don’t even wait for her to finish speaking. I start to pull my hand away, calling her bluff, and Willow lets out a whimper, grabbing my forearm with her small hand to stop me. Her grip is tight, her nails digging into my skin, but I relish the bite of pain.

“Use your words,” I tell her again. “What do you want?”

“I...” Her fingers flex almost convulsively, and her voice is hardly more than a breath as she says, “Don’t stop.”

The beast inside me roars, and immediately, my hand is between her legs again, my fingers going straight to her clit.

“We did what we had to do to keep you safe from X,” I tell her, working my fingertips over the little bundle of nerves. “But that doesn’t mean we didn’t fucking enjoy it. And the fact that you enjoyed it too doesn’t mean there’s something wrong with you. There’s nothing wrong with liking to be fucked dirty. With liking it rough.”

Each word is punctuated by a teasing press to her clit, and Willow goes stiff against me, like she’s trying to keep herself from losing control.

Good. That makes two of us.

I can see her scanning the crowd, trying to make sure no one is watching us, but at this point, I don’t think I’d stop even if they were. Not when I’ve finally got a chance to binge on the only drug I’ve ever been addicted to.

Her.

I cup her whole cunt with my hand, grinding the heel of my palm against her clit and stroking my middle finger along the heat of her folds through her panties. The soft fabric is slowly getting more and more soaked, and the smell of her arousal fills my senses, driving me insane.

My cock is pulsing insistently, and I want nothing more than to pull her dress up and slam into her, fucking her right

over this railing, not giving a shit who sees.

But I don't do that.

Instead, I keep working her up slowly, determined to drag his out as long as possible.

"Someone's going to see you," Willow mutters, the words choppy and disjointed as she sucks in a breath.

"They won't," I counter, pressing my hand even more firmly against her. "Not if you keep quiet. Can you do that for me, Solnyshka? I'm gonna be honest, I hope you can't."

I feel more than hear the strangled moan she bites back, and it turns my own breathing ragged as I keep going.

Finally, I slide my fingers back under her panties, slipping them to the side so I can touch her with nothing between us. Willow almost sags in relief, and her knuckles are white as she presses her hands against the top of the railing.

I let one finger glide along her soaking wet slit and flick her clit a little, just to tease.

"Remember when I came to your class?" I ask her, still in that same low voice. Still with my mouth right there against her ear. "Remember how I worked my fingers into you just like this?" I dip one finger into her pussy, thrusting shallowly. "And you came so hard for me, right there in the back of the classroom?"

"I..." Her voice dies out before she can get another word out, and I thrust my finger all the way into her.

"I know the risk of being caught turned you on. Do you like the idea that anyone could see us?" I whisper. "That they might all know how dirty you are? That they could look up and see you grinding against my hand right now like a greedy little whore?"

Willow doesn't answer, but I can feel her trembling against me. Her hips buck into my touch, and I pull my fingers free of her for a second, pinching her clit.

She gasps at that, but doesn't pull away, as if the slight pain is something she wants.

“I could make you scream if I wanted to,” I promise her. “I could take you apart right here and make you come so hard you’d scream out for all these fucking rich people to hear.”

“Malice,” she whimpers, grinding against me, and the sound of my name in her voice like that is enough to drive me insane.

My cock is so fucking hard it’s almost painful, but I ignore it, focused on Willow right now.

I work her clit with two fingers, pressing them right against the little bud and rubbing it in slow circles.

“Let go,” I tell her. “I know you want to come for me. You’re so fucking close, I can feel it. You don’t have to fight it.”

She chokes back a moan, but the way her hips are thrusting forward makes it clear she’s right there on the edge. I could give her what she wants so easily, forcing her to come.

But I hold back, slowing down again. Pulling her tighter against me, I press my own hips forward so she can feel how hard I am through my pants.

“Tell me,” I whisper. “Tell me you’re my good little slut. Tell me you want to come for me.”

Willow whines and shakes her head, and I make a tutting noise.

“You must not want it bad enough, then. You want me to leave you like this? Worked up and needy where everyone can see? They’ll take one look at you and know you’re right there on the edge.”

I start rubbing her faster, letting her get closer, and then slow down again.

She makes a noise of frustration, and I chuckle darkly.

“Tell me. Tell me, and I’ll let you come.”

“I... Malice, please.”

“Not good enough. You know what I want to hear.”

I pinch her clit again, and I can feel it when she gives in. When the need to come apart outweighs whatever fears or hang-ups are holding her back. She slumps a little, her body still tense and tight, poised on the knife's edge of pleasure and need.

"I... I'm your slut," she finally whispers, sounding desperate and so fucking beautiful. "I'm your slut, and I want to come for you."

Approval roars through me the same way possessiveness did earlier. "Good girl," I whisper and then plunge my fingers into her, fucking her hard and fast with them.

I can feel how wet she is with each thrust, my fingers slamming into her body, working her up more and more until her inner walls clamp down tight.

She spasms against me, biting her lip to try to hold back the muffled noises as she falls apart. I keep one hand on her stomach, helping her stay upright and keep her composure as she shudders through her pleasure.

When she finally stops shaking, I slip my hand out of her dress, giving her a second to find the strength in her legs before I step back. My cock pulses with disappointment, and I have to grit my teeth to keep the distance between us.

Willow turns to look at me, and as soon as our gazes meet, I lift my hand to my mouth, licking my fingers. She tastes sweet, the way she always does, and combined with the lingering scent of her arousal, it's enough to drive me crazy.

And if I thought she looked beautiful in that dress before, she's a fucking vision now, her cheeks flushed and her pupils blown wide.

I breathe in raggedly through my nose, and neither of us moves for a long moment.

"*Ya yeshche nikogo tak ne khotel, kak tebya,*" I tell her, letting it slip off my tongue in Russian.

I know she doesn't understand the words, and maybe that's for the best.

I'm not sure I'm ready for her to know just how deep my feelings for her run.

WILLOW

MALICE STARES DOWN AT ME, the words he spoke in Russian still hanging between us. My body is buzzing, a mix of adrenaline and arousal surging through my veins, and my emotions are running so high that I feel like there's no way my skin can contain them all.

“We did what we came here to do,” he says, his voice still a little deeper than usual, raspy and gruff. “We'll be leaving soon.”

I nod, not trusting myself to speak. My legs shake as I turn back to face the railing, trying to get my pulse back under control.

Malice doesn't say anything else, but the same way I could feel it when he arrived, I can tell when he leaves, as if my body can sense his absence even though his footsteps are quiet on the carpet.

Running my hands over my hair to smooth down the flyaways, I gaze at the crowd below, all the guests talking and laughing and going about their business. None of them even noticed what was happening up here, and somehow, that makes me feel dirty and wrong.

I should have been down there, mingling and learning how to be a part of this new world.

Not up here, getting...

My cheeks flush at the memory of Malice's thick fingers thrusting in and out of me, the heel of his hand grinding against my clit right where I needed it. Despite my shame,

some dark, sensual part of me loved it. He was right about that. It made me feel free and wild, just like I felt that night with all three of the brothers.

But it's all too much.

These men get under my skin too much, leaving me too unbalanced and off-kilter. I told myself I was done with them, that it was best to cut ties, and yet here I am.

Once I'm sure Malice isn't coming back, I push away from the railing and start to make my way down the stairs, my legs still wobbly.

As I reach the bottom of the steps, I almost crash into Joshua, who's coming from the opposite direction. He looks me over, and I can only imagine what he sees. Is my face still flushed? Do I look as sexed up and dirty as I feel?

Fuck, can he *smell* it on me?

"Oh hey, Willow. I was wondering where you got to." He grins at me, then his brows draw together. "Are you alright? You look a little—"

"Yeah," I say quickly, cutting him off before he can finish. "Yeah, I'm fine. I just got a little overheated. I'm going to go find someplace to sit down."

Before he can say anything else, I move away from him, pushing blindly through the crowd of people. Suddenly, there are too many of them. Too many voices adding to the din in my head, too many sharp, fake laughs, too much going on.

I just want to be alone. I need some quiet and a few minutes time to clear my head and gather my thoughts.

Every little room I find is filled with people, and my emotions keep spiraling, something almost like panic beating at my chest. I'm almost on the verge of tears when I finally find a bathroom. It's single occupancy, and I let out a sigh of relief as the door closes behind me, shutting out the noise.

The bathroom is small but nice, the toilet separated from the rest of the room by a stall, and a small cushioned bench against one wall, with a little table next to it.

I sink down onto the bench gratefully, exhaling roughly. I run my hands over my dress and try to focus on taking deep, even breaths.

“You’re okay,” I whisper to myself. “You’re okay. It’s okay.”

But my clit is still throbbing, and my heart is still racing.

I close my eyes, trying to center myself and focus on something other than how fractured and confused I feel, but every time I breathe in, it’s like I can still feel Malice there. Like he’s still pressed against me, talking low in my ear, working me up until I can’t do anything but beg for him.

The sound of the door opening sends panic shooting through me, and my eyes snap open. I’m expecting it to be some guest of the gala, annoyed at finding someone crying in the restroom when all they wanted to do was pee, but it’s not a stranger at all.

It’s Ransom.

I’m not sure if that’s better or worse than what I expected, and I watch warily as he comes in, closing the door behind him. He walks over and sits down next to me on the bench, close enough that I can feel the heat of his body at my side.

Surreptitiously, I reach up to brush my fingers over my cheeks, trying to wipe away the few tears that escaped earlier.

“Are you okay?” Ransom asks quietly, glancing sidelong at me.

“I’m fine.” It’s an automatic response, and I’m hoping it’s enough to get him to leave me alone.

But I really should know better by now.

Ransom’s blue-green eyes don’t stray away from my face, and he tips his head to one side, like he’s trying to see through me.

“I saw Malice talking to you before,” he says. “Up on the second level. Did he... ?”

He trails off, and I stiffen even more, realizing what he's getting at. He knows what happened up there between me and Malice, which means he probably saw it. And if he saw it, then anyone else could have. Everyone else could have.

They could all know what happened and what I said to Malice and what he did to me and—

My breathing turns ragged again as I start to freak out. My heart pounds so hard in my chest that I can hear the blood rushing through my body.

“Did you... did you see?” I manage to get out. “Did everybody see?”

Ransom shakes his head quickly. “It’s fine, pretty girl. Nobody saw. No one from the gala was looking at you. Which really just makes them all fucking fools for not wanting to watch you every second you’re here.” He shoots me that lopsided grin that used to make my heart turn over in my chest. “But I guess that’s more my brothers’ and my thing, isn’t it?”

I swallow hard, trying to take some comfort in his certainty that what Malice and I did went unnoticed. The last thing I need is for the people here, for my fucking *grandmother*, to know what went on.

“Are you sure?” I press. “No one saw?”

“No one saw,” he promises. “And even if they had glanced your way, other people probably wouldn’t have known what was going on. It just looked like you and Malice were talking up there. Standing a bit close, maybe, but that’s all.”

“Then how did you know?” I counter.

He shrugs. “Because I can read you. I know what you look like when you’re close to falling apart, even if you try to hide it.”

He says it matter-of-factly, and it makes me feel laid bare in front of him—because I know he’s right. I put my hands over my face, and I can feel the heat from my flaming cheeks.

Fuck. It's so easy for them to do this to me, and it's so damned embarrassing.

"I shouldn't have let that happen," I blurt out, shaking my head. "I have a chance to turn over a new leaf now, and I need to take it. I have a family now. A whole new world I could be a part of. This is the life I want, and I need to stop letting things get in the way of that."

It's what I've been beating myself up about ever since Malice broke into my apartment. With Olivia's help, I can be somebody. I can do something with my life and leave all the bad shit I grew up with behind.

But I keep giving in to these men. Giving in to the part of me that can't stay away from them, the part that craves their darkness.

And it's maddening.

Ransom doesn't say anything. He just rests his hand on my knee, and it's like that simple touch unlocks the floodgates of all the things that have been building up in my head and heart since I met Olivia. Maybe even longer than that.

"I've always worked so hard," I whisper, rubbing my hands over my face as I blink back more tears. "So fucking hard to make sure I don't become like my adoptive mother. I wanted to go to school so badly because I felt like I needed an education to better myself. I didn't want to end up begging for money for drugs or sucking dick just to make ends meet. I saw how terrible that life was, and I hated everything about it. All I knew was that I *had* to be better. That I had to do more. I was willing to do whatever it took. Take as many classes as I could, work however many hours I had to so I could pay my tuition. Anything."

I drag in a deep breath, and Ransom rubs his thumb over my knee, a silent comfort by my side.

"And now suddenly, I've had this chance dropped in my lap," I continue, my voice low. "A chance to leave my old life behind, to have everything that I was working so hard for. Olivia could open so many doors for me, and she *wants* to!

She wants to help me escape who I was and make things easier for me. And... and it's like I'm *trying* to sabotage it! What the fuck is wrong with me?"

The last words come out louder than I mean for them to, and my voice rings off the tiles in the little bathroom.

My face gets hot all over again, and I want to turn away from Ransom, embarrassed that I let all of that out.

But he just squeezes my knee gently. "Angel, look at me."

I shake my head, staring hard at the tile floor.

The hand on my knee doesn't move, but with his other hand, he catches my chin between his fingers and thumb, tilting my head up so our gazes meet. There's a serious, almost angry expression on his face, so different than his usual languid grin.

"Listen to me. There's *nothing* wrong with you," he says emphatically. "You don't have to believe anything else my brothers or I say, but believe that. If you want to be in this life, to be a part of this world, then they'd be fucking lucky to have you."

He hesitates for a second, shaking his head like he's debating whether or not to say more. Finally, he continues on.

"But you shouldn't let anyone try to change you. You shouldn't let anyone make you feel like you're not already good enough. Because you are. You're one of the strongest people I've ever met. And the sweetest. You've held onto your kindness, even when the world has no right to expect that from you. You're already perfect."

I blink up at him, my jaw falling open slightly in surprise. My heart is still racing, but it's for a different reason now. Emotions are welling inside me again, but this time, they don't feel quite so overwhelming.

"I'm pretty sure no one else out there thinks that," I say, huffing a soft laugh as I glance toward the door and the rest of the museum.

Ransom raises his pierced eyebrow.

“Well, I can think of two people out there who definitely do,” he tells me. “And as for the rest? Fuck ’em. Like I said, they’re idiots if they can’t see what you’re worth, and that it has nothing to do with how much money you do or don’t have. It’s just... you.”

His words settle over me, and when I stare into his eyes, the color of the ocean on a bright day, I know he meant them.

He really does think all of those things about me.

Everything that happened between us before they made the video, everything I was feeling and thought they were starting to feel too? Maybe it wasn’t all a lie. Maybe it wasn’t fake.

“Thank you,” I whisper. They’re not really the right words, not big enough to encapsulate everything I want to say, but they’ll have to do for now.

Ransom smiles and releases my chin, tucking a lock of hair behind my ear before continuing the motion to cup my cheek. His palm is warm against my skin, and I can feel the faint roughness of his callouses.

It’s probably a bad idea, especially since he found me in here freaking out about letting my walls down with Malice, but I tilt my head up a little, my gaze dropping to his lips.

It’s been so long since he kissed me. I’ve missed the feeling of being *consumed* by him, as if I’m more precious than the air he breathes.

The little voice in the back of my head warning me to not do this grows quieter and quieter, and when I lean in, Ransom meets me halfway.

His mouth is warm and soft, the way it always was before everything went to shit. He kisses me gently at first, like he’s easing me into it, or maybe relearning the way it feels to do this, since it’s been a few weeks now.

But it doesn’t stay gentle for long.

I don’t know which one of us moves in closer first, but the kiss deepens quickly, getting more insistent and hotter, the hunger in both of us coming out.

I moan against Ransom's mouth, and he groans in response, sliding his tongue against the seam of my lips. The second I part them, he delves inside my mouth, like he's trying to memorize the way I taste all over again.

It makes my head spin, but it also feels strangely... comforting.

For a moment, the only thing that matters is the way his muscled body feels against mine as he pulls me closer on the bench. I lose myself in the heat from everywhere we're touching and the taste of champagne on his lips. The way he kisses me deeply and then pulls back a bit to give me some room to breathe before diving right back in.

I'm not thinking about the party outside, or how I don't fit in, or even Malice and his intense way of showing he misses me. My head is empty of anything but the pleasant, buzzing warmth that comes from being kissed really, really well.

That's probably why it takes a minute for the noises from outside the bathroom to filter in.

Several raised voices from the main room catch my attention, and Ransom and I finally break apart, breathing hard as we stare at each other.

The voices get louder, anger and agitation clear in them, and worry floods me.

Fuck. Whatever the Voronin brothers came here to do—has it gone wrong?

WILLOW

RANSOM FROWNS, looking worried, and my gut twists.

Shit. Shit. Shit.

He told me no one was going to get hurt in their job for X, but maybe things went off the rails somehow. Maybe by getting them tickets for the event, I unwittingly put everyone here in danger.

“What’s going on?” I ask, my gaze shooting toward the door.

“I don’t know.” Ransom rises smoothly from the bench and takes my hand, helping me up. “Come on. We need to find out what’s up.”

I nod, letting him lead me out of the bathroom and back into the main area where most of the guests are still milling around.

We rejoin the crowd, and Ransom pushes his way through until we can see the source of all the commotion.

My heart lurches in my chest as soon as I see what’s going on.

It’s not something to do with the Voronin brothers at all. It’s my mom.

She’s near the large entryway, making a scene, and it feels like my stomach drops out of my body.

What the hell?

I vaguely remember telling her I was coming to this event, but I thought she was too out of it to care. And I *definitely* didn't think she'd decide to show up.

Misty is "dressed up," but it's nothing like what everyone else is wearing. Her makeup is thick and caked on, eyeshadow and lipstick in bright colors that cover the pallor of her face. And her clothes are... barely clothes. She has on a short leather skirt, skintight and shiny, and it looks like if she bent over, she'd flash her probably bare crotch to everyone gathered. Her shirt is mostly a halter top, showing off the curves of her chest and leaving nothing to the imagination.

She looks like the most stereotypical version of a hooker, gaudy, revealing, and tacky, and she's yelling at a woman wearing a name tag with the museum's logo on it, one long painted fingernail waving in her face.

"Ma'am," the woman says again, her tone polite but firm. "As I've said, you're not on the list. This is a private function. The new wing of the museum will be open to the public starting on Monday. Until then, I'm going to have to ask you to leave."

"Fuck you!" Misty screeches. She stumbles a bit in the heeled boots she's wearing, glaring daggers into the woman's face. "You can't keep me out! I deserve to be here."

She's slurring her words, which is a clear sign that she's high on something, and my heart clenches.

Two uniformed guards push their way through the crowd and come to stand with the woman who's been dealing with Misty. They're big guys, and they fold their arms, looking down at my mother.

"Ma'am, you have to go," one of them informs her.

Misty spits on the ground in front of him.

"You don't tell me what to do. None of you do!" She looks past the guards to the people gathered around watching this scene play out. "You're all a bunch of stuck up ass kissers. Walking around here with your spoons shoved so far up your

asses you're spitting silver. You're not better than me! Especially not you, you tacky bitch."

That last bit is directed to the woman with the name tag, who looks helplessly at the guards.

Fuck. I've seen enough.

I step away from Ransom and hurry forward, hoping to defuse this before it gets any worse.

As soon as she sees me, Misty perks up, a triumphant smile spreading across her face.

"See?" she says, jabbing her finger in my direction. "That's my daughter. I raised her. I took care of her. I gave her fucking *everything*. If she's here, then I should be here too."

My face immediately floods red. Everyone is watching me now, and I can just imagine what they're thinking. They're looking at the two of us like we're trash, like we're some crazy freakshow.

Tears burn behind my eyes, but I don't have time to cry now. That'll be for later, once I know how much damage my mom has done.

"Stop it," I tell her, grabbing her arm as I reach her. "What are you *doing* here?"

"I came to rub elbows with the rich and fa-ancy," Misty slurs, giggling a little. "I came to drink champagne with my baby girl. Don't you want me here?"

Rather than answering, I tug on her arm to try to get her to come with me, but she yanks herself out of my hold, refusing to budge.

"I'm so sorry about this," I say to the woman from the museum. "She's..."

The woman doesn't reply, just stares at me, and my heart sinks. Before this, I was Olivia Stanton's granddaughter, and a guest people were eager to meet. Now I'm just the daughter of a hooker who's high out of her mind and making a scene.

“If she doesn’t leave, I’m going to have to call the police,” the woman says, her voice turning cool.

I nod, then shift my attention back to my mom. “You have to go,” I tell her, keeping my voice quiet. “You don’t have a ticket, so they can’t let you in. Just go, okay? Don’t make this any worse.”

“Oh, don’t make it any worse?” Misty scowls, her mood switching from happy to pissed off in the blink of an eye as it often does when she’s like this. “You think I just make things worse, huh? Is that why you don’t want me here? Did you tell them to keep me out? Your own *mother*?”

She pushes away from me, trying to rush the guards and get farther inside, but they’re too big for her to move, and they grab her easily.

“Hey! Let go!”

She fights, kicking and twisting in their hold as they escort her outside and down the stairs. Most of the guests stay inside, but a few onlookers follow me as I step outside. The woman from the museum calls the police, and the guards hold on to my mom, keeping her contained until the cops show up.

Blue and red lights flash, and my mother finally stops struggling, calming down a little as two cops step forward to speak to her and the guards.

Part of me thinks I should stay out there with her and make sure it all works out okay, but a bigger part of me doesn’t want anything to do with her right now, angry and hurt by her behavior. I listen to that part, slinking back into the museum with the rest of the guests.

The large space where the event is being held feels strangely quiet, everyone speaking in muted voices as they gather in tight clusters to gossip. Ransom, Malice, and Victor are standing by the door, and I see Ransom move like he’s about to come toward me, but I shake my head, giving him a tight smile.

I don’t know if I could handle him talking to me right now, seeing the sympathy burning in his eyes, without breaking

down and crying.

I scan the room, searching for Olivia, but before I can find her, someone clears their throat into a microphone.

That gets the attention of everyone gathered, and a pretty, dark-skinned woman in an evening gown smiles from the head of the room.

“Hello, everyone, and good evening,” she says, sounding cheerful in a forced way. “Sorry for the, uh, interruption, and thank you all so much for coming out tonight. The Museum of Contemporary Art has stood as a pillar in the cultural scene of this city for...”

I tune out most of her speech, letting the words about the history of the museum wash over me. It’s clear that she’s trying to move on from the scene that just happened, glossing over it to reset the evening and get things back on track.

“We’re especially excited tonight to be unveiling a new wing, and to allow you all to have the first look. Thanks to donations from patrons like you and the tireless work of our team, we’re so pleased to announce that the Museum of Contemporary Art will now have a section devoted purely to displaying the work of local artists. Some pieces will become permanent parts of our collection, while others will rotate out on a quarterly basis, so that we can truly highlight the talent Detroit has to offer.”

Everyone applauds, and I clap along with them, still in a daze. The section that had been blocked off is unveiled, and people mingle as they walk through, admiring the art of local artists and discussing the unveiling.

It doesn’t seem like anyone is still talking about what happened, but I know none of them have forgotten it.

The event lasts for another hour or so, but I lose track of time. It’s all a blur, and every so often, I catch people looking at me. They always look away when I glance in their direction, but I know what they must be thinking.

I’m an imposter. I don’t belong here.

Troy glances at me and sneers, and there's so much disdain and mockery in his expression that it makes my stomach sour.

I go on autopilot for the rest of the night, tapping into the skill I developed when I lived at Misty's house, trying to do my homework in my room while she 'entertained' johns down the hall. All I want is for this all to be over soon.

Eventually, the night comes to an end, and people start leaving. I'm desperate to get out of here, and when someone comes up and touches me on the shoulder as I slip out the door, I jump in surprise.

It's Olivia. She's given me space all night, not ushering me around the room to meet her friends and acquaintances like she did earlier, and I have no idea if it's because she's ashamed to have them meet me now or because she knows I wasn't up for it. Either way, seeing her makes me want to cry all over again.

"Heading out?" she asks.

I nod. "I'm so sorry," I tell her. "I didn't know she was going to show up tonight. I didn't... I would never have told Misty to come here. And since everyone knows I'm your granddaughter, they're going to think you're a part of all of this, and... I'm just really sorry."

The words come out in a jumbled mess, and I fall silent once I'm done, my heart in my throat. I expect Olivia to be angry or annoyed. After all the work she did trying to help me fit in here, introducing me to everyone and getting me and the Voronin brothers on the list in the first place.

And this is how I repay her kindness? How could she not be angry about that?

But instead of snapping at me or lecturing me, she gives my shoulder a gentle squeeze.

"It wasn't the highlight of the evening," she admits, grimacing slightly. "However, it also wasn't your fault. You don't have to pay for the mistakes of others, Willow. You had no say in who adopted you, and I'm honestly quite impressed

that you managed to keep yourself together so well, given your upbringing.”

I wrap my arms around myself as a light breeze ruffles my hair, at a loss for what to say to that. I’m so used to people lumping me in with my adoptive mother, assuming I’ll turn out just like her or already *am* like her, that it feels strange to have my grandmother see me for myself and treat me like my own person.

Olivia pulls me into a hug, holding me close. She smells like a comforting mix of fresh flowers and perfume, and I wrap my arms around her, a lump rising in my throat.

“Don’t let this get you down,” she murmurs. “It’s alright. Everyone who met you tonight was very impressed.”

We separate, and I take a deep breath, trying to take her words to heart.

“People won’t hold your adopted family against you,” she promises. “Not when they’ve seen how delightful you are.” Her smile grows, her hazel eyes twinkling a bit. “Joshua Powell seemed quite taken with you, for example.”

I flush. Joshua was nice enough when we spoke earlier, but I haven’t seen him since my mom’s outburst.

“Thank you... for everything,” I tell Olivia. “For bringing me here.”

“Of course.”

Movement in my periphery catches my attention, and I glance over to see the Voronin brothers heading down the steps, going to get their car from the valet. I watch them go, then look back to Olivia.

“I hope your friends had a good time as well,” she says.

There’s no inflection on the word *friends* or anything, so I still don’t know how she feels about the fact that I wanted to invite them. Has she picked up on anything between us, or does she think they’re just people I knew in my old life? Maybe she thinks allowing them to stay in my life will help

me navigate the divide between who I used to be and who I am now.

I twist my fingers together, trying not to blush or think about what Malice did to me upstairs or how I kissed Ransom in the bathroom.

“Yeah, I think they did,” I tell her.

“Then it was all worth it.” Olivia takes my hand, her fingers soft and dry. “Keep your chin up, dear. You did wonderfully tonight, and I’m very proud of you.”

“Thank you,” I murmur again.

She smiles at me one last time and then turns to head back into the museum. I follow the path that Malice, Ransom, and Vic took, going to the valet to get them to bring my car around.

As I pull away, I see the Voronin brothers pulling out too, and my heart tugs a little. I don’t know when I’ll see them again, since it’s not like I have a reason to after this.

That should be a relief. I shouldn’t *want* to be around them.

But instead, it just makes me feel like there’s a hole in my heart.

VICTOR

I FLICK my eyes to the steering wheel as Malice pulls our car away from the museum and starts to follow Galvin's vehicle. He keeps a close enough distance that we won't lose our mark, but he doesn't get so close that Galvin or his driver will notice being followed.

In my head, I think that there should be another car length between us, but I bite my tongue, saying nothing.

Whenever we all go somewhere together, I prefer to be the one driving. Ransom and Malice can drive fine, but I hate being in the car with one of them behind the wheel. They're too imprecise, and it grates on me.

Malice drives with his emotions, flooring it when he's angry and braking hard when he's feeling spiteful, and Ransom is just a thrill seeker, pushing the boundaries of the speed limits, but without the careful control that I have when I drive.

But for now, it makes the most sense for Malice to be the one behind the wheel. I have to use my tech skills to tune into the recording device that we planted on Galvin, making sure we get everything he says for the next several hours, like X told us to.

Ransom is in the backseat, and he's taken his tie off and undone the first couple of buttons of his shirt. His brown hair is messy, like he's been running his hands through it.

"So what the hell happened tonight, Mal?" Ransom asks, and Malice grumbles something under his breath. "Don't give

me that,” Ransom presses. “I saw you and Willow up there on the second floor. Did you really think some fancy-ass museum wing opening was the right place for that?”

“No one saw anything,” Malice counters.

“Maybe not, but you might as well have bent her over and fucked her right there for how intense you were being.”

“Don’t think I didn’t consider it.”

Ransom snorts. “Of course you did. Look, you’re gonna scare her off if you keep pushing her too hard. It’s obvious she’s not in the right headspace to be fucking around with us in public, especially with her grandma right there.”

Malice just grunts, taking a turn too fast. “Willow is strong as hell,” he shoots back. “She can take it.”

“I know she’s strong. But she’s been through a lot of shit lately. You don’t know—”

“Quiet,” I say, cutting into their argument. “I’m getting a signal.”

I clutch the receiver in my hand, not liking the unsettled feeling in my stomach. It’s irritation, but it’s tinged with something like jealousy. Malice wanted Willow tonight. He wanted to touch her and rile her up, to make sure that she can’t forget him and what he does to her. So he took what he wanted because that’s what he does.

And that’s not something I can do. I have too many... issues. Too much shit piled on my shoulders, holding me back. So no matter how much I wanted to touch Willow or see her fall apart tonight, I wouldn’t have been able to.

Static crackles over the receiver, and I shake those thoughts out of my head.

Focus.

We have a job to do.

The fingers of one hand drum on my leg, and I count the space between my breaths as we listen in on Galvin’s

conversation, sticking close to his car as it drives through the city.

He has a driver, because of course he does, and he's in the back seat talking about some deal he's working on.

"If we can close this, it will be big," he says, his voice coming through the receiver. "Big enough to start shaking things up. I just need to get some signatures on the forms so we can start making progress with things. Their accountants are holding things up for some goddamned reason."

It's all boring business talk, nothing that interests me, but that doesn't matter. This is what X wants, so obviously it means something to him.

We merge onto an empty road, picking up speed, and the signal starts to fade out, the sound of Galvin's voice going crackly with static, like a badly tuned radio.

"We need to be closer," I tell Malice.

"On it," he says. He pulls into the lane right behind Galvin's car, still keeping some space between us, but inching closer.

I turn the dial on the receiver a bit, and then nod once Galvin's voice comes back through, strong and clear.

He's berating accountants in general now, it seems, so it doesn't appear that we missed much.

We need to get a better signal so that we can fall back a little and not risk him noticing us tailing him. I start to fiddle with the device X gave us when all of a sudden, something flares inside Galvin's car, bright enough that we can clearly see it through the tinted windows.

Smoke starts to fill the interior of the car, and the vehicle swerves sharply.

"What the—"

"Oh, shit—"

Shouts burst through the receiver, and then the recording cuts out.

Galvin's car swerves again, veering to the left and smashing into the median. It flips and rolls over, landing right back in our lane.

"Fuck!" Malice slams on the brake as he curses, but it's too late. We were going too fast, and it all happened in what felt like an instant.

The sounds of crunching metal and breaking glass fill my ears as we smash right into the wreck of Galvin's car.

We hit with a jolting impact, and my body jerks against the seat belt as it goes tight across my torso. For a moment, I feel dazed and stunned, blinking hard as my head swims.

It almost feels like when my dad used to hold my head underwater, his voice muted and muffled as he talked to me about finding the strength to endure pain. There's a buzzing in my ears, and I hear someone talking, but it has that same muffled quality, out of reach.

For just a moment, I'm that kid again, lungs burning, fighting the need to gasp for air, my head held down by someone bigger and stronger than me. Just counting the seconds and the wild beat of my heart until I'll be allowed to breathe again.

Then a hand lands on my shoulder, shaking me urgently.

"Vic? Vic! *Victor!*"

It's Ransom, shouting my name. I blink, shaking myself out of the daze, even though my ears are still ringing.

"Get out of the fucking car!" Ransom yells, and I nod, shoving my dented door open so I can slide out.

"Mal?" Ransom calls, pushing his way out as well.

"Yeah." Malice's voice is strained. "I fuckin'—need a little help."

Ransom yanks the driver's side door open, and then curses. "Shit. Fuck, Mal."

I come around to look, seeing Malice half slumped in the driver's seat. The whole front of the car is crumpled in on

itself, and a piece of metal from the dash is stuck through Malice's side.

It doesn't look too deep, but it's definitely going to need medical attention, or he'll bleed out.

Between the two of us, we get Malice out of the car. The white of his dress shirt is liberally stained with spreading blood, and he leans on me as Ransom goes to check Galvin's car quickly.

I glance around, adjusting my grip on Malice as I evaluate our surroundings. The road we're on is empty at the moment, but I don't know how long it will stay that way. My best guess is that Galvin's driver took this route so he could speed down the mostly deserted street.

"They're dead," Ransom says as he returns to us, scrubbing a hand down his face and leaving a streak of red on his cheek.

Dead.

I don't know if that's good or bad yet, but it means one less thing for us to deal with in the short term, at least.

"We can't let this be traced back to us," I tell Ransom, and he nods.

Moving quickly with Malice shuffling along at my side, I grab the laptop I brought with me just in case we needed it for the job, then pull out the small container of accelerant we keep in the trunk. It's not hard to make sure our car will go up in flames, and that will be enough to hide the fingerprints and anything else that could ID us. The car already doesn't have a VIN, and the plates are fake, so this is just covering the bases.

Ransom grabs the first aid kit we keep in the car and then pulls out a lighter and ignites a blaze. The three of us limp away from the crash site as smoke starts to billow up into the night sky.

We're lucky that this road was pretty deserted when we got here, but we need to get out of sight before anyone sees us.

Instead of following the road, we pick our way down the grassy, tree lined slope in the darkness. It's not easy, especially with Malice supported between us, but we make it, getting out of eye line of the road.

"Goddammit," Ransom says once we're a good enough distance away. "We're nowhere near home. We can't call a cab looking like this either. It's gonna be a long-ass walk, and we need to get Malice looked at."

He's right. We don't have a lot of options, and judging from the way Malice is gritting his teeth, just the walk down the hill has already put stress on his wound.

"We're not that far from Willow's apartment," I tell them.

We all share a look at that. As much as we've wanted to keep her out of things, it seems like we have to keep turning to her for help.

Ransom chews his lip for a second, then nods. "So we go there, then. It's our best bet right now."

With Malice out of commission, gritting his teeth through the pain and not offering much by way of an opinion, Ransom takes the lead. We stick to the side streets and alleyways, keeping to the shadows. The last thing we need is for someone to see us like this and start asking questions.

It takes longer to get to Willow's place than it would normally, since we're moving slowly, but we manage to make it. More blood has soaked into Malice's shirt, and Ransom is trying to keep pressure on it. It would be easy to let myself spin out right now, to let the chaos and unpredictability of what happened drag me to a dark place, but I take a deep breath and shove my demons down.

I count the steps up to the front door of Willow's building, letting that simple act calm me a little.

Unlike her last apartment, this place isn't the kind of building where people prop the front door open with a rock to just let anyone come walking in off the street. Here, you have to be buzzed in by someone inside, unless you have a keycard for the door.

I find the number for Willow's apartment and hit the buzzer.

Tapping my fingers lightly, I count the seconds that pass until she buzzes back.

"Hello?" she asks, sounding confused.

"Willow." I lean closer to the intercom, my chest tightening strangely at the sound of her voice. "It's us. We need to come up."

"Victor? I... what are you—"

She sounds hesitant, but we don't have time for that, so I cut right to the only thing that matters.

"Malice is hurt," I tell her. "We don't have anywhere else to go."

"Oh god. Fuck. Okay. Come up."

She buzzes us into the building, and we slip inside. Fortunately, there's an elevator, and we manage to get Malice into it without dripping blood all over the place. I'll have to erase any security footage that's capturing us, but that should be easy enough to do.

"Almost there," Ransom says, like he's giving my twin a pep talk.

Malice just keeps clenching his jaw, breathing heavily through his nose. It's clear he's in pain, although he's got a much higher tolerance for it than most people.

Willow is waiting for us at the door, and we've barely knocked before she's letting us inside.

I've seen her new place before, through the cameras Malice set up that day he went to see her, before she found out about them and took them down. But this is the first time I've been inside it physically. It smells like her. Like the unique floral scent of her preferred shampoo, combined with something else that I can't name but that I recognize as distinctly *Willow*. I got used to having that scent around when she lived with us, and I still feel the absence of it in our warehouse.

“Holy shit,” Willow breathes, her voice shaking a little.

She looks us over, taking in the cuts and scrapes on me and Ransom, and when her eyes land on Malice, she sucks in a sharp breath.

WILLOW

MY HEART CRAWLS up my throat as I stare at the three brothers.

I just saw them not that long ago. They were okay then, their usual selves. Malice was cocky and infuriating, pushing my buttons and stretching my boundaries the way he always does.

And now he's hurt.

Hurt *badly*, if the amount of blood soaked into his dress shirt is anything to go by. Victor and Ransom have a handful of injuries between them, but none of them seem to be that serious compared to Malice.

“We need to get him horizontal,” Ransom says. “Before he passes out and takes care of that for us.”

I nod, letting that spur me into action. Standing around staring at them in shock isn't going to help anything, so I gesture quickly for them to follow me, then lead them back into my room.

“Put him on the bed,” I instruct, and Vic and Ransom go to help him lie down.

“Wait.” Malice resists, grimacing as he shakes his head. “I'll get blood on your sheets.”

I gape at him incredulously. “What are you... I don't care about that right now!”

How could that even matter at a time like this?

He holds my gaze with his stormy eyes, his jaw working as a small trail of blood oozes down the front of his shirt. I don't know what the fuck is going on in his head, but he finally relents and eases himself into a lying position, wincing in pain.

Ransom sits on the bed beside him and cuts his shirt open, revealing the bloody wound on Malice's torso. It's on his side, just above his right hip, and I can't look away from it as more blood pulses softly from the tear in his skin.

"I..." My voice dies out. I have to swallow hard, forcing the words out past numb lips. "I don't have a first aid kit or anything."

Ransom shoots me a grin that's nowhere near as bright as his usual charming one. But he holds up a case on a strap that's been slung over his shoulder. "Don't worry about it, pretty girl. We're always prepared for this kind of shit."

There's something a bit horrifying about the fact that these three men feel a need to be prepared for an injury like this at any time, but I don't say that out loud. Instead, I stand near the foot of the bed, feeling useless as Ransom stands up and Vic takes his spot on the mattress beside Malice.

I was keeping my distance at first, but I inch closer as Victor gets to work, unable to help myself.

After rummaging through the first aid kit with his usual precision, he starts cleaning the wound, using gauze pads soaked in antiseptic.

Malice doesn't flinch once as the gash is cleaned, but the pain is clear to see in his eyes. He stares at the ceiling, hands clenched into fists as Vic works quickly and efficiently, starting to stitch him up.

I can't look away from it, creeping around the side of the bed to stand even closer. Vic's hands are steady and sure as he moves the needle, drawing it and the suture thread through Malice's skin, joining torn flesh on either side.

After a few seconds, I become aware that Malice is looking up at me as I lean over him, but I ignore his heavy gaze.

Instead, I glance over at Ransom, who's taken up a spot on the other side of the bed.

“What happened?”

“There was an accident,” Ransom says with a sigh. There's a dark streak on his cheek, and I think it might be blood. “Our car was totaled. We were too far from our place to walk, especially with Malice in this condition.”

I suck in a breath, worry making my skin chill.

“Did it have to do with your job for X?” I ask.

“Yeah. It didn't go quite as planned. But I mean, can you imagine if we'd tried to call a cab looking like this? Malice would have bled all over the seat, and we can't afford that kind of cleaning fee.”

He smiles crookedly, clearly trying to change the subject, but his attempt at levity doesn't really fool me. Malice is hurt, bleeding all over my bed, and even though Victor's hands are steady and precise as he stitches his brother up, I can see the scrapes and cuts on him too. Ransom looks tired, despite the way he's trying to put on a brave face.

Something bad happened. Something that they weren't expecting, or they would have had some kind of backup plan for it. Showing up at my place definitely wasn't supposed to be in the cards for them tonight, I'm sure.

My stomach twists itself into a knot, and I stare down at the floor. I worry about these men, even though I'm not sure I should. I probably shouldn't, considering everything, but I can't seem to help it. They're under my skin, just like Malice said earlier tonight. And fuck, “earlier tonight” feels like it might as well have been a completely different day already.

I shift my attention back to Malice again just in time to see him grimace in pain—the first time I've seen him react this strongly to the needle Victor is dragging through his flesh. His face is pale, and his teeth are gritted tightly together. There's a fine sheen of sweat on his forehead, and even though Vic is working as neatly and quickly as he can, that's clearly not enough to keep the pain from setting in.

“Do you...” I start speaking before I can think better of it, then stop. I take a deep breath and try again. “Do you need some painkillers or something? I have some extra strength Tylenol, I think.”

Malice shakes his head, and his eyes are tight at the corners when he looks at me.

“No. I don’t need that shit,” he grates out. “What I need is a fucking drink. Do you have anything?”

I hesitate for a second, but then nod, turning to go to the kitchen. This is going to be showing my hand in a big way, but... there are extenuating circumstances. Or something like that.

In the cabinet above the fridge, I have a bottle of liquor. Specifically whiskey, and even more specifically, the same kind that we drank the night Ransom and Malice fucked me.

My fingers tighten around the neck of the bottle as I bring it back to the bedroom and then hold it out for Malice to take.

He looks at the label and then back to me, and something passes over his face. Something that makes me pretty sure he understands the significance of me having this.

It’s stupid, in a way.

I wanted to leave that night behind, forget about it and them and everything that was weighing on me. But I still went and bought this bottle. I’m not even much of a whiskey drinker, but I liked it on the night we all drank it together, and I like it now because of that memory.

Malice doesn’t say anything, thankfully. He just takes a few swigs from the bottle, sitting up partway so that he doesn’t spill it everywhere.

Vic shoots him an annoyed look at all the moving around, but doesn’t say anything. A second later, he ties off the thread and snips the excess with the tiny scissors from their first aid kit. He cleans the wound again and then covers it with gauze and medical tape.

“There,” he says, leaning back. “That should hold you for a while. You’re going to have to keep that clean or it’s going to get infected.”

He shoots Malice another look, and I wonder if he’s warning his twin about that because that’s been an issue before. Malice definitely strikes me as the type of person to play fast and loose with things like his health or recovering from an injury.

“It’ll be fine, Vic,” Malice grunts. He sets the bottle on the nightstand and then starts scooting toward the edge of the bed like he’s going to get up.

“Wait. What are you doing?” I ask, frowning.

“We should go,” he says, not looking at me. “Get out of your hair now that I’m not bleeding out.”

I march closer to the bed and put a hand on his shoulder, trying to push him back down. It’s a testament to how shitty he must feel that I actually manage to get him to move an inch.

“Don’t be stupid,” I tell him bluntly. “You need to rest. You literally just got into a car accident and were impaled by something.”

Ransom chuckles, looking mildly entertained by our battle of wills. “I guess she told you,” he murmurs.

Malice grumbles something under his breath in Russian, but he lets me push him back down.

“She has a good point,” Ransom continues once Malice’s head hits the pillow again. “You should take it easy for a bit. We’re not in any hurry to get home, so it doesn’t matter if we leave now or not. It’s more important that you get some rest.”

“Yes,” Vic agrees, nodding. Then he glances at me. “Willow, can I use your bathroom? I want to wash my hands.”

“Yeah, sure.”

I don’t even bother to direct him to it, since I’m almost certain he already knows where it is. Considering the cameras he had Malice put up the last time he was here, and Vic’s

whole... Vic-ness, it would be more of a shock if he *didn't* know the layout of my entire apartment already.

Ransom follows Vic out of the bedroom when he goes, and I'm about to head out with them, to give Malice some peace and quiet so he can rest. But something holds me back, and I hesitate, turning to look at the man stretched out on my bed.

Carefully, I step closer and then perch on the edge of the mattress, taking the spot Victor was just in.

It's weird to see Malice like this. He doesn't seem quite... diminished, but there's definitely something different about him now that he's been injured. Maybe it's just that I've never seen him laid low like this before. All my memories of him are dynamic, him simmering with anger or practically vibrating with the need to hit something. He's not someone I associate with stillness.

But here he is, lying in my bed. Not quite broken, but not quite whole either.

"Do you need anything else?" I ask softly. "I can still get those painkillers if the whiskey isn't helping. Or maybe some water?"

Malice snorts. "I'm fine, Solnyshka," he says. "This isn't the first time I've been hurt. Won't be the last."

"You say that like you're sure."

He shrugs. "I am."

"Does it hurt, though?"

"I've had worse."

I glance down at his body, taking in the new wound and the neat job Victor did in cleaning it up. It doesn't even look out of place with the rest of him.

Most of his torso is taken up by tattoos and various scars, some shallow and neatly healed, others puckered and angry looking even now that they're old. So I know he isn't lying about having experienced worse.

I swallow hard, feeling almost nervous for some reason.

“Do you ever wish you had a life where you didn’t get hurt so often?” I whisper.

Malice huffs, making a noise in his throat. “Nah. I don’t know how I’d function if I had a quiet life like that. How the hell would I know I was alive if I didn’t brush up against death every once in a while?”

There’s something bright in his eyes that makes it seem like he’s joking, but at the same time, it’s hard to say how much of him believes it and how much is just kidding.

The words make my heart clench, and even now, I don’t want to think about him having too many close calls with death. It just doesn’t sit right in my heart, and it makes a panicky feeling flutter in my stomach.

“Don’t die, okay?” I murmur, almost too soft to hear.

But of course he does hear it.

He turns his head a little, and his gaze burns right into me. “Why? Why don’t you want me to die?”

There are probably a hundred different reasons, but I can’t get myself to say any of them. They all feel too intimate, too close to admitting things that I don’t want to feel, let alone say. I could tell him that it’s because I don’t want his brothers to have to miss him, but then, why should I care about that? If I’m supposed to be cutting them out of my life, why would I care about any of it?

That’s the biggest question, of course, and I don’t have it in me to try to figure out the answer right now.

So instead, I drag my gaze away from Malice’s and put my walls back up a little, shutting him out.

“You need to get some rest,” I tell him, getting up from the bed. “Sleep, if you can.”

“Solnyshka.”

Malice’s voice is low, and there’s something in it that stops me in my tracks, my hand resting on the door handle.

It's not that there's a command in his tone. It's more like... *vulnerability*, and it pierces right through the armor I thought I just erected around myself. I turn around, swallowing as our gazes meet.

"What?" I ask.

"Stay."

Just that single word does something to me. It's halfway between an order and a plea, and I feel rooted to the spot by it. I could easily say no. I could tell Malice that he needs peace and quiet to sleep, and that I won't be of help with that. But I don't.

Instead, I stay right where I am, leaning against the door while I watch him—as if keeping some physical distance between us will help with the emotional side of it.

The room descends into silence, and Malice goes for the whiskey bottle again, taking a few more deep pulls. Hopefully it will help dull the pain he's in even more.

It really must hurt, but he's dealing with it well. It's just little things that give him away. The way he winces after he drinks, the tightness around his eyes, the way he keeps flattening his lips and breathing through his nose.

I wish I could shake loose the part of me that can pick up on Malice's tells, but there's not really much I can do about it now. I *know* him, just like he knows me.

Now I guess we just have to decide what we want to do with that fact.

He doesn't speak, and neither do I. With my arms wrapped around myself, I stay propped against the door until, after a long while, he finally falls asleep.

His head turns on the pillow, lips parted slightly, and the tension in his face smooths out a bit.

I can't stop myself from watching him sleep, studying his face like I'm trying to memorize every line of it. There's something indulgent in watching him while he can't watch me

back. It feels *safer* somehow than gazing at him when his eyes are open to read my expression.

He always sees too much.

He sees everything I try to hide from the world.

Malice makes a quiet noise in his throat, his brow furrowing and then smoothing out again, and once I'm sure he's not going to wake again, I take my chance to slip silently from the room.

RANSOM

WHEN WILLOW COMES out of the bedroom, I'm in her kitchen, raiding the cabinets for snacks. I can only imagine that this place is much better stocked than her old one, given that everything else about it is nicer than that rathole.

The apartment has an open floor plan, so there's only a partial wall separating the living room from the kitchen. From where I am, I can see Vic perched on an armchair, typing away at his laptop, doing Vic stuff. He already erased the security footage from Willow's apartment entryway, so now he's probably trying to figure out what the hell went wrong with the job from X tonight, and why X might have wanted Galvin dead.

We'll have to debrief about it as soon as Malice is back up and running, because honestly, this shit was fucked up.

None of us have ever shied away from killing someone when there's a reason for it, but doing X's dirty work like this pisses me the hell off. Especially when we don't even know why Galvin had to die, and we had no fucking idea what we were signing up for in the first place.

There's no way that flash in the car didn't have something to do with the device we planted on Galvin. Maybe it was some kind of small explosive as well as a recording device, or maybe it was a detonator of some kind for something that was already placed in the car. Either way, the timing is too perfect for it to have been an accident, and I'm sure we all want to know what the fuck kind of game X is playing.

I pull down a bag of cheese puffs just as Willow steps into the kitchen, and I shove those thoughts away for the moment. Turning to face her, I shake the bag lightly and grin.

“Damn. You’ve got the name brand kind and everything,” I tease. “Someone’s moving up in the world.”

She huffs a little laugh. “Is that the signifier that things are going better in my life? Name brand cheese puffs?”

“Oh definitely. The off brand stuff is fine, especially when you don’t have money, but there’s just something about the extra dollar you pay for the premium fake cheese that really screams privilege.”

“Or maybe you’re just weird,” she shoots back.

I shrug. “Hell, that’s *always* a possibility. I like your new digs either way. They’re fancy.”

“Thanks,” Willow replies, rolling her eyes. She hops up onto the kitchen island and goes for a package of cookies that I left there, taking a few and eating them.

There’s something about seeing her like this that I really like. She’s in her own territory, queen of her castle, and despite the stress of our sudden blood-soaked appearance at her apartment, she seems comfortable and at ease in her sleep shorts and oversized shirt.

“So,” she says, speaking around a mouthful of cookie. “You said there was an accident and your car was totaled.”

I nod. “Yeah. On a back road, going fucking seventy something miles an hour too.”

“But what happened? Was it random? Was it a part of the job?”

“Let’s just say things didn’t go quite how we expected them to, and we couldn’t stop it in time before we totaled the car,” I tell her.

It’s not safe to explain too much more than that. Even her knowing about X in the first place is probably too much, but we needed her help—and we needed her to understand why we made that video that hurt her so badly.

“Can it be traced back to you?” she asks, and she looks a little anxious, even though she’s trying to hide it.

“Nah.” I shake my head. “We’re better than that. And we run a chop shop, remember? We’re good at this kind of stuff. The car we were in can’t be linked back to us. No one will know we were there.”

Willow chews on her lower lip, seeming to process my answer. She nods slowly, but I can tell she’s still worried about us. I like that. I like that even after everything, all the shit that went down between us, she still cares. But at the same time, I don’t want her to worry too much or ask too many questions.

Because what happened tonight? It was very bad. I don’t want her to get involved in that or make her worry any more than she already does.

It’s easier to just change the subject, so I pivot to a new topic.

“I’m guessing you didn’t actually invite your mom to the museum opening tonight,” I throw out, raising an eyebrow.

Willow sighs and runs her fingers through her blonde hair, making it catch the light. “No, I didn’t. I mentioned it offhand a few days ago, just in a ‘here’s a thing I’m doing, isn’t that cool’ kind of way, and she just... ran with it, I guess. I hate that she made a scene like that, but...”

She trails off, and when it seems like she’s not going to say anything else, I nudge her a little. “But what?”

“But... I don’t know. I feel so conflicted about the whole thing, you know? She was never a great mom, but she did take me in. She did keep me off the streets, and I think maybe she did her best with what she had. Don’t I owe her for that? For making sure I wasn’t just some foster kid all my life?”

It’s a complicated question. I don’t have the answer, but I get the sense that just saying all this shit out loud is helping Willow, so I lean against the counter, crossing my arms over my chest.

“Maybe. Although I’m not really all that inclined to think well of your mom, going off of what I know about her,” I

admit. “And let me ask you this: if the positions were reversed, and your mom came into a bunch of money all of a sudden, do you think she’d help you out? Or would she take the money and leave you to fend for yourself?”

Willow’s brow furrows, and I can tell she is actually thinking about it. Then she sighs again, shaking her head. “You must think I’m an idiot for still wanting to believe that people are capable of being better, even though I’ve seen enough of the world that I shouldn’t be so naïve.”

“No. I don’t think you’re an idiot,” I say sincerely. “I meant what I told you back at the gala. I like that you have a big heart. I think it’s one of the best things about you.”

I move closer to where she’s sitting on the kitchen island and put a hand on her chest, right over her heart, above the tattoo that Malice gave her.

Willow’s breath catches. I half expect her to jerk away or go all tense and stiff again, but when she looks up to meet my gaze, her expression isn’t shuttered. It’s not closed off. I can see need and desire and something like hope swirling in her eyes, and her tongue darts out to lick her lips.

“Ransom...”

She whispers my name, her luminous eyes large in her face.

I move in even closer, and Willow spreads her legs, letting me stand between them. It feels right to be this close to her again. To have her here like this.

I slide my fingers up and over her shoulder, just for the sensation of touching her. She smells the same as always, an enticing floral scent that clings to her and tickles my nose, reminding me of sinking into the bath with her and being even closer than this. I can’t stop myself from dipping my head so I can smell her skin, wanting more of it, craving more.

“Fuck, angel,” I murmur. “I missed you.”

“You’ve still seen me,” she whispers back. “Since I left.”

“Yeah, but not enough. I missed you. Missed this.”

I press my lips to her shoulder, where the oversized shirt slips down to show her bare skin. Willow shivers against me and seems to melt a little into it.

“Ransom.” My name falls from her lips again, breathy and quiet.

“Tell me to stop,” I rasp. If one of us is going to bring us back from the brink of madness, it sure as fuck won’t be me.

But she doesn’t tell me to stop. She doesn’t say anything, so I keep going.

I drag my tongue over her shoulder, tasting the smooth, clean expanse of her skin. I grip her sides and then slide my hands up, finding the curves of her breasts through the fabric of the shirt she’s wearing.

She’s not wearing a bra, and I heft the softness of her tits, brushing my thumbs over her nipples until they’re hard and peaked, poking out through the shirt.

Willow squirms against me, whimpering softly. “That feels... good...”

My heart is practically racing now, urging me to keep going, to keep playing with her because it’s what we both want.

I give in to that urge and drag one hand down, finding the waistband of her shorts. It’s easy to slip my hand inside, and the heat there is incredible.

My finger slips into her pussy, and Willow groans, bucking against me as she grips my shoulders tightly.

“Fuck,” I groan. “You’re so wet. I missed this too, pretty girl.”

I missed every-fucking-thing about her.

And now I’m gonna show her just how much.

WILLOW

FUCK. Oh god.

I grind against Ransom's hand a little, trying to push that one finger deeper into me. Malice already made me come once tonight, but it feels like that was so long ago now.

My body aches, like it needs this. Like it needs to feel more and deeper and now. These men make me hungry in a way I never was before, like they're an addiction I just can't quit.

I roll my hips against Ransom, and his eyes flash with heat. He shifts his hand so he can shove another finger into me, and at this point I'm wet enough that there's basically no resistance.

His other hand is still playing with my breasts, and he gets rougher now, pinching one nipple hard enough that it makes me gasp.

He leans up and kisses me, swallowing the quiet noise, and the touch of his lips to mine is like electricity. It sends a spark down my spine, making me shiver against him. Instead of pulling away or trying to stop this before it gets out of hand, I melt against him even more, kissing him back.

Ransom makes a low, pleased noise, and he squeezes my breast a bit harder, before sliding that hand up to come around my neck and pull me in even more.

His mouth is hot and hungry, and it's like I can feel the truth of the words he said earlier in every brush of his lips on mine.

He did miss me.

He does want this.

His tongue slides into my mouth, seeking out mine. They twine and twist together, slick and insistent. My heart pounds heavily the whole time, measuring the seconds as we make out like teenagers in the kitchen.

Before I even realize it, my hands have decided to join the party, and I slide them under Ransom's shirt, touching his skin, feeling the places where he's finely muscled.

He groans into my mouth and then pulls back a bit, breathing hard. "Fuck. You have no idea what you do to me, angel."

"I think I'm getting an idea," I whisper.

The full weight of everything that exists between us hits me all at once as I speak, and I bite my lip, unsure all of a sudden. Overwhelmed by it all.

Ransom clearly sees that, but he doesn't back away from what he sees in my expression. He leans in again, tugging my bottom lip from between my teeth and lapping at the spot where my teeth dug into it before kissing me again.

His fingers haven't stopped moving in my pants either, and when he adds a second finger to my wet core, I moan, my hips grinding forward all over again.

It feels so fucking good, and my head is spinning with it. Having him here, pressed close, touching and teasing me, working me up. It's like nothing I've ever been able to do to myself, and as much as I know I shouldn't be letting this happen, I can't help myself.

"I think about this all the time," Ransom murmurs roughly.

He drops his mouth to my neck, dragging his tongue over my pulse point before pulling back to look me in the eye. His gaze is heavy and hot, the usual bright blue-green color of his eyes dark now, like a stormy sea.

"I think about how fucking gorgeous you were that morning when you woke up and admitted you'd been having a

dream about me and my brothers,” he says. “I think about the way you let me make you come, how you opened your eyes and looked at me just as you fell over the edge.”

He punctuates the last words by thrusting his fingers in even deeper, working them faster, fucking me harder.

“You have no idea how many times I’ve jerked off to memories of you,” he groans. “But nothing... *nothing* could ever compare to the real thing.”

“Oh! Fuck!”

My eyes roll back as pleasure slams into me, hot and deep. I choke on a gasp, and Ransom stares right at me, clearly intent on not missing a second of this.

“Are you close?” he asks, his voice low. “Are you on the edge right now? I want to see it. I wanna see you fall apart for me. Fuck, I missed making you come, angel.”

He pushes his fingers in with each sentence, and when his thumb comes up to rub at my clit, I know there’s no way I’m going to hold off the impending orgasm.

My hips jerk and buck, and I grind myself shamelessly against his hand, giving in to the pleasure that sears under my skin and demands more.

“Ransom!” His name comes out sounding desperate and breathless, and I don’t even care. My head is full of nothing but the need to come undone, to finally feel the intensity of the climax that’s building. “Please...”

His eyes flare with heat and he surges forward, kissing me hard all over again.

“Yes,” he says. “Come for me, Willow. I wanna see it. I wanna feel it. Soak my fucking fingers.”

It’s not phrased exactly like an order—the words are too loaded with Ransom’s own desperation for that—but they work like magic, tipping me right over the edge and headfirst into an orgasm that I couldn’t stop if I wanted to.

And I *really* don’t want to.

Not when Ransom is kissing my neck and groping at my chest with his free hand, pinching my nipples while his fingers fuck into me hard and fast.

My breath catches, and the pleasure reaches a fever pitch. Everything goes rigid and tight, and for a second, I can't even breathe as it all rushes over me. Then that incredible tension snaps like a rubber band, and all I know is the liquid heat of coming for him, shaking and moaning as wave after wave of pure sensation crests over me.

Ransom works me through it, his fingers moving slower now, like he's coaxing every last bit of pleasure out of my body.

I gasp for breath, riding it out, until I can't anymore, and I whimper with oversensitivity.

"That's my good girl." Ransom finally stops, grinning at me.

He pulls his fingers free of my body, and just like he wanted, they're practically dripping. He holds them up, wiggling them a little with a hungry smirk on his face, offering them to me but not forcing me to lick them clean.

But something surges in me anyway. A desperate need, even though I just experienced the best orgasm I've had in weeks. It's something I've been ignoring since I left their place, since I walked out on them and vowed never to come back, and I give in to it now.

I grab his wrist and bring his fingers to my mouth, not even hesitating before practically devouring them. I suck on each one greedily, savoring the taste of myself, sharp and sweet.

"Fucking hell." Ransom groans, his head tipping back. "I would say you're killing me, pretty girl, but I think I must've already died and gone to heaven."

"Mmm," I murmur around his fingers, pulling them deeper into my mouth and sucking hard as I swirl my tongue around them.

His eyes flare with heat again, and from the way his jaw goes tight, I know this is affecting him just as much as it is me. Even his voice sounds deeper as he keeps talking, words of praise falling from his tongue.

“Goddamn, you do that so well. You’re so stunning when you let yourself go and take what you want. And what you want right now is to taste what I did to you, isn’t it? You like the way your cum tastes? You like knowing these fingers were just buried so deep inside your pussy?”

His words make my clit throb all over again, but at the same time, they freak me out a little too. I’m still grappling with feelings of shame and embarrassment for liking rough, dirty sex, and even here, when I’m already in it, those feelings don’t go away.

But not even the heat rising in my cheeks can stop me from wanting more of this. Releasing his fingers from my mouth with a wet pop, I use the hold on his wrist to tug him in even closer, kissing him hard.

His tongue finds mine again, and it’s like he wants to taste me too, savoring every last bit of the flavor of my arousal.

I wrap my legs around him, and that puts the hard line of his cock right against my sensitive pussy.

“Fuck,” I gasp out as his clothed cock rubs against my clit.

“Yeah?” Ransom pants back. He rolls his hips, rocking against me, pressing in even harder to up the friction. “Is that what you want next? Want me to fuck you, pretty girl?”

There’s a noise from behind me, and I jerk in surprise before craning my neck to look back.

The kitchen is open to the living room, and with me sitting on the island like this, my back is to the armchair.

The same chair that Vic has been sitting in this whole time.

Somehow, I got so caught up in everything that I forgot he was there.

He was busy on his laptop when I came out of the bedroom, but he’s looking away from it now, the light from the

screen illuminating his face as he stares at me and Ransom.

My cheeks burn, and I turn back to Ransom, my pulse pounding as I whisper, “Vic can see us.”

Ransom’s gaze slides over my shoulder to his brother, but he doesn’t stop. He drops a kiss to the spot where my shoulder meets my neck and slides his hands under my shirt again, rolling one nipple between his fingers slowly, methodically.

I choke back a moan, and I can’t keep from squirming against him, caught up in how good it feels.

“Let him watch,” Ransom murmurs. “You know Vic doesn’t always like to be touched, but that doesn’t mean he doesn’t want you.”

My stomach flips, goosebumps breaking out over my skin. In the time since I met the Voronin brothers, there have definitely been some interactions where Vic has seemed like he’s attracted to me, but he’s always so hard to read. It’s easy to second guess myself when it comes to him.

But Ransom knows him well, and he says that Victor wants me.

He wants to watch.

The thought of it makes wetness gush from me, soaking my panties even more as my inner walls clench around nothing. The dirty, depraved side of me wins out, and I drag Ransom in again, kissing him even more hungrily than before.

Putting on a show for Vic.

Ransom laughs against my lips as if he knows exactly what I’m doing. He nips lightly at the bottom one, soothing the sting away, and then pulls my shirt up.

It takes a bit of maneuvering to get it up and over my head so he can toss it to the side, and then he makes quick work of his own, revealing his bare chest and torso.

My jaw falls open, my chest heaving as I stare at him. This isn’t the first time I’ve seen him shirtless, but it’s been long enough that the sight of it hits me like a physical force. He’s so fucking gorgeous. They all are, in their own unique ways, but

Ransom has always been the most conventionally attractive. Vic and Malice both have a sort of harsh, terrifying beauty, their entire personas designed to keep people out, but Ransom makes you want to come closer.

He smirks at me, desire and amusement flashing in his eyes. “You keep looking at me like that, pretty girl, and you won’t be able to walk tomorrow.”

I whimper, reaching out to touch him, indulging in all the muscled hardness of his torso and arms as he keeps undressing me. He taps my thighs, and I lift my hips for him so he can pull my shorts and underwear down and toss them away too.

That leaves me naked in my kitchen, which is oddly something I’ve never done before. Not in this new apartment, anyway.

The top of the island is cool under my skin, and Ransom steps back for half a second, letting his eyes devour me.

“Fucking beautiful,” he murmurs.

Then he’s on me again, kissing my shoulders, my collarbones, my neck. His hands roam up my thighs, spreading them wider before sliding up over my hips and to my chest again. He dips his head and takes one nipple into his mouth, and I gasp at the sensation, arching my back to offer more of my chest to him.

It feels amazing, heat growing inside me like a wildfire raging out of control. My body doesn’t seem to care that I’ve already come twice tonight, and that that’s more than I usually get. I feel insatiable—*starving*, even—for everything Ransom can give me.

“Please,” I groan, dragging the nails of one hand down Ransom’s back as he switches to licking and sucking at my other nipple. “Oh fuck, please. I want you. I want more.”

He bites down on the little bud, and I arch forward with a sharp cry.

“Anything you want,” he promises when he lifts his head. “How the fuck could I ever deny you?”

He smooths his hands over my sides again, tipping my upper body back to rest on the island.

In this position, if I twist my neck a little, I can see Victor where he sits, his gaze still locked on us. His blue eyes are so intent, and it goes straight to my pussy to realize that he's watching with the same intensity and focus that he gives to his screens when he's in work mode. As if there's nothing that could break his focus and nothing more important than what's in front of him.

It makes my heart pound faster, and I can't look away for a second, watching him watch us.

But then Ransom steps away from me, leaving me sprawled out on the kitchen counter alone.

“What... what are you...?”

The fridge door opens and closes as I'm trying to form words, and when I lift my head to look at him, he's holding a jar of cherries and wearing a wicked grin.

“What do you get when you mix two delicious things together?” he asks, arching his pierced brow.

My mouth is too dry to even try to formulate an answer, and luckily, it seems like Ransom doesn't need one. He just opens the jar and steps forward until he's standing right between my spread legs again.

The first dribble of the thick juice is cold on my heated skin, and the temperature difference makes my nipples go even harder than they already were.

Ransom drizzles the sweet cherry juice over my breasts, letting it drip down to my stomach, and he follows the path with his mouth, licking and sucking up every last drop.

He groans against my skin. “Delicious. I could feast on you for hours. I want to lick every goddamned inch of your body.”

I shiver as he dives back in, pouring more juice and cleaning it up.

His tongue is hot and wet, and each pass of it goes straight to my pussy, making it ache and throb with need. He's not even licking anywhere near the spot between my legs yet, but it's like there's a phantom sensation that makes my clit pulse with every swipe of his tongue against my sensitive skin.

"So greedy already," he murmurs, his lips moving against my skin. "And I haven't even gotten to the main course yet."

I arch against him, and he straightens and plucks a cherry from the jar, holding it up by the stem. At first, I think he's going to eat it, but then he trails it over my body instead. He drags it down over my collarbones and over the mound of one of my breasts, before sliding it even lower.

It circles my navel, and I hiss out a breath when I realize where he's headed with it.

My legs spread instinctively, and soon enough, the cool, smooth skin of the fruit is gliding over my clit.

The sensation of it is enough to make me pant with need, and I squirm on the island, needing more.

Ransom drags that cherry down farther and lets the rounded edge of it press into my entrance just a little bit. Just enough that I can feel it. I gasp at that, arching harder, so fucking needy for everything he's doing.

He growls low in his throat and then pulls the cherry out, dipping his head to lap up the wetness between my legs. I can feel the ball of his piercing against my skin, and I shiver.

"Oh my god," I groan, my head falling back. "Oh my *god*."

"You know," Ransom muses, his voice a little hoarse. "I've never been jealous of a cherry before."

Before I can say anything in response, he drags the cherry up along my sopping wet entrance to my clit, teasing it in soft circles.

I whimper, because he's driving me crazy. My whole body is on fire. Ransom's slow, deliberate teasing is working me to

a point of desperation I've never felt before, and I'm only seconds away from begging him to fuck me.

He meets my gaze and smirks at me, like he knows the exact track my thoughts have taken. Then he lifts the cherry from between my legs and dangles it over my mouth, letting it brush my lips in a feather light touch.

"Taste," he instructs, and I lean up to obey.

I bite the cherry off the stem, and the flavor explodes in my mouth—the sweet, tart taste of the fruit itself, mixed with the distinctive tang of my own arousal.

Ransom runs his tongue piercing between his teeth, a lock of his brown hair falling over his forehead as he looks down at me. "So, which is sweeter? Your cream or the cherry?"

I swallow hard, but I don't have an answer for that. Even if I wanted to think about it, my head is too full of the need to feel him to hold any other thoughts.

My hips buck up, almost on their own, and I sound desperate to my own ears as I blurt out, "Please! *More.*"

I really am desperate, so I guess it makes sense for me to sound like it. My body aches, the need throbbing almost painfully, deep and impossible to ignore. I want him so much, and I'm past the point of worrying whether this is smart or not. At this point, I don't even care.

Something in Ransom's expression shifts, as if he's pushed himself past the point of holding back. He shoves his pants down, and his cock springs free like it's been contained for too long. It's thick and hard, flushed at the head and wet at the tip. The line of piercings along the underside glint in the soft light, and my stomach clenches tightly.

He's big. Not quite as big as Malice, but still thick and long, and with the piercings adding to it all, I remember how much my body had to stretch to accommodate him.

I want that again.

I want that stretch.

That pinch of pain.

That rush of pleasure.

He fists himself at the base, adjusting his position between my legs and lining his shaft up with my pussy. The thick head presses against my entrance, and then he starts sliding inside, filling me up.

“Fuck, you’re tight,” he chokes out.

“You’re *big*,” I shoot back, trying not to hold my breath as my body reacts to the intrusion.

Even though he’s fucked me before, more than once, it’s been long enough that I feel as tight as I did the first time. I’m so wet that it doesn’t take much for him to be fully seated inside me, but he does have to work at it a bit, going slow and taking his time.

The stretch burns, but in a way that just enhances the whole thing, the slight pain mingling with the overwhelming pleasure. All I can do is gasp at the sensation of his piercings rubbing against my sensitive walls as he works his way in, making me squirm and arch against him.

“There you go,” he murmurs roughly. “Just like that.”

When he’s finally all the way inside me, he doesn’t waste any time. He draws back, making sure I feel all of him, and then slams back in, setting a pace that already has me seeing stars. I think both of us have been waiting for this more than we were willing to admit, and it’s clear that Ransom doesn’t intend to wait any longer.

“Goddamn, that’s perfect,” he pants. His fingers grip my hips, pressing in hard enough that I wonder if he’s going to leave bruises behind. “You feel so fucking good, angel. I want to be buried balls deep in you all the fucking time.”

All I can do is whimper and nod, because right now, all I want is his cock. I want it deeper, harder, faster, filling me up and making me forget everything else.

“Vic is still watching, you know,” Ransom breathes, dragging my attention back to the present moment. He pulls out until just the tip of his thick length is still in me and then pushes back in, taking my breath away when he bottoms out,

hitting a spot that makes me nearly scream. “He hasn’t looked away. I bet he can’t. He’s so caught up in the sight of you. You look like a fucking goddess right now, impaled on my cock.”

“Ransom...” I groan, and I don’t know if it’s to tell him to stop or tell him to keep going or what. I guess it doesn’t really matter.

“That’s it,” he pants, and the sound of our skin slapping together rings out in the kitchen. “You’re taking me so fucking well. Touch yourself. Let Vic see how you like it.”

I swallow hard, but my hand is already moving, sliding down over my chest and stomach to the place where I’m currently burning up.

I can just imagine the sight I make right now, sprawled over the counter while Ransom fucks me, my hand delving between my legs to add to the sensations.

I can feel the place where Ransom and I are joined, and every time he pushes back into me, it sends a jolt of pleasure up through my body. I bring my fingers into the mix, touching myself the way I like, swirling around my clit with my fingers before rubbing it in slow circles that don’t stay slow for long.

It drives my pleasure higher and higher, and every breath I take comes out on a moan. I feel half delirious with it, like my head is spinning and I’m burning up, every part of my body focused down to a point, the tension growing and growing. My fingers fly over my clit, the slick wet sounds adding to the noise of us fucking, and for a second, I feel like I can hear Vic’s labored breathing over the sounds of everything else.

The proof that he’s affected by this.

But my orgasm seizes me before I can listen harder, and I’m shaking and nearly sobbing with the pleasure of it. It rocks me hard and fast, stealing my breath and making my vision blank out for a moment as Ransom keeps fucking into me.

I twist my neck as I ride out the waves of my orgasm, just in time to see Vic stand up. It almost seems like he’s going to come over, and I reach one hand out for him, trying to beckon him closer.

He stays where he is though, not moving any nearer. Just standing there in the middle of the living room, watching.

Ransom drives into me harder, faster, stealing my focus as he fucks me with an almost punishing pace.

It's enough to surprise another orgasm out of me, and I slap a hand over my mouth in time to keep from screaming as my oversensitive body is wracked with wave after wave of overwhelming pleasure.

My pussy goes tight around the thick weight of Ransom's cock, and he curses breathlessly before following me right over the edge, coming hard.

"Gonna fill you up. Fuck... fuck!"

I can feel it as he empties himself into me, heat spreading through me and making me shiver. He pumps in and out a few times, growling out unintelligible curses. Then he finally goes still, hands gripping my hips as his chest heaves.

I couldn't move if I wanted to, so spent from coming so much and so hard. My head is still spinning, and it takes what feels like a long time for my breathing to return to normal and my limbs to stop trembling.

Ransom seems just as spent as I am. He drapes his body over mine, the sweat on our skin mingling as he leans down to kiss me lazily.

There's not the same level of heat in it as before, just a kiss for the sake of kissing, but it feels good after the intensity of what we just did.

Neither of us seems to be in a hurry to put ourselves back together, but I can feel Ransom's softened cock slip out of me after a few moments, and finally we separate with one last kiss.

"See? What did I tell you back at the museum? You're perfect," Ransom says with a lopsided, charming smile.

My cheeks flush at the compliment, and I roll my eyes at him. "Sweet talker."

He shrugs. "*Truth* talker."

He fetches my clothes from where he tossed them on the floor, then grabs a few paper towels and wets them with warm water before cleaning up the mess between my legs. After pulling my clothes back on, I slide down from the island. My legs are still wobbly, and Ransom loops an arm around my waist so I don't fall on my face.

"You good?" he asks, ducking his head to look at me.

"Yeah." I nod, flushing a little.

Once I have my feet under me, I turn to look at Victor—but he's already back in his seat, gaze focused on his computer, almost like nothing happened.

Ransom touches my face, drawing my attention back to him. With his arm still wrapped around me, he kisses me tenderly, caressing my mouth with his own.

"You should get some rest," he murmurs when we break apart.

Before I can protest, he picks me up and carries me down the hall, quietly opening the door to my bedroom. Malice is still asleep, and Ransom sets me on the bed next to him.

I don't even question how he knew I'd want to sleep beside his brother, but I'm grateful as hell that he did know and that he brought me in here.

I'm still worried about Malice after everything. I want to make sure that someone stays with him all night in case he needs anything.

"Thank you," I whisper.

"Of course, angel." Ransom smiles. "Thank *you* for opening the door when we came knocking tonight. You didn't have to do that, but it means a hell of a lot that you did."

He kisses me one more time before slipping out of the room, easing the door closed behind him.

Now that I'm lying down in a dark room on a soft bed, it hits me just how tired I really am. Being at the museum wing opening was already exhausting enough, between having to navigate talking to people, dealing with the Voronin brothers,

and handling Misty's unexpected appearance. Then it turned into an even longer night, and all of that is taking its toll on me, leaving me exhausted.

Malice doesn't seem to have been woken up by the sounds of Ransom and me having sex in the kitchen. He's still out cold, his soft breathing rhythmic and soothing, and I start to doze off quickly, curled up on my side, facing him.

Before I'm all the way asleep, my phone buzzes in my pocket. I pull it out to see a text, blinking at it blearily.

It's from Vic, and it's just two words.

VICTOR: You're beautiful.

MALICE

IT TAKES a second when I wake up in the morning to remember where the fuck I am. I know it's not my room, and a spike of adrenaline shoots through me before the shit that went down last night comes flooding back through my mind.

I feel like shit, my side aching where I got hurt. I'm alone in the bed—Willow's bed—and it's already late in the morning, judging from the way the sunlight looks as it slants through the blinds into the room.

My mouth tastes like ass from slugging down whiskey before I fell asleep, and even though I'm not really hungover, my head is throbbing and my wound aches.

Now that I'm not as out of it as I was last night, I can think more clearly about what happened. In the harsh light of day, everything that went down last night seems even worse. Shit is fucked with X, and that's very fucking bad.

I swing my legs over the side of the bed, not even bothering to try to put my bloody and ripped up shirt back on.

Leaving Willow's room, I can hear the others in the kitchen, so I follow the sounds to find them.

Willow is sitting on the island in the center of the kitchen, and Ransom is leaning against the counter. Vic's at the table, eyes on his phone, but I know he's listening to everything that's going on.

“So let me get this straight,” Ransom says, cocking his head to one side, his eyes bright. “You'll spring for the name brand snacks, but not name brand orange juice?”

“The store brand stuff is just as good!” Willow insists. She doesn’t even sound annoyed with him. Her eyes are just as bright, and there’s a smile tugging at her lips.

“And you don’t even get the kind with pulp!” Ransom continues, swishing the bottle of juice in his hand. “You’re just drinking... off brand orange water now. This is a tragedy.”

She giggles at his melodramatic expression, and the sound of it makes something twist in my chest.

When Willow walked out on us, she was treating us all the same. Keeping us all at a distance. But something has clearly shifted between her and Ransom in the last couple of weeks. It’s the same thing that happened when she was staying with us. There’s just something there. This easy lightness that they have that I feel like I’ll never have with her. Willow isn’t as on edge around him. She leans toward him, lets him in. She seems to trust him. To *like* him.

I clench my jaw, shoving those feelings down before they can twist my heart even more.

Vic looks up from his phone, his gaze landing on me, and I wonder if he can see it on my face. If he can, he doesn’t say anything about it. Instead he just says my name, matter of fact as always.

“Malice. You’re up.”

That gets Ransom’s and Willow’s attention, and they both turn to look at me. Willow slips off the counter and comes over, her eyes raking over my body.

“How are you feeling?” she asks.

“Fine,” I grunt out. It’s a defense mechanism, I guess, closing her out the way she seems to have closed me out. I feel like shit, and I don’t want to deal with this right now.

I look past Willow to Vic and Ransom. “We need to go. You should have woken me up earlier so we could get out of here.”

“It’s fine,” Ransom says, the same way he did last night. “It’s better for you to get enough rest so you can start your

healing off right. Plus, Willow was nice enough to let us stay. Can't shrug off that kind of hospitality."

I roll my eyes at that, but he has a point. Willow could have told us to get fucked when we showed up last night, me covered in blood and invading her space. But she didn't.

"Thanks," I tell her, nodding. "For letting us in."

"Sure." She nods, something I can't read passing through her expression.

I jerk my head at the others. "Let's go."

Without waiting to see if they're going to follow me, I turn and start heading for the front door.

Willow pads quietly after me, and my brothers fall in behind her.

"What will you do now?" she asks.

I shrug a shoulder, hiding my wince as the movement tugs at my stitches. "What we always do. Figure it out."

She sucks in a breath and furrows her brow, and I know she's annoyed by that non-answer. But she'll have to fucking live with it. I'm not giving her anything else.

"Don't worry," I add bluntly. "We'll be out of your hair now."

She starts to say something, then snaps her mouth shut. Her eyes, so warm when she was looking at Ransom earlier, glint with something harder when she looks at me. I turn away, pressing my lips together as I yank her apartment door open.

The three of us head out into the hallway, and Victor glances back over his shoulder once before closing the door behind us.

"Oh shit. Here," Ransom says, stopping in his tracks. He takes off his jacket and dress shirt and passes the white shirt over to me before buttoning up his jacket over his undershirt. "So you don't look like some kind of jacked up stripper when we get a car."

Snorting under my breath, I put the shirt on, and we head downstairs and walk several blocks away from Willow's place before calling a cab to take us to our warehouse.

The whole ride back, I feel on edge. Victor has his computer out again, probably wiping any additional security footage from around Willow's place that caught us this morning. Wearing Ransom's shirt feels weird, like a skin that doesn't fit right, and the driver keeps glancing at us in the rearview mirror, like he's expecting some trouble or something.

I clench my hands into fists, letting my nails bite into my palms, trying to breathe through the waves of irritation that keep surging under my skin.

Finally, we get back to our place and go inside. Once the door is closed behind us, I feel like I can breathe a little easier, but then Ransom has to go and open his damn mouth again.

"We didn't have to rush out of Willow's place, you know. We could have hung around a little longer."

It feels like my skin is prickling, and I let out a slow breath through my nose. "She didn't want us there," I say, and it comes out sounding bitter as fuck. "Or at least, she didn't want me there. She's made that perfectly fucking clear multiple times. She doesn't want shit to do with me anymore."

Ransom chuckles, shaking his head. "Yeah, that's definitely why she spent the whole night sleeping by your side. Because she didn't want you there."

That makes me pause. Fuck, I really must have been out of it, because I didn't know that. When I passed out, she was leaning against the doorway, still in the room but as far away from me as she could get, watching me with wary, closed off eyes. I didn't even realize she came back. That she slept beside me.

Something about that thought affects me, lingering in my chest, but I try to brush it off. It doesn't matter one way or another. She probably just wanted to make sure I didn't die in her bed or some shit.

It doesn't mean anything.

“Since we *did* leave Willow's place,” Vic puts in, setting his laptop down on the table as we enter the kitchen. “There are more important things we need to talk about. Namely, the job last night.”

That gets us back on track, and even Ransom sobers up real quick at the reminder. He shakes his head with a groan. “Yeah. What the hell happened?”

“Let's run down the timeline.” Vic says. “We planted the device on Galvin at the museum. He mingled, we... mingled. Then we followed him out and onto that empty road. At some point, something sparked in his car, and it all caught fire.”

“Yeah, then we crashed into them,” Ransom mutters. “It wasn't supposed to go down like that. We were supposed to just record him and report back.”

“Something got fucked up,” I say, pacing back and forth.

This is how we've always operated. Sometimes things go sideways, that's just the nature of the jobs that we do, but then we hash it out together. Having three of us makes it easier to turn over each piece of information we have, coming at it from different angles until we can piece together the whole puzzle.

And this is one hell of a goddamned puzzle.

“The question,” Vic murmurs thoughtfully, “is whether this is what X meant to happen, or if there was some kind of malfunction. Or if someone *else* was targeting Galvin at the same time we were. Maybe someone else took him out while we were tailing him.”

“It's possible, I guess.” Ransom frowns, tugging at his bottom lip. “He was pretty wealthy and connected, which means he could've had enemies. Other people could have been waiting for him to come out into the open to get him, the same as we were. But it just seems too...”

“Neat?” Vic asks. He taps his fingers against the table and nods. “That's what I'm thinking.”

“Let’s say X wanted Galvin dead,” I throw out, pressing a hand to my side as my stitches ache. “Why wouldn’t he just tell us that? It’s not like we could say no to the job either way. And it’s not like we haven’t killed people before—something X is well aware of.”

“Maybe he didn’t want it traced back to him?” Ransom suggests.

Vic shakes his head. “That doesn’t make sense, though. We would know that it was X who wanted Galvin dead because he’s the one who gave us the job. Either way, we’re the ones who carried it out. I think we have to go with the most obvious answer here. The recording device we planted on Galvin was more than just for recording. It was also some kind of small explosive.”

Ransom and I share a look, and the atmosphere in the kitchen grows heavier. Vic has to be right. Any other answer is just too coincidental to make sense.

“Fuck,” I say, scrubbing a hand over my face. “Okay, so X wanted Galvin dead, but there would have been neater ways to do that. Ways that didn’t fucking involve us plowing into his car like that.”

“Unless...” Ransom grimaces, glancing between us. “Unless that was a part of the plan all along.”

“What?”

“Think about it. All we knew from X was that we had to put the device on Galvin and then stick close so we could record what he said. The device was rigged to explode, and X knew that we’d be in range of that explosion.”

Vic nods along with that, his eyes narrowing as he thinks. “The crash would kill Galvin, but it would also take us out as well. We did just barely avoid crashing worse than we did, and if things had gone just a bit worse, or we’d been driving faster, or our car had caught fire to begin with...”

He trails off, but neither of us need him to finish that sentence to know what he means. We wouldn’t have walked away from it.

Ransom makes a face. “Well, I guess it’s safe to say that X is more pissed off than we thought about us not delivering Willow to him as a virgin. Now he’s just fucking with us. Getting us to do jobs that are either designed to kill us or to be so dangerous that we’ll be lucky to get out alive.”

We all take a minute to process that, caught in the seriousness of this shit. It’s not like we can tell X to go fuck himself. Not when he has this kind of leverage over us. We have to keep doing his goddamned jobs, even if it means he gets to keep taking shots at us to try to take us out because he’s pissed.

Fuck.

A pinging noise cuts through the silence of the kitchen, and Vic pulls out his phone and checks it.

“We’ve got a message,” he says, giving us a significant look.

“Great. Can’t wait to see who that’s from,” Ransom mutters wryly, and we head upstairs so we can pull it up on Vic’s main computer.

Tension coils in my muscles all over again as we wait for Vic to decrypt the message. I hate this shit. Feeling helpless. Feeling like I’m at the whims of someone else—especially a mysterious psycho like X who holds my fucking life in his hands.

Of course that’s exactly who the message is from, and once it’s fully decrypted, we lean in to read it on Vic’s screen. X gets right to the point, telling us that we did good work on the job last night and arranging a drop for the file we recorded from the listening device before the crash.

At the end of the message, there’s a final sentence telling us he has another job ready for us.

“What the fuck?” I snap, hot fury rising inside me. I curl my hands into tight fists, my knuckles aching from the strain. Usually, X gives us jobs every few months, not every few days. Not one right after the other like this.

Ransom scowls. “Yeah, this is bad. He’s basically fucking with us now, and if we keep doing jobs for him, we’re going to end up dead sooner or later.”

Vic nods, looking a little distant, like he’s calculating something in his head. “He plans to run us down,” he says quietly. “To tire us out or keep throwing us at shit until we fuck up somewhere along the way. He’ll use us until one of his jobs gets us killed. It’s a win-win for him, but we lose no matter what. This needs to end.”

His eyes slide to me as he finishes speaking, and I clench my jaw.

My twin is right, but I don’t know how the hell we’re going to do that. We’ve tried to figure out X’s identity before and failed. He has everything over us, and we don’t even know who the fuck he is.

I give Vic a look that conveys all of that, heaving a sigh. “How the fuck are we going to end it? We don’t know shit about him. We don’t know how he gets his information or even how he’s keeping tabs on us.”

“I don’t know,” Vic murmurs, his expression tight.

That’s a big admission for him. Usually, he at least has some kind of a plan for this type of shit. But X has evaded Vic’s best hacking work from the first time he contacted us, so it makes sense.

“We’ll figure out a way, though,” Ransom says, sounding a bit more optimistic. Or maybe it’s just determination I’m picking up in his voice. “We’ll find out who he is and take him out so he can’t keep forcing us into this shit. So he can’t keep manipulating and fucking with us.”

I take a deep breath and let it out in a long rush before nodding. “Yeah, okay. We’ll try.”

We all share a grim look.

It’s pretty damned easy to see what the stakes are here. We have to get X off our backs if we’re ever going to be free of his bullshit.

But it feels like a long shot, and that worries me.

Despite the fact that we don't know his identity, it's clear that X has power and resources, and enough favors to pull in that he was able to get me out of prison years before my sentence should've ended. And he could send me back just as easily. He could have me thrown back behind bars and then fuck up the lives of my brothers, and I wouldn't be able to do shit about it.

On top of that, Willow is involved now too, and I can't help but worry about her.

Maybe I should never have told her X exists.

I couldn't stand her hating us, couldn't stomach the idea that she thought we saw her as trash. But maybe telling her the truth was a mistake, an ultimately selfish action that will ruin more than it fixed.

It was different when she was here, living under our roof, and we could keep an eye on her and make sure she was safe. But now she's out there living her own life, doing her own shit, and we can't protect her the same way.

I fucking hate that.

WILLOW

WITH THE VORONIN BROTHERS GONE, my apartment seems too quiet. Luckily, it's the weekend, so I don't have to think about classes for the moment, but it leaves me with way too much time on my hands to think about other things.

I spend the entire day trying to stay busy, taking care of a bit of homework and then finding other projects around the apartment. I take my time cleaning the entire place, loading up the dishwasher with some dirty dishes and then wiping down the island.

I can't help but blush when I think about what Ransom and I did on top of it. I clean away a bit of spilled cherry juice, sticky from sitting out all night, and fight the urge to lick my lips, remembering the taste of it in my mouth.

I move from the kitchen to my bedroom, stripping off the sheets, which are stained with Malice's blood, and taking them into the small closet where my washer and dryer are.

It's nice to not have to haul everything to the shitty laundromat I was using before, where I'd have to sit all day, guarding my shit in case someone decided to steal it or try to stop my machine mid-cycle and take that for themselves.

It's much less stressful to load everything up and have the pleasant hum of the washer doing its thing in the background as I keep straightening everything up, pulling out fresh sheets to put on the bed and marveling at having more than one set.

Olivia insisted on that when she helped me buy furniture and household supplies for my new place. I don't think she

was thinking about this kind of situation when she suggested having two sets of bedding, but it definitely is coming in handy now.

My phone is on the kitchen island, and when it rings, I jump a little, startled out of my thoughts.

I half expect it to be one of the guys, and I feel a little shiver of anxiety, wondering if something else has gone wrong.

But when I check the screen, it's Misty's name that pops up.

I swallow hard, my finger hovering over the screen, caught between answering and hanging up on her. In the end, I give in, sliding the little bar to the right to accept the call.

"Hi, Mom."

"Willow, baby," she says immediately, and I can tell she's at least sober right now. That's something.

"What's up?" I ask, hoping she'll get to the point quickly.

"I'm so sorry. I'm *so* sorry, honey."

The words spill out of her just as easily as the screaming and insults did last night. I sigh internally and head back to my room to finish making my bed with the fresh sheets.

"I should never have come to that museum event last night," she goes on. "I made a whole scene, and I didn't mean to do that. I didn't mean to ruin your night."

I let my eyes fall closed for a moment, pausing as I tuck the sheet in at the base of the mattress. This is the routine as usual with her. She does something terrible and then flips to the other side of the coin, begging for forgiveness and piling on the love and affection. I'm always caught in the middle of it, torn between saying enough is enough and cutting her off already and wanting to give her another chance.

"Mom, you can't keep doing stuff like this," I tell her, and I can hear the tiredness in my tone. "What if they had wanted to press charges for trespassing or something?"

“I know.” She sighs. “I know I shouldn’t have done it. But... I was just scared.”

That makes me frown as I pull a pillow into its pillowcase. “Scared of what?”

“Of losing you, baby,” she says plaintively. “You have all this fancy new shit, this fancy new life. I was scared you would leave me behind and forget all about me. Get all hoity toity and forget where you came from.”

“Mom—”

“I just wanna still be a part of your life, Willow,” she continues, cutting me off. “I don’t wanna be replaced now that you’ve got blood relatives.”

I swallow hard, not even sure what to say to that. I think back to what Ransom said last night. Would Misty actually treat me well if our roles were reversed? I’m not even sure, and it makes my stomach knot.

“That’s not what I’m trying to do,” I tell her, and that is true. “I’m just... I’m trying to get somewhere in life, you know.”

Misty hums. “I know. I know, baby. And I don’t wanna hold you back. You know that, right? I’m not trying to fuck this up for you. I promise not to wreck any more events. I’m gonna do my best to come up too. Okay? To get better.”

“What do you mean?”

“I’m trying to get clean. Starting today, I’m gonna stop using. I’m gonna try to stop hooking too, get a different job. A real one with some security and everything.”

“That would be nice,” I murmur. “I think it would be good for you.”

It’s funny, because I can’t even imagine Misty doing anything else. Not because I don’t think she can, but because she’s never had any other job as long as I’ve been her daughter. It’s just been the drugs and the hooking and the constant stream of shitty men in and out of her house.

If she could turn over a new leaf and get her life together, that would be great.

“I’m gonna do it,” Misty says firmly. “I’m gonna be worthy of you, Willow, so I can fit into your new life.”

It’s on the tip of my tongue to tell her that she says shit like this all the time. That she always promises to be better, to not steal from me anymore or not let fucking drug dealers come into the house. It lasts for all of a month, sometimes less, before fizzling out. Then she’s right back to her old habits.

She sounds more sincere this time, I can give her that, but I don’t want to get my hopes up.

“I hope it works out,” I tell her. “I hope... I hope it works out.”

That’s pretty much all I can think to say, but it seems to be good enough for her. I can practically hear her beaming over the phone, the smile clear in her voice.

“You’ll see,” she says. “Next time you have some fancy shit to go to, you’re gonna be *begging* to take me with you. That’s how put together I’m gonna be.”

I don’t see a world where that would ever happen, but I don’t want to burst her bubble. I remember a guidance counselor I had in high school saying something once about how you can’t change people—they have to want to change themselves. So if she really wants to change her life this time, maybe she’ll actually do it.

“Well, I gotta go,” Misty says, still sounding upbeat. “I’ll talk to you again soon. Keep in touch, alright? I’ve barely seen you lately.”

“Bye, Mom.”

The line goes dead, and I toss the phone down onto the neatly made bed and blow out a breath.

Talking to my adoptive mother is always kind of an ordeal. Between never knowing what kind of mood she’s going to be in and having to take care of her all the time, it can be exhausting.

I shake my head, chewing on my lip as my thoughts run around in circles. Then I pick the phone up again, sitting down on the bed so I can send a quick text to Vic.

ME: *Hey. How's Malice doing?*

His reply is prompt as always, and it's amusing to wonder if he ever doesn't have his phone in his hand or close by.

VICTOR: *He's grumpy.*

VICTOR: *Which I take to mean he's recovering okay.*

That second message surprises a laugh out of me, and it's a good point. A grumpy Malice is a Malice who can't be feeling all that bad, all things considered.

ME: *You just made a joke.*

I hit send on the text message, grinning at my phone.

VICTOR: *No, that can't be right.*

VICTOR: *I don't joke.*

I shake my head, still smiling.

ME: *You obviously do because that's what you just did.*

I like this side of Vic a lot. I like how he's more open with me over text. As if he's controlling fewer of his reactions and letting me see a part of him that's more playful and fun than the usual cool exterior. It's less intimidating to talk to him when I don't have to try to figure out his reactions from his lack of facial expressions.

I scroll up a little in our text thread, my gaze tracking over the message he sent last night. Just those two words, standing out so prominently. *You're beautiful.*

My tongue darts out to wet my lips as I hesitate, my thumbs hovering over my phone's screen. It would be easier not to push, not to bring it up. The original reason I texted was to ask about Malice, and I've gotten my answer, so that should be the end of it.

But something makes me want to keep going. To follow this little connection between me and Vic and see where it

leads. So I scroll back down to send another message.

ME: *Did you like watching us last night?*

My heart pounds, the sound filling my head in the space of the few seconds it takes Vic to text me back.

VICTOR: *Yes.*

One word, just like that.

My stomach flutters at his admission, and I debate in my head for a second, chewing on my bottom lip. I could end it there, say I got the answer I wanted and move on. But again, I want more. I want...

I don't even know how to put it into words, but there's something I want to share with Vic, and I let my instincts take over.

Rising from the bed, I go over to the drawer where I stashed the cameras I took down before. Carefully, I put them back up in my bedroom, making sure they have good angles to see the bed. Then I turn them on.

I don't tell Victor I'm doing it, but there must be some kind of reconnection to his computer system when they power on, and he must be in front of his screens like usual, because it's only a couple of seconds later when my phone buzzes again.

VICTOR: *What are you doing?*

I sit back on the bed, looking right at one of the cameras. I bite my lip and start to text back, but then stop. Instead, I speak out loud into the empty room.

"Can you hear me?" I'm going to feel kind of stupid if he can't.

But the text comes back immediately.

VICTOR: *Yes.*

My heart thumps harder in my chest, and I lick my lips, my mouth suddenly dry.

“You’ve watched me with your brothers twice now,” I tell him, switching my gaze from one camera to another. “This time... I want the show to be just for you.”

My phone buzzes in my hand.

VICTOR: *You don’t have to.*

“I know.” I nod, taking a deep breath. “But I want to.”

When no text response comes through immediately, I scoot back on the bed, propping the pillows up behind me. My heart is racing now, adrenaline spiking in my veins, but I don’t feel that sick, nervous feeling. Instead, I feel reckless and a little wild, running off instinct and blind courage.

This isn’t like me—not like the girl I’m trying to become, at least. But the ‘me’ of right now wants this.

Whatever connection I have with Vic, it’s different from how it is with the others. All the same, I’m drawn to him. I feel close to him, closer now than ever before, with the way we’ve been texting. Like taking out the need to speak out loud or look at each other face to face has let us be more honest and open than we were before.

So I keep gazing at the camera, biting my bottom lip as I spread my legs a little.

I know he’s watching me, but maybe it’s easier that I can’t feel the heaviness of his gaze. I can just imagine it in my head, the way his eyes would linger, the way his face would be mostly impassive, almost impossible to read.

“You’ve seen so much of me,” I whisper. “I know you watched when Malice ate me out in my old apartment. I know you watched me touch myself. You watched Malice and Ransom... f-fuck me in your living room, and you watched me and Ransom last night.”

My cheeks flush darker with each memory I bring up, and I stumble over some of the words. It’s like when Ransom wanted me to tell them about my dream that time. The words don’t come naturally to me. I’m not experienced with dirty talk or trying to seem sexy.

But at the same time, with Victor, it's a little easier. I know I have to be the one to take the lead here, so it gives me a small boost of bravery.

My hand slides over my body while I talk to him, tracing a long line down my front and over my thigh before heading back up. My breasts feel sensitive already, the fabric of my shirt rubbing against my nipples, making them go hard and tight.

I grip one of my breasts through my shirt, sucking in a soft gasp at the sensation of it. It's not quite the same as having someone else do it, but knowing Vic is watching makes it feel more intense than usual.

I brush my thumb over my nipple, pressing a bit into the stiff peak of it. Heat curls through me, pooling in my stomach, and my hips buck forward a little, all on their own.

My pussy is starting to get wet, my clit tingling with the first signs of my arousal. I roll one nipple between my fingers, pinching it a little harder than I usually would and gasping when the pain sends a hot line right down to my pussy.

"Oh," I breathe out, arching my back. I do it again, harder, just for the feeling of it.

My breath comes faster as I glance at the camera, letting my other hand dip below the hem of my shirt.

"What do you want to see?" I ask Vic. "Tell me."

Again, the answer is immediate.

VICTOR: *Take off your shirt.*

I do it, dragging my shirt over my head. I've spent the day in that loose cotton shirt and a pair of comfy shorts, and I never bothered to put on a bra. So as I toss the shirt to the floor, my naked chest is bared to the camera for him to see. I arch my back a little, letting him get a good view of my breasts, and then go back to playing with them, groping at them, feeling the softness of my skin.

I run my hands along the sides of my breasts before grasping them both in my hands. I'm not super well endowed,

but they're big enough to fill my palms. I circle each nipple with a finger, starting outward and moving in, my breath coming faster and faster as I get closer to the sensitive buds of my nipples.

It feels so good, every sensation heightened by the knowledge that I have an audience. I start to lose myself in it a bit, pinching and twisting, the heat going right to my head.

My phone buzzes again, and I try to glance down at it, but I don't want to let go of my breasts to answer the message. I shift my gaze to the camera again, and my voice comes out breathless when I speak.

"I want to hear your voice, Vic," I whisper. "Not just read your texts. Will you call me?"

VICTOR

MY HEART THUNDERS as I stare at Willow on the screen in front of me. She put up three cameras in total, all pointed toward the bed, giving me different angles of the beautiful sight of her, spread out and touching herself.

For me.

I can see the line of her jaw, the curves of her breasts. The way her hands move over her own skin, stopping and starting as she's caught up in the sensations she's giving herself.

Like she said, this isn't the first time I've watched her like this, but there's something different about this time compared to the others. There was already a difference between how it felt when she knew I was watching versus when she didn't, and I decided that her knowing I could see her was better. For a number of reasons. But even before, with Malice and Ransom or just with Ransom last night, I was like a fly on the wall, watching as she was taken apart by my brothers.

There was something appealing in that, in being the observer to it all, but it's nothing compared to how this feels.

This is for me. Just me and Willow and no one else.

She's so perfect.

I watch as she glances at her phone and then back up to the camera, her brow furrowed a bit. "Are you still there?" she asks.

I can hear the need in her voice.

The light in the room gleams on her skin, making her almost seem to glow. The new sheets she put on her bed are a pale green color, and she looks so good spread out on them. More appealing than any of the art from the museum opening last night.

And... it's almost more than I can take. She's waiting for me to answer, to make a move, but I'm not sure what move to make. It's easier to just watch, to just take in what happens around me without participating.

Some part of me wants to run from this. To shut this whole thing down before it gets even more out of control. Willow shreds the carefully cultivated and meticulously maintained order that I like in my life, tearing it to ribbons with a single word, a single look.

I should hate that. I shouldn't let it keep happening, and I definitely shouldn't be wanting more of this. More of her.

But I can't leave. I can't turn the monitors off, and I can't look away.

Slowly, I pick up my phone. The screen is on the last message I sent her. My finger hovers over the option to call the contact for a long moment, and finally I let out a sharp exhale and hit 'call.'

On the computer screen, her phone lights up where it's next to her on the bed, and she answers right away.

"Hi," she breathes.

I mute the computer so that the only way I can hear her is through the phone. And fuck, that's much better. She sounds so much closer like this than speaking through the cameras' mics. I can hear every intake of breath, every harsh exhale.

"Hi," I say back.

"I thought maybe you'd left," Willow murmurs.

I shake my head, even though she can't see it. "No. I'm still here."

"I'm glad."

My gaze is glued to the screen as I hold my phone to my ear, and I watch as she hits something on her phone and then puts it back on the bed. Putting it on speaker, no doubt.

“Tell me what else you want me to do,” she says, her hands hovering over her body as if waiting for my command.

My brain feels like it’s seizing up, overloaded with possibilities. I can’t tell her that I want to see everything, because that doesn’t mean anything. But it’s hard for me to put into words what I want from her. There are so many things.

“I want...”

Something sticks in my mind, a thought from before, when I watched her through the cameras at her old apartment. That was before she moved in with us, before she knew there were cameras set up in her old place at all.

I remember watching her sleep and thinking about her scars.

I’m thinking about them now.

She hasn’t been making as much of an effort to cover them when she’s around us as she used to, but I want more than that.

“Touch your scars,” I tell her finally, managing to get the words out even though my tongue feels thick in my mouth.

Willow’s eyes fly open wide, and even at this distance, I can see the alarm and embarrassment in them. Her cheeks flush darker, and she glances away from the camera, looking down.

“Um, I... I don’t...”

My cock pulses in my pants, and I have to swallow hard before I can speak again. “Please.”

It comes out rough and quiet, edged with need. Willow glances back up, so I know she heard it.

She hesitates for another suspended moment, but then she starts to do it. Slowly at first, just letting her fingers slide from skin that’s smooth and unblemished to the mess of scars on her side.

She runs her fingertips downward, skimming over the scar tissue that covers one shoulder and then lower, over her side, down her hip.

It looks awkward at first, like she's avoiding touching them too much. Like she doesn't want to linger too long, and I wonder what it feels like. Scars that old probably don't hurt too much anymore, except maybe to ache when there's a change in temperature or something.

Is she more sensitive there than in other places? Does it feel like anything at all?

And then there's the texture of the scars themselves against her fingers, different from the smooth softness of her regular skin, but not rough either, I bet.

"That's good," I choke out, my voice strained. "Keep going."

She does, and I can see when she starts to get more into it. The touches turn softer, more like a caress than an awkward rub. She drags her fingers over the chaotic patterns of the scars, and she makes a low, soft noise as she keeps going.

My own hands start to tingle a bit, itching with the need to be touching her myself. To trace the paths that she's tracing with her own fingers, to feel this for myself.

I groan, low and deep into the phone. "Beautiful," I murmur. "Such beautiful chaos. Like a butterfly."

Willow moans in response to that, dragging her plump bottom lip between her teeth. Her breath hitches, and it takes her a few tries to get her next words out. "Is this what you like?"

"Yes," I reply instantly.

"No one has ever *liked* my scars," she whispers, sliding her fingers down along a line of scars that covers the outside of her thigh, just visible past the hem of her cotton shorts. "The best I've ever hoped for is for people to look past them."

"I don't want to look past them." I shake my head, even though she can't see it. "I like them. I like seeing you like

this.”

“I’ve never done this for anyone before,” she admits. “No one but you.”

Her words go straight to my cock, leaving it hard and throbbing. No one else has ever seen her touch herself like this before. She’s never run her hands over her scars for anyone else, and being the first, being the *only* in this case, hits me hard.

I’m so affected by everything this gorgeous, ethereal woman does, and right now, I can’t fight it even a little.

“Take your shorts off,” I tell her, and she nods, shimmying out of her shorts and panties.

My breath catches at the sight of her, fully naked and exposed for me. Just for me.

“Spread your legs.”

She does it, spreading them out on the bed, giving me an almost perfect view. *Almost* perfect.

“Wider,” I demand. “Wider than ninety degrees.”

Willow shoots an amused look at the camera at my precise directions, but she spreads her legs even farther apart, planting her heels on the bed so she can show me everything.

“Scoot down a little,” I continue, nearly biting a hole in my bottom lip as I watch her follow my instructions. “More. There. Stop there.”

Like this, she’s displayed perfectly. The light overhead shines down at the perfect angle, showing me how wet and turned on she is right now.

With the multiple cameras, I can see every part of her, and it’s hard to believe she’s fucking real. My cock throbs almost angrily, demanding some kind of relief, but I ignore it, focusing on Willow.

“Touch yourself,” I instruct her. “Start slow.”

“Okay,” she breathes back, and I hear the soft moan in her voice as she does it, sliding her hand from her hip down to her

inner thigh and then farther in.

She dips her fingers into her pussy, rubbing it slowly, letting her fingertips dance up and down the wet line of her slit, gathering her arousal.

“Wait,” I tell her. “Spread yourself open with your other hand. I want to see how wet you are.”

Her face flushes even darker, but she obeys, parting the lips of her pussy with two fingers, letting me see the glistening wetness there.

“Perfect,” I breathe out. “Fucking perfect. Slide a finger into yourself. Just one.”

She does it, and I watch her index finger sink into her hole all the way up to the knuckle. Willow moans, her hips bucking a little, obviously wanting more. But I don't let her have it. Not yet.

I tell her to add another finger and to slowly start to fuck herself with them. I watch as those digits sink in and pull out of her pussy, my hand curled into a fist on my desk.

Her breath comes faster, and just hearing it is enough to have my cock straining hard against the restriction of my pants. I feel like I could come just from stroking myself once at this point.

I'm completely on edge, desperate for relief, everything in me narrowed down to focus on this. I could slide a hand down and grip my cock through my pants, and that would probably be enough to make me explode right now.

But I can't do that. There are only certain days of the week that I let myself jerk off, and this isn't one of them.

I'm already breaking so many of my rules and going against my routines. And as much as I want this, I'm not sure what would happen if I let go of that much of my control. I'm not sure I could handle it.

So I keep my hands above my desk, one on my phone, one clenched tight into a fist.

Willow keeps working herself up, following every one of my instructions without hesitation, and when I tell her to make herself come for me, she does it beautifully, fucking herself with her fingers while keeping herself spread open so I can see every bit of it.

She comes on her own hand, gasping and crying out, my name mixed in with muted curses that pour from her lips. Her eyes are closed as her chest heaves, and she looks incredible.

“Keep going,” I say, leaning forward in my chair a bit more, as if getting closer to the screen will let me experience more of this.

“I can’t,” she whimpers, and she sounds wrecked already.

But I know she has more in her.

“Yes, you can,” I tell her. “I saw you come three times last night. I want four.”

It comes out sounding possessive, as if every last one of these orgasms will be for me and me alone. As if I want to hoard them, covet them, and stash them away with all the other things I keep wrapped up and hidden away for myself.

Whatever she hears in the tone of my voice makes her moan softly, and she nods, opening her eyes so I can see how hazy with lust and pleasure they are.

“Go on,” I urge her. “Keep going.”

Her fingers slide back into her body like they were made to fit there, and she pumps them slowly, working herself back up. She’s probably already so sensitive from coming once already, and judging from the soft gasps that spill from her lips, it’s not going to take her long to hit orgasm number two.

Her other hand keeps her pussy spread, but she switches fingers, so that her middle one can rub at her clit, starting slowly and then pressing harder and faster.

“Just like that,” I murmur. “Push yourself. I want to see it.”

Willow nods and whimpers an affirmative, and the second orgasm seems to slam into her body, making her go rigid and tense, ripping a strangled moan from her.

It's fucking gorgeous.

The third orgasm is much the same, taking her over, knocking the breath out of her as she keeps working herself through each round of pleasure.

I watch as she crests that wave over and over again, hips bucking, back arched, mouth open. She moans a litany of curses and pleas, my name dropping in among them from time to time.

She pushes past four, spilling into a fifth that leaves her trembling, her whole body wracked with the pleasure of it.

"You're so good," I rasp. "You're so perfect, butterfly. You have no idea. You—"

I break off, losing the thread of my words as the need to be there with her or to touch myself or something breaks over me, strong and intense. I hold it back, breathing harshly through my nose, and watch as Willow forces one last orgasm out of herself.

She's practically sobbing with pleasure and overstimulation by this point, and she finally collapses back on the bed, breathing hard.

I stare at her on the screen, covered in a sheen of sweat, boneless and wrung out.

I can't move. I can't even speak.

I feel like I'm on a knife's edge of control, and if I do anything sudden, I'm going to lose it.

Willow pats around for her phone and finds it in the sheets. She takes it off speaker and puts it to her ear, letting her voice flood into my ear again, closer and breathless.

"God, that was amazing," she breathes.

"Yes." My voice is like sandpaper. "It was."

"Did you touch yourself too?"

I swallow hard, my entire body still stiff and tense from the unspent arousal coursing through my veins. A small

shudder wracks through me, and my hand on the desk is clenched so tight that my bones ache.

“No.” I hesitate, then add, “But I wanted to.”

Willow looks at the camera again, and I see something glint in her eyes. I don’t have a name for what it is, but it makes my chest unclench just the smallest bit.

“Did you like it?” she whispers.

I blink and let out a rough chuckle. “Yes. That might be something of an understatement. You are...”

I shake my head because I don’t have the right words. Nothing in my life has ever prepared me for this.

For *her*.

But Willow just hums, and it seems like she doesn’t need me to have the right words. She understands me better than most, and that should be... irritating, at the very least. Maybe even terrifying.

Instead, it just feels almost comforting.

“I’m glad,” she murmurs. Then she chuckles, her voice muffled as she rolls onto her side. “And I’m sleepy.”

“It’s getting late. You should get some rest.”

“Okay.” The word comes out heavy and slurred with the sleep she’s already starting to sink into. “Goodnight, Vic.”

“Goodnight, butterfly.”

I end the call, but I don’t look away from the screen.

I watch her put her phone down and curl up right where she is. She doesn’t take the cameras down, or even get under the covers. She just drifts off to sleep, letting me see everything as she does.

WILLOW

ON MONDAY, I go back to my usual routine of waking up early for school.

My first class of the day is an easy one, and I sit in the back and take diligent notes. As I leave the building after the professor dismisses us, I'm surprised to hear someone calling my name.

I turn, and it's even more of a surprise when I see April and a couple of her friends heading toward me.

Usually, April only talks to me when she has something she wants to mock me for, or when we have to work together on a group project and she doesn't have a choice. And even then, it's not pleasant.

But now she's smiling. She leans against one of the columns in front of the building, looking casual and perky, and I have no idea what to make of it.

"Hey, we heard you were at that event at the museum over the weekend," April says, and I brace myself, waiting for her to make some cruel comment about what happened with my mom. "How was it?"

I blink, waiting for the rest. But that seems to be it.

"Oh. It was fine," I tell her. "The art looked nice, and the appetizers they had were pretty good."

She nods, flipping her hair over her shoulder. "I heard the Winstons were there. Did you meet them? They own like half the city in one way or another."

I think back, trying to remember the names of all the people my grandmother introduced me to. “I’m not sure. I think so...”

“What about the Flecks?” one of her friends asks. “I heard their youngest daughter just got a modeling contract. She’s probably going to drop out of high school and move to New York. If I had tried to do that, my parents would’ve flipped out on me.”

“Well, that’s what Darcie Kensington did,” another one chimes in. “And then she stopped modeling and married that one movie producer.” She gives a dreamy sigh, pulling a face. “God, she’s living the life. Was she at the gala? I heard she was in town.”

All three of them look at me eagerly, and it all starts to make sense. Because of who my grandmother is, I’ve been rubbing elbows with the elite echelon of the city. People that social climbers like April and her friends wish they could talk to. So they’re being polite to me because I have value in their eyes now.

I bet April would just love talking to someone like Troy. She’d probably be perfectly happy to have him openly leer at her during a conversation, just so that she could tell her friends he was into her later.

Part of me wants to tell them to go fuck themselves, but instead, I just give a tight smile.

“I met a lot of people,” I say with a shrug. “It’s hard to remember each and every one. Anyway, I’m going to be late for my next class.”

Before they can ask anything else, I step away, walking off toward the science building. The last thing I want is to get sucked into their little clique of bitches, and I’m definitely not interested in being used for my connections.

Getting the guys into the event so they could keep Malice out of prison was one thing. Helping April and her crew meet famous people so they can drool over them or whatever is something totally different.

But hearing them talk about the event makes me wonder if what happened with my mom got any press coverage.

Shit, I really hope not.

The last thing I need is for it to be splashed all over the internet that Olivia Stanton's long lost granddaughter has a drug crazed hooker for a mother. I couldn't do that to Olivia.

I really am running late for my next class, so it's not until I'm leaving campus for the day that I have a chance to pull out my phone and do a quick search for press coverage of the gala.

There's are a few short articles about it, just the usual sort of thing where they talk about the who's who of the guest list and give an overview of the new wing. Olivia is mentioned, as well as some of the other people I met that night, but there's no mention of my mother or the disturbance that happened. They don't even talk about the fact that the police were called out.

Good. That's a relief.

Was it Olivia who did this? Did she pull some strings to make sure it wasn't talked about? Or maybe the organizers just asked the press not to mention it. It wouldn't exactly be the glowing praise they probably wanted for a night they worked so hard for.

I poke around through the search results a bit more, frowning when I see a different article that mentions the gala. Except this news piece isn't about the event itself—it's about a man who died on his way home from it.

Richard Galvin, a well-known businessman in Detroit, was also a donor to the museum. Apparently, he died in a car crash not long after the event ended, on his way back to his home. The article mentions that another car was at the crash site, but it was empty, and that the police are still investigating how it all went down.

I stop walking and read the article again, more carefully this time.

The crash happened not long after I saw the Voronin brothers leaving the museum that night. And they said that

Malice got hurt in a car accident.

My heart starts to pound as the pieces come together in my head.

That's what happened the other night. They were involved in Richard Galvin's death.

Shoving my phone back in my pocket, I hurry the rest of the way to my car, then peel out of the lot and start driving toward the warehouse space the brothers live in. I don't even know what I'm doing, but I have to do *something*. I have to know what the hell is going on here.

When I reach their space, I screech to a stop and park, slamming my door walking up to the front of the warehouse.

It's a stark contrast to the way I've come here before—either timid and unsure of myself, or being brought here practically against my will. This time, I march right up to the door and start banging on it, anger and worry and hurt building up inside me in a torrent until I feel ready to explode.

Malice comes to the door a few seconds later, his face already set in an angry expression. He looks better than he did when I last saw him. Less pale, moving with more of his usual determination than the pained walk he was doing before.

But I don't care about that right now.

Before he can say anything, I push past him, taking advantage of his surprise as I storm into the warehouse without letting him stop me.

My anger fuels me, and as soon as he closes the door, I whirl to face him, glaring him down.

“What the hell, Solnyshka? What are you—” He manages to get out before I cut him off.

“Did you kill that guy after the gala?” I demand, my voice shaking. “Richard Galvin?”

There's a split second where shock sparks in Malice's eyes, just there long enough for me to see it before it's gone, leaving his expression shuttered. His jaw goes tight, and he folds his arm, closing down. “What are you talking about?”

“Don’t give me that. I just read an article about some businessman who died after the event the other night. In a car crash with an unregistered car. I *know* you all had something to do with this, so I want to know: did you kill him?”

“Not exactly,” he mutters.

Of course he doesn’t say anything more than that. Of course there’s no clarity, no further details. No information. *Nothing*. He just stands there gazing at me with a stoic expression, as if I’m the one in the wrong here.

It just makes me even more furious.

“That’s not an answer!” I shout. “I am so sick of your non-answers and your lies. The way you avoid telling me anything, avoid letting me in, but then show up whenever you need my help. That’s not fair. It’s bullshit!”

“Why does it matter?” he snarls. “It’s none of your business anyway. You’re the one who said you don’t want to be involved in our shit anymore.”

“Yeah, I did say that,” I fire back. “And then you dragged me into it anyway! Ransom shows up and tells me that you guys need my help or—” I break off, not wanting him to know that I gave in so easily over the weekend because I was worried about him going back to jail. Instead, I square my shoulders, glaring up into his eyes. “What was the job, Malice?”

He shakes his head stubbornly, crossing his thick, tattooed arms over his chest. “I’m not going to tell you that. It’s better if you don’t know.”

My eyes narrow, and I grit my teeth, biting back the urge to scream.

“Don’t you dare,” I whisper harshly. “Don’t fucking act like you’re trying to protect me right now. This isn’t about me. It’s only about me when you need my help. Every other time, you’re just thinking about yourselves.”

“You know that’s not true,” Malice bites out, his nostrils flaring. “I told you there was a reason we didn’t want you involved in this shit before.”

“Yeah.” I let out a humorless laugh. “And when you showed up at my apartment covered in blood and losing more of it by the second, you got me involved anyway. So that ship has already sailed.”

“That’s not what I—”

I cut him off before he can say anything else. “What was it?” I press, stepping in closer, lifting my chin to get right in his face.

There was a time when Malice would have shoved me back or grabbed a gun and threatened me, but now he just stands there, watching me. He doesn’t make a move to get me to stand down, and he doesn’t growl out any type of threat.

There was also a time when I would have been terrified to go toe to toe with him like this, but that time has long since passed. Danger still radiates from him like an aura, but it doesn’t scare me anymore. And I don’t plan on backing down until I get the answers I want.

I glare up at him, practically vibrating with the force of my emotions.

“Did I help you murder a man?” I demand, my heart thudding heavily. “Was that why you needed me to get you invitations to the event? Because you needed an in so you could fucking murder him?”

“We’ve never claimed to be good people, Solnyshka,” Malice grunts, and it comes out sounding almost mocking. “You know we’ve killed people before. You saw what we did to Nikolai. Hell, you watched Victor kill your boss in your own fucking apartment. So why does it matter if we did it again?”

I have to swallow back the metallic taste of bile, thinking of when Victor killed Carl right there in my living room. I haven’t thought about that in a while, and dragging up those memories now doesn’t help anything.

“Stop it,” I snap. “Stop... twisting around the fucking question and just answer me. I want to know. Ransom told me no one was going to get hurt, and I believed him. I only did it

because I didn't think I was helping someone fucking die! So tell me the goddamned truth for once!"

My voice rings out in the entryway, and Malice's eyebrows twitch, as if he's surprised by the intensity of my reaction.

He looks away, his jaw still tight, his hands curled into fists. We're just inches apart, and I can tell that he's breathing harder. Part of me worries that his wound is hurting him, but I don't let up.

"I'm not leaving until you tell me," I say, folding my arms tightly, trying to make myself look as immovable as possible. "What was the job?"

"Jesus fucking Christ. *Fine*," he mutters. When he looks back up at me, his eyes are shadowed, like he's trying to keep a handle on his feelings, to keep me from seeing them. "It wasn't supposed to go down like that, okay? We put a device on Galvin, like X told us to. It was just supposed to be a recording device, and we were supposed to follow him, to make sure the receiver stayed in range. That's all we were fucking told."

"Then what happened?" I ask. "How did he end up dead?"

"Well, it turns out the goddamned device was also some kind of explosive. It went off in his car, and he crashed. We were tailing him so close that when he flipped over, we slammed right into his car."

My eyes flicker down to his side, where I know the wound is hidden beneath his shirt.

"That's how you got hurt," I murmur.

Malice nods. "Yeah. It seems like X fucking set us up. He didn't give us the full info about the device or what it would do on purpose. Maybe because he wanted to get us killed along with Galvin."

I stare at him as he finishes talking, reeling in shock.

I know that this mysterious man X has some control over the brothers, because he's the one who got Malice out of

prison and can send him back if they don't do what he says, but this is...

Why would he also want them dead?

For a dizzying moment, fear rises up in me, mingling with the anger that's slowly draining out and making me feel sick. It's fear for Malice and his brothers, sharp and intense. Because this is a lot. Someone wants them dead, and as I grapple with that realization, I feel like I'm in over my head in a way I haven't since I first came to live with them all those weeks ago.

X is clearly a powerful man, with connections and resources. He holds power over the brothers, and he wants them dead, which means they're in danger in a big way.

And they didn't tell me.

Because of course they didn't.

They never tell me *anything* until it's too late.

They never clue me in on what's going on. All they do is show up when they need my help or make decisions behind my back, cutting me out and leaving me in the dark.

The terrifying truth is, I'm getting attached to these men. They're under my skin, just like Malice said, and I'm so terrified that I'll fall for them completely, only to see them die. I'm terrified that they're the wrong people to fall for.

They live dangerous lives. They've never made any secret of that, and there's nothing I can do to keep them safe. Nothing I can do to stop them from getting hurt by enemies that I probably won't even know about because they won't fucking tell me.

Malice is still watching me, and for a moment, his shuttered expression drops away. His dark gray eyes narrow a little, as if he's trying to work out what I'm thinking now that I know the truth. But then he closes down again, and his features harden as he throws his walls back up.

The harsh anger I've seen in him before bleeds back into his gaze, and he looks away again.

“Don’t act so fucking surprised. You’ve known from the beginning what kind of men we are,” he mutters angrily. “If you can’t handle that, fine. But we never lied to you about who we are. Unlike you, who’s been lying to yourself about who you are since the day I fucking met you.”

It’s like a slap in the face to hear that, and I take a step back, stung. I have enough trouble with the constant war going on in my head, caught between what I want and what I feel like I *should* want.

I remember Ransom telling me that I’m a bad girl, trying too hard to pretend to be good, and it feels more like a condemnation than a teasing comment now.

I swallow hard, my own hands curling into fists.

“You don’t know what the fuck you’re talking about,” I say coldly. “But I’m done being lied to. Next time, just leave me out of this. If you can’t even be honest with me, then don’t come asking me for any more favors.”

With that, I turn on my heel, storming out before Malice can say anything else.

My emotions are a churning mess, and I practically throw myself into my car and drive home as fast as I can.

As if that will somehow help me leave it all behind.

WILLOW

I DON'T HEAR from the Voronin brothers for the next several days. Not even a text from Victor, which makes me feel weird. Then I get mad at myself for feeling weird about it, because this is what I wanted, and the conflicted nature of my feelings just gets worse.

I try to focus on school, going to class as usual, doing my homework, and trying to make sure that when the fall semester rolls around, I'll be ready for it.

But my emotions are still a mess from my fight with Malice. I'm still mad at him. Every time I think about how he shut me down and shut me out, I get angry all over again.

And still... even though I barely want to admit it to myself, I miss him. I miss all three of them. I worry about them and the danger they're in, and I want to see them, even though I definitely know I shouldn't.

I catch myself looking around when I leave classes, half expecting Ransom to come sauntering up to me, trying to smooth things over with his charming smile and some joke about how Malice doesn't know how to talk to people. Or Malice himself lurking in the shadows between buildings or waiting in my apartment when I get home, not apologizing since he clearly doesn't do that, but trying to move past it.

It doesn't happen, and I tell myself it's for the best, even as my heart aches a little with something I don't want to call longing.

Trying to take my mind off the three of them, I throw myself into my new life with gusto, trying to find a place for myself in this confusing new space.

Olivia is delighted whenever I agree to go somewhere with her or when I let her buy me something or suggest something to me, and I try to let her obvious happiness outweigh the awkwardness I still feel.

It's hard to not feel like an outsider. Like I don't belong with these fancy, rich, sophisticated people. They move through this world with their heads held high, navigating it all so easily, and I feel like I'm stumbling through it, trying my best not to trip over my own feet and fall on my face.

On Thursday, I meet Olivia after class, taking her up on her offer to go to her country club for the afternoon. I'm already nervous, because the words 'country club' conjure up a certain image in my mind, and when we get there, it's even more luxurious than I expected.

The golf course area is made up of sprawling green lawns and hills, and the afternoon light glints off a large pond in the center of it all. When we walk into the actual clubhouse part, my jaw almost drops.

None of it is over the top ostentatious, but there's a massive chandelier hanging from the ceiling, and everything is clearly expensive.

The people milling around all seem comfortable and at ease here, and Olivia greets them by name with her usual polite smile. I follow after her, greeting the people who say hello to me and trying to remember how to talk to strangers.

"Olivia!" An older woman with white hair and a bright smile waves from an armchair in the little lounge area. She's sitting with a group of people, and they all turn when she calls out my grandmother's name.

Olivia guides us over and does a round of introductions, although I can barely keep up with everyone's name.

They strike up a conversation about someone they all know, half gossip and half business talk, and it's easy to zone

out. I'm content to not be noticed for a while, until I notice someone approaching me from across the room.

When I glance up, I'm surprised to see that it's Joshua Powell, although I guess it does make sense for him to be here, since his parents are a part of this crowd.

"Hey, Willow." He grins, smiling at me. "Fancy meeting you here."

"Oh, hi." I smile back, relieved to see a face I recognize. "Olivia wanted to show me the place, so here I am."

He glances over just as one of the women in my grandmother's circle starts laughing, leaning in closer to say something in Olivia's ear.

"It seems like she's going to be busy with them for a while," Joshua says. "Do you want to play a round of golf while you wait?"

"Oh. Uh, I've never played golf before," I admit.

"I can teach you," he offers, slipping his hands into his pockets with a shrug. "I've been playing since I was young. You'll be a pro in no time."

Truth be told, I really have no interest in golf. It never seemed interesting when I happened to catch it on TV, and I always switched away quickly to one of my home improvement shows.

But clearly, it's what the people come here to do, other than gossip and drink expensive booze.

"You should go with him," Olivia says, I jump a little, not having realized that she was listening. "I might be here a while, and I know this old person stuff is boring for you young folks."

She gives me an apologetic smile, and I smile back, then turn and nod at Joshua.

"Sure. I'd like that, thanks."

That seems like the right thing to say, because Joshua and Olivia both look pleased. He leads me outside and snags a golf

cart, loading it up with his clubs in the back. We drive over the green to the first hole, and he hops out, grabbing his bag.

“I know golf looks boring on TV,” he says, chuckling a little as if he’s read my mind. “But it can be really interesting if you look at it the right way.”

“Which way is that?” I ask, watching as he selects a club.

“Like a strategy game. The holes are your targets, and there are different parameters for sinking the ball in. Do you know about the par system?”

I nod. “I think so. That’s like the number of shots you have to get the ball in, right?”

“Exactly. The fewer shots the better, which means you have to really think about your shot before you take it. That leads into considering what kind of club you want to use to make the shot, since some of them are better for some scenarios than others. It’s like a puzzle, if that makes sense.”

“It does,” I tell him. “You’re saying there’s more to it than just being able to hit a ball.”

He grins, revealing his slightly crooked front teeth as his eyes dance with amusement. “You’ve got it.”

As he explains what the different clubs are for, I listen, trying to absorb the lesson. He clearly knows a lot about the sport, and one hand holds on to the club while the other gesticulates as he speaks. He seems like a nice guy, friendly and open, not condescending at all. And he’s handsome too.

Still, when he smiles at me, I don’t feel anything.

There’s no rush of heat, my heart doesn’t beat faster, and no butterflies fill my stomach. It’s nothing like how the Voronin brothers make me feel.

But maybe that’s a good thing. The way they make me feel is terrifying half the time, my emotions so volatile when I’m around them that sometimes I feel like a pinball in a machine, wild and out of control.

At least Joshua will never make me feel like that.

“So your swing doesn’t need to be too hard here,” he’s saying. “Since it’s just a straight shot to the hole. A good solid tap should do the trick.”

He demonstrates, hitting the ball, and it glides along the green, stopping just a few feet shy of the hole.

“Good shot,” I tell him, trying to make myself pay attention to what he’s doing. The last thing I need to do here is distract myself thinking about Malice, Ransom, and Vic.

“Thanks.” He winks at me. “The first couple of holes are always the easiest. Do you want to try to putt it in the rest of the way?”

I make a face. “Are you sure? I wouldn’t want to mess up your game.”

He chuckles warmly, shaking his head. “Don’t worry, this is just practice. And the best way to learn is to do it.”

“Okay, then. Sure.”

I let him lead me to where the ball is resting, and he puts the club in my hand. I try to mimic the way I saw him holding it, and he steps up behind me and adjusts my grip, using his hands to slide mine to where they need to be.

“I’ll show you how to adjust your swing,” he says. “Like this.”

I just nod, feeling the warmth of his body against my back. I can’t help but think of the way it felt when Malice stepped up behind me at the museum and how aware I was of him, every atom in my body reacting to his presence.

It doesn’t feel uncomfortable to have Joshua’s arms around me. It’s not creepy or lecherous the way Troy Copeland’s touch was when he did something as simple as shake my hand. But as I wait for any kind of spark to flare inside me, none comes.

“Okay, are you ready?” Joshua murmurs. “Take your shot.”

I move my arms like he’s taught me to, drawing back until he stops me, and then I let him help guide my swing forward

to hit the ball. The little white ball rolls for a bit, then teeters on the edge of the hole before dropping in.

“Very nice.” Joshua nods in approval, stepping back. “Did you feel that in the swing?”

“Um, yeah. I felt it.”

“Eventually, you’ll learn how hard or soft you need to hit it for a particular hole. And that’s not even accounting for things like wind or being on hills or anything yet.”

“It sounds like there’s a lot that goes into it.” I eye the club in my hand before glancing at the hole the ball disappeared into. “You must have a good head for remembering all of it.”

He dips his chin, looking almost a bit bashful. “I guess you could say that. It’s a good distraction after a long week of work. Talking about numbers all day can get very tedious.”

In the back of my mind, I think that golf seems just as tedious, but of course I don’t say that out loud.

We move on to the next hole, Joshua chatting away about his life. He’s an only child, and he grew up being doted on by his parents, which led to some resentment when they had higher expectations of him as he got older.

“I don’t blame them, I guess,” he says with a sigh. “I can’t expect to carry our family name if I can’t live up to it, but it was a lot to handle when I was eighteen and still trying to figure out who I was, you know?”

“Yeah. That makes a lot of sense,” I tell him. “I can relate.”

There might not be much spark between us, but at least he seems... easy. He talks about normal things, straightforward things. The school he graduated from, the people he plays golf with on the weekends. There’s nothing dangerous or deceptive to it, and I don’t feel in over my head.

He’s kind and normal, and as we play through more holes, I try to convince myself that *this* is what I want. Stability. Comfort. Only having to worry about someone working overtime or spending too long at the country club—not being

concerned that they might die in some brutal attack or end up killing someone else.

When we reach the sixth hole, we find a group just finishing up and getting ready to move on. We wait for them, talking quietly amongst ourselves, before someone breaks off and strides over to us.

I have to hide my grimace when I realize that it's Troy.

He nods at Joshua in greeting and then looks me over, his eyes sliding up and down and then up again as a slow smile spreads over his face. It gives me that same gross feeling I had before, and I fight the urge to shudder.

"Willow, right?" he asks. "Olivia's granddaughter."

"Yeah. That's right."

Everyone else I've met here who was also at the gala seemed content to pretend the incident with my mom never happened, but of course, Troy has to be the exception to that rule.

His eyes are still on me as he smirks.

"We usually don't get that much excitement at events like the one at the museum. Usually it's a lot of boring speeches and people begging for money, so I've gotta say, I wasn't mad about the entertainment when your mom showed up."

Heat rushes up my cheeks, my spine going stiff. "What's that supposed to mean?" I say sharply.

Troy gives a languid shrug.

"I'm just saying she livened things up, that's all. Is she really the one who raised you?" He chuckles, looking me up and down again. "You were doing a decent enough job of blending in, but damn. She looked like she walked in right off a street corner."

"That's my mother you're talking about," I say quietly, defensiveness rising inside me. I know Misty has an entire truckload of issues, but that doesn't mean she deserves to have this asshole talking about her like she's a piece of trash.

Troy nods, something lecherous gleaming in his eyes. “Damn. Being adopted by that woman, I bet you’ve got some interesting stories to tell.”

“Not really,” I grit out, my jaw tight. “My childhood was pretty boring, actually. Now, if you don’t mind—”

“It’s true your mother’s a hooker, right?” he asks, cutting right over me. “She definitely looked like one.”

My stomach clenches, my pulse picking up as adrenaline rushes through me. I’ve never been the type of person who got into fights at school or things like that, but right now, it’s very hard to resist the urge to punch Troy in his smug fucking face.

But before I can do anything, Joshua steps in, getting between the two of us.

“Hey, man. That’s enough,” he tells Troy in a low voice. Then he turns to me, offering me a small smile. “I’m a little tired of golf at the moment, actually. Do you want to go back to the clubhouse?”

I nod gratefully, not trusting my voice right now.

We get back into the golf cart, and Joshua speeds away, leaving Troy and his friends behind. My stomach is in knots, and I take several shaky breaths, trying to calm myself down.

Joshua glances over at me, grimacing. “I’m sorry,” he says. “Troy is an asshole. If I’d known he was out on the green today, I wouldn’t have suggested playing.”

I laugh, but there’s no real humor in it. “It’s okay. You can’t control what assholes do.”

He shrugs wryly. “I guess not. And unfortunately, he’s an asshole with money, from a good family, so the club won’t kick him out, despite a number of... indiscretions. It’s a pity.”

“Unfortunately, a lot of assholes have money,” I say, shaking my head.

“I hope you don’t think I’m like that. I can’t really help my tax bracket, but I try not to let it turn me into a raging dick.”

A smile tugs at my lips as we roll to a stop back at the club, and I climb out of the golf cart. “No, you’ve been nothing but nice since I met you.”

“That’s a relief.” He gets out too, shoving his hands into his pockets as he dips his head to catch my gaze. “Because I was wondering if you’d like to go out with me on Saturday.”

I blink, unsure of what to say.

My first impulse is to tell him no, but then I glance over to where my grandmother is talking with her friends, the group of them laughing about something as they sit at a table on the clubhouse patio. This is my chance for the normal life I’ve desperately wanted for so long. The chance to start truly fitting into this world, making a real effort to become part of it. It’s right there in front of me, ready for the taking.

And all I have to do is... take it.

I lick my lips, hesitating for just one more second. Then I nod.

“Sure. That sounds nice.”

MALICE

EARLY ON SATURDAY MORNING, we head out to do our newest task for X. I'm in a shitty-ass mood, agitation whipping beneath my skin like a nest of snakes. Playing errand boys for this asshole is always fucking annoying, but more than that, now we have some idea of what X is probably up to.

He's fucking with us.

He's *toying* with us.

And I hate it.

We've spent the last few days doing the usual research and prep for the job, trying to make sure we'll be able to complete it without fucking anything up or ending up dead. But there's only so much we can control when we don't know what strings X plans to pull, if any.

The job is to break into a guy's house and steal a flash drive. From what we've gathered from Vic's digging, our target is a judge. That makes him a higher profile mark than we've had from X before, someone more well connected than the usual random warehouse or businessman. It makes us nervous, putting us all on edge, because if this job goes tits up, then we could be in a lot of trouble.

We're all wondering if this shit will go according to plan, or if X plans to betray us on this job too.

How badly does he want whatever we're supposed to steal? Would he be willing to risk not getting it just for the satisfaction of seeing us all killed?

Fuck. I don't know.

It's still dark out when we leave, driving over to the judge's house.

Vic is in the front passenger seat, running a smaller version of his usual set up, checking on things from a tablet in his hands.

"You got eyes on the judge?" I ask him.

He nods, brushing a small lock of dark hair away from his forehead. "He's still at the hotel he checked into last night," he says. "Along with the hooker he brought with him. His wife is at home."

I grit my teeth, already disgusted with this fucker.

We park a few blocks down from his house and make the rest of the trek on foot, keeping to the shadows, using trees and hedges to hide ourselves as we make our way to his place.

Once we hit the perimeter of his property, Vic's fingers go flying over his tablet screen, and Ransom and I wait while he works.

After about thirty seconds, Vic nods. "Security bypass is up. Let's move."

He takes the lead, creeping up Judge Asshole's driveway, and then picks the lock on his front door, easing it open without a sound.

From here, we don't speak. We've already gone over the plan fifteen different times, so we know what we're doing.

We know the layout of the house from an old real estate listing Vic dug up online, and we know there are likely to be two places the judge might keep a flash drive: either in his office or in the library. As long as the drive isn't locked up in a safe or something, we can grab it fast and get out. And if it is... well, we'll cross that bridge when we come to it. But we're hoping it won't come to that.

We split up, Ransom and Vic peeling off to the left and down the hall to the library, and me to the right, hunting for the door to the office.

I move quickly, slipping into the room and heading straight for the large mahogany desk set against one wall. There's a laptop sitting on it, and I check that first, but there aren't any drives connected to the ports.

That would've been too easy, I guess.

I start rummaging through the drawers, finding mostly papers and a few questionable photos that look like they definitely aren't of his wife.

"Fucking idiot," I whisper under my breath. "Keeping this shit in the house, right under your wife's goddamned nose."

I reach for the drawer in the center of the desk, easing it open, but before I can look through it, a soft alarm goes up in the hall.

Shit. I freeze, holding my breath. The office door is set just enough ajar that someone would have to physically poke their head in to see me, but I don't risk trying to escape.

The alarm shuts off a few seconds later, and I hear the sound of footsteps coming down the stairs.

"John? Is that you?"

His wife. Dammit.

She steps into the hall and I drop down immediately, hiding behind the desk and holding my fucking breath.

She comes to the office door and glances inside but doesn't step any farther in. I wait until I hear her retreat and then give it a few more seconds, my heart pounding in my chest.

Her voice filters into the room from down the hall a moment later, and it takes me a second to realize she's on the phone.

"Hey, honey. The alarm went off, and I thought it was you coming home," she says. "You didn't come home last night. Is everything okay?"

I roll my eyes because clearly it's not okay. He's been banging a hooker all night, and she has no fucking idea.

“Oh,” she says, sounding a little sad. “This is the third time this month you’ve fallen asleep at the office, John. You really should consider cutting back on your hours a bit. Yes, I know, but—” There’s a soft sigh as he cuts her off, and she’s quiet as she listens to whatever bullshit he’s spinning. “Right. Yes, of course. Yes. I’ll go back to bed. What time do you think you’ll be home tonight? Alright. Well, I hope I get to see you then, if it’s not too late. Okay. I love you too.”

The call ends, and she sighs again before making her way back up the stairs.

I stay crouched behind the desk, counting out the seconds like I’m Vic or some shit, not daring to move yet in case she decides to come back down. It’s not even five a.m. yet, so hopefully she’ll go back to sleep, but I don’t want to assume that.

After several more long minutes, it seems clear that she’s gone back to bed. Letting out a breath, I ease up and go back to searching through the drawers. A few minutes later, Vic and Ransom slip into the room, Vic carefully adjusting the door back to the angle it was at before they disturbed it.

They give me a look, and I shake my head, holding up a finger.

Give me a minute.

They join me in my search, and after rooting silently through most of the drawers and shelves in the office, I finally spot a small flash drive that matches the description X gave us. I grab it and hold it up so my brothers can see that I’ve found it.

Ransom does a little jazz hands motion, and I roll my eyes, gesturing for them to go ahead.

Just as silently as we crept in, we make our way back out, heading off down the street to our car. The tension in my shoulders unwinds a little as we go, relieved that there were no unexpected explosions this time.

I guess X decided the flash drive was worth more to him than seeing us burn.

Now we just have to see if we survive the next job. And the next.

And the next.

“I feel bad for the wife,” Ransom says, shaking his head as we drive back to our place. “She sounded nice.”

I snort. “She sounded stupid. You don’t marry someone like that and think he’s going to be a good person. And how many times do you buy the ‘I fell asleep at the office’ bullshit before you start to get suspicious?”

“Too many times, apparently,” Vic murmurs.

Once we’re back home, we gather in Vic’s room, as usual. We’ve got the drive X wanted, but we still have to do the drop.

And that will be our opportunity to start trying to end this shit once and for all.

“As far as jobs go, that one was relatively smooth,” Ransom comments as Vic settles at his computer.

“Yeah,” I agree, rolling up my sleeves. “I don’t know if I trust it.”

“Well, there are always more chances for things to go horribly wrong,” he says with mock optimism, cocking a brow at me.

“Don’t remind me.”

The stitches in my side ache as I speak, another reminder of how quickly shit can spiral into chaos. They’ve been healing up well though, and Vic should be able to take them out soon.

“This should work,” Vic says, a note of determination in his voice. “So far, X has been able to make sure we never get a chance to see him at all. He clearly knows what my skills are, and he’s been avoiding them as much as possible.”

He’s not wrong about that. Every time we do a drop for X, he picks a spot that’s basically a dead zone. No security cameras, no traffic cameras, isolated and out of the way. A

place that's impossible to surveil to see who comes to pick up the drop.

But just because the drop point itself doesn't have any cameras, that doesn't mean we can't find a way to get one there. Vic has a shit ton of little cameras at his disposal, and our new plan is to leave one at the drop point, hidden well, so we can try to get a glimpse of whoever comes to pick up the flash drive.

It's unlikely to be X himself, but maybe we can pick up some identifying marker that will lead us to X. It won't solve the puzzle entirely, but it will be a thread we can pull on. A breadcrumb we can follow.

"Here," Vic says, turning away from his computer and handing a small bag over to me. I flip it open, peering at the tiny button camera inside. "Hide it somewhere it won't be seen, but where it'll have a good view of the drop point."

"Yeah, I know the drill," I tell him.

"Good. With any luck, we'll get a face. Either X's or whoever he sends to pick up the drive."

"And hopefully they won't pick up on the fact that we placed a camera at the drop spot," Ransom points out. "I know you're good at your shit, Vic, and you too, Mal. But that's always a risk."

Vic nods, not looking offended. "It's worth it, though. If I can get a face—*any* face—I can start putting the pieces together and we can figure a way out of this."

I roll my neck, working out the kinks. "We've gotta do something. Sitting on our hands and obeying X's every command isn't going to get us anywhere but buried in shallow graves."

"Yeah. Yeah, I know." Ransom scrubs a hand through his hair. "Good luck."

I give him a little salute with two fingers and then head down to my car, the camera and the flash drive tucked safely away.

The drop point is a few miles outside the city, in a run-down area. In the instructions X included in his last message, he told us to leave the drive in a drop box for what used to be a public library and is now just an abandoned lot.

I walk up to the rusted metal box and slip the drive inside, subtly attaching the camera to the side of the box at the same time, nestling it between several pieces of chewed up gum that someone stuck there. It should have a decent view of anyone who comes up, and it's small enough that someone would really have to be hunting for it to see it.

Just in case X is watching somehow, I make sure to keep my expression neutral, and I don't linger. I head back to my car and drive home again, calling Vic on the way to let him know that it's done and that he can message X to tell him the job is completed.

Now the only thing we can do is wait for something to happen.

Ransom is in the shop when I get back, actually organizing his tools for once since we haven't had a car to work on in a while. I clench my jaw at the reminder of Ethan Donovan and his crew coming to our warehouse, and the memories of Willow that rise up with it.

Needing to blow off some steam, I head into the room just off the garage and spend the next several hours sketching out some tattoo designs and occasionally taking a swig from the bottle of whiskey I keep on the counter.

Finally, Vic calls us up to his room to tell us that someone picked up the drive.

Ransom and I both drop what we're doing immediately, heading upstairs together. We crowd around Vic's desk to watch the footage we picked up, and as we do, my lip curls in frustration.

"Shit. They're mostly out of frame." Ransom frowns, sounding disappointed.

"I couldn't just stick it right to the front of the damned drop box," I tell him. "That would've given it away."

“I can scrub through the footage,” Vic says. “Going frame by frame, I might be able to pick something up.”

“Here’s hoping,” Ransom replies with a sigh. “I’m heading down to the shop.”

He steps out of the room, and Vic starts going through the footage image by image, trying to find anything noteworthy in it. I stick around to try to help for a bit, but only Vic can find this kind of shit interesting for long.

“Do you need me here?” I ask.

“No,” he says bluntly, not looking away from the screen. I chuckle, because things have always been like that between us. We’ve got each other’s backs, but we know when it’s best to let the other person just do the shit they’re good at.

“Alright. Then call me if you find anything,” I tell him.

He waves vaguely over his shoulder at me as I turn, about to head out.

But before I reach the bedroom door, Vic frowns and sits up straighter, glancing at one of the screens on the left side of his desk.

“Wait,” he says, a line forming between his brows. “Listen to this.”

He pulls his headphones out, turning the audio up, and I recognize Willow’s voice coming through the speakers.

“Oh, that’s okay,” she’s saying. “I understand having to work rough hours for sure. Seven is fine. That gives me more time to get ready.” She laughs, sounding a little nervous. “No, no. I just haven’t been on a date in... a long time, I guess. I think I’m going to be rusty at it.”

My eyebrows fly up into my hairline. *What the fuck? A date?*

Vic turns to look at me, and there’s something in his eyes that looks a hell of a lot like what I’m feeling right now.

Pure, raw possessiveness.

He doesn't want her going out with some fucker any more than I do.

Is it the guy from the museum? The one who made her laugh?

The more I think about it, the more pressure builds up in my chest. I feel like a predator pacing in a cage, clawing to get out so I can fuck something up. So I can unleash the violence gathering inside me like a hurricane.

Fuck whoever this guy is for thinking he can take Willow out on a fucking date. She's ours.

I turn on my heel again, heading right for the door. Victor doesn't try to stop me—not that I expected him to. He wants me to do this just as much I do.

I stride downstairs to get in my car again, passing Ransom on the way.

“Did Vic find anything?” he asks, glancing up as he wipes grease from his fingers with a rag.

I shake my head. “No. I'm going to Willow's.”

“You're—what? Wait, why?”

“Ask Vic,” I growl. Then I slide into my car and slam the door shut, peeling out of the garage and down the street.

All I can think about as I drive is that whoever this fucker is, he'd better not be at her apartment when I get there. He'd better not think he can touch her. He'd better keep his fucking distance.

Instead of getting lighter the closer I get to Willow's place, the tightness in my chest just gets worse. It coils around my heart, squeezing for all its worth, making it hard to breathe and impossible to focus on anything but the one word repeating itself in my head.

Ours.

WILLOW

I PULL my hair up into a ponytail, holding it with one hand as I look at myself in the mirror. After a few seconds, I make a face and let my hair fall back down around my shoulders again. Having it pulled up shows off just the top of the scars that spread up my shoulder almost to my neck, and I don't want that.

So down it is.

I've gotten a bit dressed up for the date, although it feels kind of silly, in a way. I'm wearing a dress that Olivia helped me pick out, in a soft rose color, and it looks good on me. It flatters my figure and hides my scars, which is all I can really ask of any of my clothes. But I don't feel confident or excited about any of this.

My stomach is in knots, and I feel slightly sick and nervous about the whole thing.

I keep telling myself it's just first date butterflies. I told Joshua that I haven't been on a date in a long time, and technically, that's true. *Never* is a really long time.

It's not like I can call going to some shitty party with Colin a date, especially after what happened afterward. And although I've had plenty of intimate moments with the Voronin brothers, they weren't exactly dates either.

Joshua is probably old-fashioned. He's probably going to hold the car door for me and pay for dinner, and I have no idea how to act on a first date.

So it would make sense for me to be nervous because of my inexperience with dating... but deep down, I know that's not the reason.

It's because I don't even really want to go.

But this is what normal people do. They have dates on the weekend with nice, normal guys. So I take a deep breath and try to calm myself down.

I can't help but glance over at the cameras still up in my room, biting my lip as I do.

Is Vic still watching? Does he know what I'm doing tonight?

The intercom buzzer makes a loud noise in the other room, and I jump in surprise, startled out of my thoughts.

It's not even seven yet, which means Joshua must've gotten out of work earlier than he expected. With one last quick glance in the mirror, I head into the living room and hit the button, trying to sound happy and breezy.

"Come on up."

I press another button to unlock the front door downstairs, then smooth my hands down my dress and go to the door, waiting until I hear footsteps approaching to open it.

"You're earl—"

I break off mid-sentence as Malice bursts in, pushing past me in a rush.

My heart lurches, and I stumble back, shocked to see him. It's clear he's pissed off, anger and irritation pouring out of him in waves. My chest goes tight, making it hard to breathe. His overwhelming presence seems to take up all the space in the room.

"What the hell do you think you're doing?" he demands, glaring down at me. His eyes are a stormy swirl of emotion, and I blink, shaking myself and trying to gather my composure.

“I’m... I’m going on a date,” I tell him. “What are you doing here?”

“The fuck you are,” he snaps.

The dismissive tone of his voice puts a spark to my own anger, and I straighten my shoulders, glaring right back up at him. “Excuse me?”

“You heard me. I don’t know who the hell this guy is, but if he thinks he’s taking you out, he’s in for a big fucking surprise.”

“That’s not up to you to decide!” I snap. “You can’t just barge in here and—”

“You’re not going!” Malice practically roars, and my mouth snaps shut. “I don’t even know why the fuck you’d want to go out with some nobody.”

“He’s not a *nobody*,” I bite out, my entire body vibrating as my heart picks up speed, racing like a jackrabbit. “You don’t even know who it is.”

“I don’t have to,” Malice retorts. “I know the type of assholes you’ve been hanging around with lately. He doesn’t give a shit about you.”

I snort, stepping past him and striding quickly toward the door. It didn’t even shut all the way after he burst in, and now I yank it wide, holding it open as I turn to face him. “You don’t know anything. And you have no right to tell me what to do. I don’t belong to you or your brothers, so you can all just butt out!”

Malice makes a noise in his throat, low and rough. He stalks toward me slowly, making my heart beat harder with every step he takes.

“You’re wrong about that,” he says evenly. “You’re ours.”

I shake my head, my hair shifting around my shoulders. Tears burn in my eyes, and my chest aches as I force out the words. “I don’t want to be. I don’t want to belong to you if you lie to me and treat me like a pawn.”

Malice reaches me, his entire body taut with barely contained energy. The dark, spicy scent that's uniquely *him* tickles my nostrils, and instead of walking out the door as I'm clearly gesturing for him to do, he shuts it.

We're standing face to face in front of it now, and he looks down at me as he shakes his head, a muscle working in his cheek.

"You're not a pawn," he tells me, his voice lowered. "You never have been. You're a fucking queen. You're the only person in this whole goddamned world who could bring me to my knees. The only person who's ever crawled inside my soul."

My jaw drops open as all the air rushes from my lungs.

I stare up at him, stunned by the honesty in his words. I've never heard him say anything like that before. He's been possessive, sure, and he's made it clear that I've affected him and the others as much as they've affected me, but this is something... different.

This is raw honesty.

This is Malice laying himself bare in a way I don't know if he ever has with anyone before.

The tension between us tightens even more, and I don't know what to say or what to do. I should throw him out. I should tell him I don't care and I don't want any part of this, but I don't. I *can't*.

The buzzer goes off again, cutting through the loaded silence.

I jerk in surprise and reach over to press the intercom button, not glancing away from Malice or moving an inch.

"Who is it?" I ask.

A male voice comes through the speaker. "It's Joshua. Sorry, I know I called to say I'd be late, and now I'm a little early."

I pull my hand away from the intercom button, swallowing hard.

Malice is still staring down at me, his eyes burning like an inferno. He shakes his head, and his tongue darts out to lick his lips.

“Don’t go out there, Solnyshka,” he rasps. “Please. Don’t go with him.”

It takes me a few tries to find my voice, and when I do, it comes out in a whisper. “Why not?”

“Because I already have enough blood on my hands, and if he touches you, I’ll fucking kill him.”

The words are harsh, but his tone isn’t. I don’t know if anything about Malice can be called soft, but that’s what it feels like. Like it’s less of a threat and more of a promise that he’s making. Like it wouldn’t even be a choice, but an *inevitability* that he would end any other man who touched me.

It hits me right in the chest, and my pulse is racing so fast I can almost taste it.

My hand shakes a little as I hit the intercom button again, Malice’s eyes searing into me the whole time.

“I-I’m sorry, Joshua,” I whisper. “I’m not feeling well. I can’t go out tonight.”

“Oh. Alright, that’s—”

That’s as far as he gets before Malice is ripping my finger off the button, pulling my hand away from it completely. He sweeps me up into his arms, then backs me against the wall.

I don’t get a chance to speak, or even really to catch a breath before he’s kissing me, hot, hungry, and hard. His arms are tight around me, and it feels like I fit perfectly right here, in the desperate cradle of them.

All the possessiveness I saw in his eyes when he showed up here is mirrored in this kiss. It’s like being caught in the middle of the ocean during a thunderstorm, lips, teeth, tongues colliding like the wildest elements. Whenever I draw back to drag in a breath of air, Malice chases me, his mouth finding mine immediately, pulling me back under.

It's as if a dam is breaking between us. All the arguing and tension that's been building finally snaps, letting out a torrent of feelings and sensations that neither of us can fight.

"*Ya zhe govovil, chto ne otpushchu tebya,*" he murmurs in Russian. "*Ya ne mogu. Nikogda ne smogu.*"

I can feel the heat of him, the solid line of his body pressing against me, keeping me pinned against the wall and giving me nowhere to go. My heart races, but it's not from fear. This is pure adrenaline, pure *need*, and I give in to it, grinding against him, hitching one leg up so I can get the friction I need.

I pour myself into the kiss, letting myself go, giving in to all the shit I've been trying to hold back. That voice in my head that's been telling me it's better to stay away from him and his brothers is silenced, replaced by a silent refrain of 'yes.'

Yes. *Yes.*

"Fuck," Malice grunts, and he sounds as wrecked as I feel right now. "Fuck, you taste so goddamned good. No one else can have you, do you understand me? No one else. You belong to us. With us. And if anyone thinks they can take you away —"

I cut him off with another kiss, swallowing whatever threat he's about to make. I don't need to hear it. I can feel it in every movement he makes. The way his hands move over my body, groping me, touching me everywhere and setting me on fire.

If his brothers were here, they might be doing the same thing. Ransom holding me up as he takes his turns kissing me, Vic watching with his heavy-lidded gaze. But it's just me and Malice right now, and it feels like he's trying to do the work of all of them in their absence.

"Gonna make sure you never forget," he mutters, squeezing my ass and using that grip to haul me in even closer to him. "You won't be able to think about anyone else when I'm done with you. Gonna mark you. Gonna fucking *claim* you."

“Malice,” I moan back, rolling my hips against him. My clit is throbbing, and grinding against him just stokes the fire even more, threatening to burn me up.

“Say it again,” he growls, kissing his way down my neck and then biting hard enough to make me cry out.

“Malice.” I groan his name, shuddering hard. “Please.”

He pulls back, and his eyes have bled to a deep, almost black color, the raw desire in them overshadowing anything else. He grabs the front of my dress, and I think he’s going to pull it over my head to get me out of it, but instead he just rips it, tearing the bodice down the middle.

I gasp as a cool rush of air gusts over my suddenly exposed skin, and Malice rips the dress even more, leaving the shredded fabric bunched around my waist.

“That was expensive,” I murmur, my chest heaving as my nipples peak.

“I don’t give a shit.”

His hands roam over my chest, groping my breasts, yanking down my bra.

He dips his head and kisses the tattoo he gave me, right above my heart. His mouth is warm, and I know that with his lips right there, he can feel how hard my heart is pounding. It’s like he’s trying to cement his mark on me, to seal it in somehow, and I think back to how irritated he looked when I said I was looking into having it removed.

It’s clear that he loves seeing it still there, and I can feel the hard line of his cock when he grinds against me. My body responds, and I push back against the wall as I try to press myself closer to him.

Malice alternates between kissing my lips, my neck, and my shoulders, whispering filthy things the entire time. Telling me how he loves to watch me when I’m needy as fuck like this.

He’s right. I *am* needy as fuck, and the longer this goes on, the closer and closer I get to falling apart. My body feels like

one giant exposed nerve, each sensation hitting me hard, and when he wedges his thigh between my legs, I let out a desperate little moan, unable to hold it back.

Pleasure is coiling low in my belly, and my hips buck harder, chasing the friction I need to finally fly over the edge.

“Fuck,” Malice grunts. “You’re close, aren’t you?”

I nod, barely able to speak anymore.

He groans and shifts position, dragging me against him and pressing his crotch right to mine, letting me feel how hard he is. I wrap my legs around him, practically dry humping him as his clothed cock grinds against my clit.

“You feel what you do to me, Solnyshka?” he asks, fisting my hair with his free hand and holding me up with the other. “Only you. You’re the only one who gets me like this. So use my cock to make yourself come. It’s yours.”

I whimper at his words and at the feeling of his thick length pulsing against me, all of it combining to send me flying headfirst into a breath-stealing orgasm. Malice holds me through it, grinding against me while I tremble from the force of it.

“Oh... please... *fuck*...” I hold on to him for dear life, my legs tightening around his waist a guttural noise pours from my lips.

“Goddamn,” he groans, sounding tortured. “I can *feel* you coming. You’re so hot and wet against my cock.”

As the waves of pleasure start to ebb away, Malice uses his tight grip on my hair to yank me into another kiss. He bites at my lips and thrusts his tongue into my mouth, as if he’s trying to devour me.

When our lips finally break apart, he drags me away from the wall, breathing hard as he stares down at my face.

“I need to be inside you,” he pants. “Right now. Or I might fucking die.”

WILLOW

MY HEAD SPINS as Malice turns and strides toward the bedroom, his hands gripping my ass tightly.

He drops me onto the mattress and wastes no time climbing up after me, moving like the predator he is until he's right on top of me.

I must look a mess, my bra shoved down, breasts spilling out, the remnants of my dress hanging off my body. But Malice looks at me like I'm everything he's ever wanted, and it sends a thrill through me.

He starts working me out of my clothes, ripping away my bra, pulling my hips up so he can tug my dress all the way off. His hands move quickly, and he fumbles a few times, seeming just as desperate and ravenous in here as he did out in the living room.

I get that.

Because I feel the same way.

The desire in me burns so brightly that I know he can see it. Whatever this thing between us is, it's igniting into a flame I know neither of us could put out, even if we wanted to.

It reminds me of the night he brought me home after Colin attacked me, when he ended up going down on me right there in my bed. Only it's even more intense now, because there are feelings between us too. It's not just the chemical attraction now. It's something so much deeper, which makes this scary and exhilarating all at once.

“Gonna fuck you ’til you can’t walk,” Malice mutters. “Until the only word you remember is my name.”

He drags my panties down as he speaks, and as I bend my knees to help him, I suddenly remember something that makes my cheeks go hot with embarrassment.

Oh fuck.

I sit up and try to scramble away from him, but he catches my ankle, pulling me back.

“What are you doing?” he asks, looming over me like a dark god.

“I, um... I’m on my period. It’s the last day of it. I forgot,” I mutter back, forcing the words out.

I’m embarrassed to say it out loud, and even more than that, I’m disappointed. My body is so keyed up and needy, and it’s like being splashed with cold water to remember why we can’t go through with this.

Malice freezes. His gaze moves down from my face to my bare pussy. He drags a finger along my folds, watching me hungrily as I arch and moan at the touch.

It’s electric, like a jolt straight to the system, and he watches me intently, soaking in every single reaction.

“You think I’m scared of a little blood, Solnyshka?” he asks, a darkly teasing note in his voice. “You must not know me as well as I thought.”

My face feels like it’s on fire, and I roll my eyes at him. “No, I don’t think you’re scared of blood. But it’s not the same as—”

“There’s nothing in the whole damned world that could keep me from wanting to fuck you right now,” he says, his voice low, almost a growl. “Definitely not this.”

He sounds so sure of himself and what he wants, and I lick my lips as I stare up at him.

When he touches me more, rubbing one finger along my clit and pressing against the swollen bud, I gasp and twist my

legs, writhing on the bed as electric pleasure shoots through me. He spreads me open with two fingers, and even though my pulse races, I don't make a move to stop him.

I suck in a breath when he tugs out my tampon and tosses it into the trash can in the corner. Something about watching him do it makes my desire ratchet up even higher, and I feel like every inch of my skin is extra sensitive, my entire body primed for whatever comes next.

Kneeling between my spread legs, Malice shoves off his own clothes, revealing his tattoos and the wound on his side that's still healing, the thick line of it angry and pink. His hands are rough and possessive when he grabs me under my knees, spreading my legs wider for him.

Every single touch is possessive and commanding, like he *owns* me. Like he can do whatever he wants with me. Like my body is his to fuck however he wants.

That sends a thrill up my spine, because for better or worse, that's what I want. I want him to take me. I want him to use me, and I can't pretend otherwise right now. I can't keep lying to myself or trying to hide from the truth.

"Look at that," he murmurs. "Your pretty pink pussy is all wet and slick for me. You fucking missed this, I knew it. Tell me you want me."

I lick my lips, and it takes me a few tries to find my voice. "Please," I gasp out. "Malice, I want you. *Please.*"

His lips curl in a satisfied smile that only makes him look more dangerous. He's every bit as intense and dominant as the first time we had sex, but it feels even better now somehow. Maybe because it's not the first time. Things have changed so much between us since then.

He spreads my legs even wider, and the stretch in my inner thighs aches. I couldn't close my legs if I tried, and I let him keep me spread, whimpering softly when the head of his cock presses against my entrance.

My body throbs and trembles with need, and Malice starts to press inside me, filling me up inch by inch.

Just like with Ransom before, it's like the first time all over again. Malice's cock is huge, and the size of it forces my body to work to accommodate him. It hurts at first, a burn that goes all the way through me, but even that feels good in a way.

"Goddamn," Malice pants, stopping for a second. He holds still, but I can feel the tension in his body, the urge to thrust and fuck into me hard and fast. "You feel so fucking good, Solnyshka. So fucking tight. Look down. Watch yourself take me."

I do as he says, gazing down the line of my body and watching his thick, tattooed cock spear into me. It feels so good, and the sight of it is both filthy and beautiful somehow. Like we belong here together. Like I was made to take him like this.

Malice keeps pressing in until he finally bottoms out, and for a second, I forget to breathe. There's just so much of him, and he's so deep inside me that it almost feels like he's hitting the back of my throat, splitting me open on his cock.

"*Fuuuck.*" His curse is ragged and drawn out, the muscles of his arms like steel as he braces himself above me.

He leans down, his stormy eyes burning as he captures my mouth again. His lips are forceful against mine, his tongue sliding into my mouth to tangle with my own. It feels like I'm falling and flying at the same time, our kiss consuming and soul deep.

It's like he's trying to devour me—and this time, he just might manage to do it.

All I can taste, all I can *feel*, is Malice. He's overtaking my senses completely, stretching and filling me as he kisses me.

We stay like that for a long moment, Malice being uncharacteristically kind and giving me a few seconds to adjust to being so full of him.

And then he starts to thrust.

The first time he drags his cock back and then shoves back in, it makes my breath catch. I shudder at the sensation of it, the drag of his thick, hot flesh against my most sensitive

places, the way the head of his cock slams right into me. That sets the pace, and he starts to fuck me with hard, deep strokes, not starting off light or easing me into it at all.

But that's how Malice is. That's how he fucks. He's told me that since the first time, and I saw it when he was fucking that woman on his couch, what feels like forever ago.

He goes deep and punishing, pistoning his cock into me with speed and force that takes my breath away, making it impossible to do anything but wrap my arms around him, my fingers delving into the hair at the nape of his neck, my nails digging into his scalp.

It's just as hard, if not harder, than the first time he took me. His fingers bite into my thighs as he holds on to me, using that grip for leverage as he fucks me until I feel like my brain is melting out of my ears.

Each thrust sends sparks shooting down my spine, and heat is already starting to pool in my belly, a liquid warmth that promises when I come, it's going to be amazing. The bed rocks under us, and I'm grateful now that I got the heavy wooden bedframe.

Wrapping his hand lightly around my throat, Malice drives into me again, shoving his cock in so deep that it hits something inside me that makes me ache. I grit my teeth on a hiss, letting out a soft, pained cry.

He freezes, chest heaving as concern flashes through his dark gray eyes.

“You good?” he rasps.

I nod, too caught up in how much I want him—how much I want this—to care about anything else. The pain is already mingling with pleasure, and I don't want him to stop.

“Y-yeah,” I manage to get out, digging my heels into his ass to urge him on. “Please, don't stop.”

Approval spreads across his hard features, and he grins at me, looking wolfish and dangerous. “Listen to you. Such a good fucking girl. You can take anything I can dish out, can't you? I don't have to hold back.”

I shake my head, because I don't want him to hold back. I'm done with that. I'm tired of both of us hiding behind our walls.

"I want everything," I pant, the last word breaking into a moan as he drives in again, thrusting hard. I arch against him as best as I can, heat rushing through me.

It feels so good, and everywhere Malice touches me burns with pleasure.

He grabs my wrists, pinning them above my head, holding me down so he can attack my breasts while he keeps fucking me. His mouth burns in the best way as he bites and sucks at my nipples, adding to the deep, intense pleasure that pours through my veins.

It's at a fever pitch now, a swirling tornado of sensation that threatens to sweep me up and blow me away, and I'm helpless against it. But that's what I want. I want to lose myself to this right now, so when my orgasm comes barreling down on me, I don't fight it.

It hits hard, and I nearly scream in pleasure, writhing under Malice, trapped between the bed and his body, pinned down by his grip.

"That's right," he grunts. "Shit, you're squeezing me so fucking tight right now."

It feels like it goes on forever, pure heat coursing through me, white hot and blinding as it leaves me undone.

Malice pulls out as I finally start to come down. I feel boneless and keyed up at the same time, both loose and pliable and tight with remaining tension as the insatiable part of me begs for more. It's easy for him to move me, and he flips me onto my stomach, pulling me up until I'm on my elbows and knees, ass in the air.

I moan when he pushes my face down against the mattress, feeling the strength in his body as he grips my hip with his other hand and guides himself back into me, shoving in and picking up the pace right where he left off.

“You feel too good,” he grits out. “Should be a fucking crime.”

I don't have the breath or the brain power left to say anything to that. All I can do is push back against him as pleasure starts to rise in me again, inescapable and undeniable.

The new angle and force of his strokes works me up all over again. The sound of our bodies slapping together, the feeling of Malice's large frame bent over mine, his harsh breathing against my skin and the panted curses that spill from his lips... It's all enough to have me barreling toward another orgasm, still coasting on the remnants of the last one.

Malice seems close too, his thrusts turning erratic and less measured.

“Oh fuck. Oh *fuck!*”

He slams into me a few more times, and that's enough to send me flying over the edge, the mattress muffling my sobbing cries as I come again.

He's right behind me, and I feel the hot spurts of his cum as he finishes with a groan and a ragged curse, filling me up as he finds his own release.

The moment he lets me go, I collapse onto my stomach on the bed, not able to hold myself up anymore. Malice follows, slumping on top of me with a harsh sigh.

As I lie sprawled on the mattress in a haze, it occurs to me, probably too late, that Victor could have been watching all of that, since the cameras are still up in my bedroom. And on the heels of that thought, I realize...

I kind of hope he *was*.

WILLOW

NEITHER OF US moves for a long moment, just lying there catching our breath in the suddenly quiet room. After a bit, Malice's bulk gets too heavy, so I squirm under him, pushing a little at his chest.

He huffs a breath and pulls out of me, lifting himself up and off.

I roll over in bed as he collapses next to me, pulling me roughly into his arms. He nuzzles at my neck, and I look down at myself.

I'm even more of a mess now than I was when we started. There's a mixture of blood and cum streaking down my thighs, and sweat cooling on my body.

"That's the second time I've bled during sex with you," I murmur.

"You like it," Malice counters, his voice deep and rough. He kisses my neck, leaving an open mouthed trail along my pulse point. His hands start roaming again, groping my chest, tweaking my nipples, sliding down my stomach.

He's clearly not turned off by the blood at all. If anything, he seems turned on by it. By the primal, caveman like act of making me bleed during sex. Of claiming me that way and marking us both with my blood.

I chuckle breathlessly, rolling my eyes. "You're such a caveman," I tease.

Malice rolls me over so I'm facing him and then props himself up on one elbow so he can look down at me. "You already knew that."

"Yeah. I did."

There's a lightness in my chest that wasn't there before. That hasn't been there for a long time, if I'm being honest. The slightly sick feeling I had when I was getting ready to go out with Joshua is gone, replaced by something a whole lot better.

I never thought I would be this comfortable with one of the Voronin brothers. And definitely not with Malice, who seemed to make pissing me off into an art form. But it feels... *right* to be here with him, like this.

"I think you just like making me dirty," I murmur, glancing down at my blood streaked thighs again.

"A-fucking-men I do."

He grabs a handful of my hair, tugging just enough to make sensations dance across my scalp as he gives me a hard, deep kiss. When we break apart, he gives me a savage grin.

Then he moves quickly, standing up and scooping me into his arms as I yelp in surprise. He carries me to the bathroom, flipping the light on as he looks around.

"Damn. It's like you live in a hotel with this fancy ass shower," he says, smirking as he glances down at me. "But one of the nice ones, not the kind you pay for by the hour."

I laugh, rolling my eyes a little. "It's not that fancy," I counter. "You should see the one at my grandmother's house. It makes this look like a gym shower or something."

Malice snorts, leaning in to turn the shower on and allowing the water to heat up.

"Less talk about your grandma when my dick is out," he says before hauling me into the shower with him.

It only takes a few seconds for the water to get fully hot, and when it does, it feels amazing on my tired, sore body.

I still feel a little wobbly from how hard Malice fucked me, but luckily, he seems to realize that. He takes charge easily, keeping one arm looped around me as he starts to help me get cleaned up.

There's something possessive in the way he holds me, and in the way he runs his hands between my legs, helping to wash away the blood and cum that's still oozing out of me.

My pussy throbs weakly when his fingers brush my clit. I'm already sore and oversensitive, but I don't ask him to stop.

It feels good to just stand with him, half floating in a haze of post-sex afterglow and hot shower water.

For a while, I just let him move his hands over me as he cleans me, but I can't keep my own hands to myself for long. Not when he's right there, naked and darkly handsome and so close.

This is the first time Malice has totally let me in. Or at least, that's what it feels like. He's not hiding behind his walls or his anger, and I'm not trying to keep him at arm's length either.

I don't know if it's a permanent change, or if something about me almost going out with another man shook his guarded nature loose for the night, but I don't want to waste this opportunity either way.

I'm always hungry for more of him, to know more about him.

So I clean him up too. I lather up my hands and run them over his muscles, touching his chest, his shoulders, his abs. I trace tattoos and scars, brushing my fingers over the newest wound with barely any pressure.

"Does it still hurt?" I ask him.

He shrugs a shoulder. "It's okay. It's healing."

He told me before that it wasn't the worst he's ever been hurt, and I start exploring his body, taking in more of the scars I find. Some of them have healed well, just faint lines on his

body now, and some are ugly and puckered, evidence of rushed stitching jobs or bad healing.

I finger one of them that looks like a circle, then glance up at him with a question in my eyes.

Malice doesn't hesitate. He covers my hand with his.

"Got shot," he says. "A year or so before I went to prison."

"You got shot?" I ask, horrified.

He just snorts. "Wasn't the first time. It went clean through, at least." He turns and guides my hand to another scar on his back, where the bullet exited his body, I guess.

"You're so..." I search for the right word. "Nonchalant about it."

"I kinda have to be. If I went to pieces every time I got hurt, I'd never get shit done."

I guess he has a point. Judging by the collection of scars on his body, he's been hurt a lot.

I touch more of his marks, asking about each one, and Malice tells me how he got them. A lot of them are from his time in prison. He says things like "fight in the cafeteria" or "kicked a guy's ass in the yard because he tried to start some shit."

Some of them are from before that time too, and they have slightly less concerning stories. I trace a small jagged line that runs up the length of his forearm, and he chuckles.

"Fell out of a tree when I was like eleven," he says. "I didn't want to worry our mom, so I didn't say anything for a few days. It got infected by then, and she ended up having to take care of it."

There's something warm in his eyes when he talks about her, and I smile softly, dipping my head to press a kiss to that scar.

I ask about his tattoos, and he tells me. Some of them have stories, some don't. Some are just things he wanted to try

when he was learning to be a tattoo artist, and others have a much deeper meaning—like his mom’s name on his arm.

Another scar catches my attention, and I lean up, brushing my fingers over the small mark on the side of his neck.

“I noticed this one before,” I tell him. “One of the first times I met you, when you came to my school to threaten me.”

His mouth quirks in a grin, and he holds me a little tighter. “That was the time you pulled a knife on me.”

“I didn’t know what you were going to do!” I insist.

“Hey, I’m not pissed about it,” he says. “You had the guts to pull a knife on a guy that threatened to shoot you, who you’d seen kill someone just a few days before. That was impressive. You didn’t let me push you around, and it made me realize that you seemed meek on the outside, but you were made of something stronger all the way through.”

“Oh.” I laugh a little at that, my cheeks heating at his clear approval. “How did you get this one?” I rub the scar lightly, looking into Malice’s eyes.

He glances away for a second, but then back to me, a muscle in his jaw working. “I pissed off a gang in prison. It was stupid easy to do—all you had to do was be someone they didn’t like or be on what they considered ‘their turf.’ I didn’t want to play by their rules. So I became a target.”

I wince, because I can already tell this isn’t going anywhere good. “What happened?”

“They cornered me one day. In the fucking library of all places. And they beat the shit out of me. There were a lot of them, and they wanted to teach me a lesson. So they kicked my ass and then held me down while their leader tried to slit my throat.”

My eyes widen, my chest aching. I knew Malice spent time in prison, and judging from how Ransom and Vic talk about it, I assumed it wasn’t great. But this is even worse than I knew. I can’t imagine anyone getting the jump on Malice like that, when he’s so big and strong and intimidating, but I guess

one of the reasons he's like that now is because of experiences like the ones he had in prison.

I lift up onto my tiptoes, cupping his jaw. "I'm glad you survived," I whisper.

He smiles, and his eyes soften a little. It's one of the few times I've ever seen him smile like this, warm and almost tender. For Malice, anyway.

"There aren't a lot of people in the world who would say that," he admits. "But I'm glad you're one of them, Solnyshka."

The ache in my chest intensifies, but it's a sweet kind of pain this time. Leaning up onto my tiptoes, I press my lips to his.

Our kiss is soft at first, but like most things between us, it heats up fast.

Malice runs his wet hands down my wet body, cupping my ass and hauling me in closer. I can feel when he starts to get hard against my stomach, his cock growing and thickening, and when our kiss breaks, I take a step back, my heart pounding. A sudden urge fills me, and I meet his gaze as I sink down to my knees in front of him.

"I've been looking at all of your tattoos," I tell him, my voice breathy. "I want to see this one up close too."

Malice stares down at me, his eyes full of banked heat. He doesn't say a word, but his chin dips in a slow nod.

Water pours down over us as I wrap my fist around his cock, taking in the dark lines of the tattoo that swirls its way up his shaft. I can't imagine how much it must have hurt to get this done, but Malice did say he got it to prove to himself that he could withstand the pain.

My free hand is braced on his thigh, and I feel the thick muscles tense under my palm as I slide my fingertips over the velvety, veiny length of his shaft, taking my time studying him.

Nerves and excitement flutter in my stomach as I start to go a step further, leaning in to taste him with my tongue.

But before I can, Malice fists his fingers in my hair and pulls me back.

I look up at him, surprised. “What—”

“You don’t have to do that.” He shakes his head. “I let you take the lead the first time you sucked my dick, but I’m not good at being gentle.”

There’s something like a warning flashing in his eyes, and I realize he’s trying to protect me. He doesn’t want to hurt me, and he doesn’t think he’ll be able to hold back.

But when have I ever asked him to?

“I’m not scared, Malice,” I whisper. “I’m not afraid of you.”

He lets out a harsh breath, his jaw tight. “Maybe you should be. I break everything I touch, Solnyshka. Why do you think you’ll be any different?”

I hold his gaze, trailing my free hand over the scars on my own body that I no longer try to hide around him or his brothers.

“Because I’m already broken. Remember?”

His eyes follow the movement of my fingers, and I can see the battle he’s fighting with himself—the need to claim this part of me warring with some instinct to protect me.

Although his jaw is still clenched, Malice’s hold on my hair loosens, and I take advantage of that silent acquiescence, leaning in and putting my mouth on his cock. I take the head between my lips, tasting the shower water and the salty warmth of his skin on my tongue.

Malice groans, his fingers going tight again, but he doesn’t yank me away.

I keep going, exploring him with my tongue and trying to remember the things he seemed to like most from when I did this all those weeks ago back in their warehouse.

Although I know he's trying to take it easy on me, he can't hold back for long. After a while, his hips start to buck forward, pressing more of his cock into my mouth. I part my lips wider, trying to relax my jaw and take it, but I still splutter a little when he goes deeper than I was expecting.

But I don't let it stop me. I bob my head, recovering quickly, letting my tongue slide against the length of his shaft, rubbing against the veins that run along the underside.

"Fuck," Malice curses. "Goddamn."

I glance up at him, and his eyes are swimming with lust all over again. He stares right back at me, letting out a shaky breath.

"You're so fucking good," he tells me. "You never stop surprising me, Solnyshka."

The praise goes straight to my head and then travels even lower, making my clit pulse as arousal gathers in my belly, even though I just got off three times not that long ago.

But there's something about being with Malice like this that makes me feel insatiable. My body craves him, but every bit of him I get just leaves me wanting more and more.

Drool and water from the shower drip down my chin as I bob my head, sucking in little gasps of air when I can. The sounds of me sucking him off are filthy, amplified by the acoustics of the bathroom.

He's so big that it's a lot to take, and Malice works his hips more, pushing me to take him deeper and deeper. My heart pounds when he hits the back of my throat, and I gag a little, but I don't stop.

It does something to me, being used by him like this. My pulse races as my body struggles to accept him, but every groan that falls from his lips makes a feeling of possessive triumph rise inside me. It makes me feel powerful somehow, even though I'm the one on my knees.

Malice's fingers in my hair tighten even more, and he starts using that hold to move my head the way he wants it. He

pulls me down and then holds me there, his cock buried all the way in my mouth.

“Take it,” he pants. “Fucking... take all of it.”

My eyes water, and he lets me pull back for long enough to grab a few grateful breaths of air. Then he’s pushing his cock right back between my lips. His hips buck and thrust, and he starts fucking my face, using my mouth the same way he was using my pussy earlier.

Each time he goes deep enough to make me choke a little, something low down in my belly tightens. Balancing on my knees, I reach between my legs, rubbing my clit with three fingers.

“You were made for this,” Malice says. “I wish you could see yourself. I should fuck you in front of a mirror so you can see how dirty and beautiful you look. Full of my cock, taking it like it’s easy. Or like it’s hard, but you want it anyway. *Ya ne mogu nalyubovat’sya toboy.*”

The last words are spoken in Russian, and I don’t know what they mean, but they make me shiver anyway. My fingers move faster and faster over my clit, his filthy praise making my head spin. Malice keeps fucking my face, going even deeper, until he’s pushing into my throat and his balls are against my chin.

Panic rises inside me for a second, but the surge of adrenaline mixes with the building swell of arousal, spreading through my limbs. I swallow around him, making him hiss with pleasure.

He pulls back just a bit as my orgasm hits me, leaving me trembling and moaning around the thickness of his cock.

The vibrations of the sounds I’m making must transfer to his dick, because Malice curses and then shoves in one more time, burying his cock in my throat and coming in hot spurts.

“So. Fucking. Good.”

His body shudders with each word. I swallow over and over, my fingernails digging into his thigh as the pleasure in my own body peaks and finally starts to fade.

When he pulls out of my mouth completely, his cock is softening a bit, strings of drool and cum connecting his dick to my lips.

I feel woozy from it all, but Malice helps me up, pressing me against the slick shower wall and kissing me until I'm even more breathless than before. He pulls back, searching my face like he's trying to make sure he didn't hurt me, and I give him a smile. I'm a little hoarse and breathless, but I liked it.

"I'm okay," I tell him, my voice raspy.

Malice stares for another few seconds, then nods. He pulls me away from the wall and shuts off the shower.

"I'm gonna change the sheets on your bed," he declares. "And then I'm gonna keep you there all night."

My heart flutters at the promise in his tone.

I like the sound of that.

WILLOW

I WAKE up partially draped over Malice, my dreams scattering and slipping away as I come back to consciousness.

Something lingers in my mind, and I realize I was dreaming about the night Ilya abducted me. I had nightmares about it almost every night for the first couple weeks after it happened, dreams of being surrounded by flames and the ominous shadows flickering in the light from the fire.

This time, it was different than it normally is. It wasn't just Nikolai's terrifying brother who was trying to kill me. There was a monster in the room with me and Ilya, a creature stalking the shadows.

I shake my head, banishing the last of the dream and focusing on Malice instead.

We're both naked, and his arm is slung around me, a pleasant, heavy weight that makes me feel tethered and connected to him. My body is sore all over, but in a really good way. I feel cleansed, somehow—lighter than I have in a long time.

This thing between me and the Voronin brothers is still complicated and strange. I've fucked two of them, and come as close to fucking Victor as he ever gets, so that in itself is different than a lot of conventional relationships. Not to mention how we met.

I'm pretty sure most people my age are using dating apps or meeting at bars, not winding up in entanglements with men they witnessed murder someone.

But at the same time, it feels like it's finally starting to make more sense. It's finally starting to feel *real*, and less like something that I keep running from and then being pulled back into.

Malice and I both made a choice yesterday. We finally acknowledged this thing between us, admitted that we both feel it—that we both *want* it—and that feels good.

As if he can sense me thinking about him, Malice stirs against me, waking up. Warm fingers brush my hair back, and he pulls me into a deep, possessive kiss. He doesn't have to say the word 'mine' for me to feel it in the way his arm tightens around me and the way his lips devour me.

"How are you feeling?" he murmurs, his voice rough from sleep.

It sends a little thrill through me to be waking up with him after everything we did last night.

"Sore," I admit, and he grins, looking pleased.

He uses his hold on me to roll us both over, settling onto his back and pulling me on top of him. We sink into another kiss, and I could easily see myself spending all day like this... but then I hear someone laugh from the other room.

I freeze, my eyes flying open wide.

"What...?"

Malice chuckles. "Come on."

He gets up, throwing his pants on, and I wrap the bedsheet around myself, letting him go to the bedroom door first and open it.

The smell of cooking food hits me as he does, and I hear Malice snort with amusement, so I peek around him, surprised to see Ransom and Vic in my kitchen.

Victor is at the stove, his attention focused on a pan that he's prodding with a spatula. Ransom is perched on the island, in my usual spot, and they both look up when we come in.

Ransom's eyebrow ring glints as he lifts his brow, looking me over slowly. "Well, no need to ask what you two got up to last night," he drawls. "You look sexed up as hell."

I'm still blinking in surprise to see them here, and Ransom laughs, coming over and kissing me softly.

"What are you doing here?" I ask, looking from him to Vic.

Ransom shrugs. "Well, since you and Malice made up, we figured we were done trying to pretend to leave you alone."

I roll my eyes at that but let him kiss me good morning. I'd go over and kiss Vic if he were anyone else, but instead, I just smile at him, giving him a little wave. He glances over at me, and our gazes lock for a moment. Although his expression doesn't change, there's a flash of heat in his eyes that makes butterflies erupt in my stomach.

I wasn't wrong. He definitely saw some or all of what happened last night through the cameras.

"I made eggs," he says, gesturing at the pan as I try to get the fluttering in my stomach under control. "And toast."

In classic Vic form, all the eggs are identical, fried to perfection, and each piece of bread is uniformly toasted and buttered evenly. I have to smile when he loads up a plate for me, and we all sit around the table to have breakfast together.

It feels weirdly domestic, even more so than when I was staying with them, but I don't mind it at all.

"You could have just buzzed to get in, you know," I comment after swallowing a bite of eggs. "I would've let you in."

Ransom shrugs. "You were sleeping so soundly, we didn't want to wake you. And besides, Vic likes to practice his skills."

"What's the point of even having a door with locks?" I ask, teasing them about their habit of breaking into my apartment whenever they feel like it.

But instead of laughing, Ransom frowns, his expression turning serious. “That’s a good point. We need to get you a better lock.”

My grin fades as my brows furrow. “Why? What’s going on?”

The three brothers share a look, and my stomach clenches a little. This is usually the point where they close me out, giving me some vague answer or half-truth just so they can keep me out of their business. But this time, Malice sighs, turning to face me.

“I already told you that X tried to fuck us with the job he gave us the night of the event,” he tells me. “This most recent job was difficult too. He’s toying with us, and he probably plans to kill us, so we need to find out who he is and kill him first.”

“And you think he might... come after me?” I ask, feeling a chill of fear run down my spine.

“We can’t know for sure.” Malice shakes his head, his expression hard. “But we need to make sure you’re safe from him either way. It seems like you’re off his radar for now, like he lost interest in you after we sent the video, but we’ve gotta be safe about it and keep an eye on you. Because the truth is, we don’t know what he might do.”

I nod, understanding his point. X sounds powerful, and just because he doesn’t want me for the same reasons he did before, that doesn’t mean he won’t have a change of heart or something. And I’ve already seen firsthand that the brothers’ enemies won’t hesitate to go after me if they think it’ll get them closer to the three men.

Still, as terrifying as it is to contemplate all of that, it’s nice to know the truth about what’s going on. To not be cut out or held at arm’s length anymore.

“So... what are you going to do?” I ask, glancing around the table. “I thought you didn’t know anything about X. How can you get to him if you don’t even know who he is?”

“We’re working on a plan for that,” Vic says, setting down his fork. “I’ve tried to figure out who he could be ever since he got Malice out of jail, but with no luck. So we’re working on a new strategy for that.”

They give me a rundown of their plan, telling me about how they left a camera at the last place they dropped something off after a job they did for him. It sounds like it hasn’t worked so far, but they seem adamant that they’re going to keep trying.

“We don’t have a fucking choice,” Malice growls, curling his fingers around the coffee cup in his hand. “He’s not going to give up, so we can’t either.”

“Be careful,” I tell him. Then I glance around the table, because the sentiment applies to all of them. “This guy sounds really dangerous, and he’s already hurt you once.”

“That’s getting off light compared to what will happen if he gets me thrown back in jail,” Malice replies.

That makes my stomach churn with worry. I don’t even want to think about Malice being sent back to prison, especially knowing what I know now about how horrible it was for him. He’s done some bad stuff, but he doesn’t deserve that.

“It won’t happen,” Ransom says, determination filling his voice. “We’re going to figure this out. We have to.”

Vic nods, and I take a deep breath, trying to take comfort in their certainty. They’re all strong, smart, and resourceful, and they’ve made it this far despite all the obstacles life has thrown at them. So maybe Ransom is right and it’ll work out.

I have to hope so.

After breakfast, I help Vic clean up the kitchen, and we load the dishwasher and wipe everything down. It feels so domestic and more comfortable than I would have expected, having him puttering around in my kitchen.

He keeps his distance, not even letting our shoulders brush when we stand at the sink together, but I still feel closer to him

than I used to. I know how to read him better, how to identify the tiny tells that give away how he's feeling.

Unlike the last time they were here, the guys don't rush off as soon as they can. Malice lounges on my couch, and Ransom amuses himself by flipping through the channels on TV, commenting on the shows that flick by. Vic keeps himself busy on his phone in the armchair I secretly think of as his, even though he's only sat there a couple of times now.

After a while, I go get dressed and remake my bed, leaving the brothers to their own devices. The door opens as I'm pulling a shirt over my head, and Ransom slips in, closing the door behind him.

"Hey. What's up?" I ask, glancing at him over my shoulder.

He walks over to me, a warm smile on his face as he reaches up and brushes my hair back. I relax into his touch, a little relieved that I don't have to keep pretending I don't want to.

He dips his head, skimming his nose along my neck, and I hum softly, tipping my head to the side to give him the space to do it.

"I'm glad you and Malice worked things out," he murmurs. "He's fucking annoying when he's all up in his feelings but pretending he's fine."

I snort softly, biting back a grin. "It's more like we fucked things out, but yeah. I'm glad too."

Ransom chuckles, drawing back so he can look me in the eyes. "I like this sassy side of you, pretty girl."

"You guys have been a bad influence on me. I used to be so sweet and innocent."

He grins, shaking his head. "Nah, I don't buy that. You had more strength than most people do from the moment we met you. That hasn't changed. We're just helping you bring it out more."

"Hm, I guess so."

“See? So maybe we’re a good influence after all.”

“I don’t know if I’d go that far,” I say, teasing him with a smile.

“You’re a good influence on us, at least,” he tells me, dragging his fingertips along the line of my jaw. “Look at how good you are for Malice. I’ve never seen him like this over a girl before. Ever.”

Hearing that makes my heart flutter with some mixture of pride and excitement. It’s not like Malice was keeping his feelings a secret last night, but it’s nice to hear someone who’s known him for almost his whole life confirm it.

“What about Vic?” I ask, biting my lip.

“You’re definitely good for him too. You seem to pull him out of his own head, which isn’t easy to do, believe me. You also don’t treat him like a freak or like someone who’s broken and needs to change.”

That makes me frown. “Do people do that to him?”

Ransom shrugs. “Other than me and Mal, yeah. They assume there’s no way he can be happy the way he is and harp on him about being better and more flexible. But it’s not like it’s easy for him to do that. If it was, he’d already be doing it. So it’s good that you meet him where he’s at and let him be himself. He’s more attached to you than you probably even know. Vic may not always know how to show it or say it, but he cares about you a whole fucking lot.”

I smile softly, thinking of the late-night texts between us and how much I liked the sight of Vic making breakfast in my kitchen.

Then I glance up at Ransom, arching an eyebrow. “And what about you?”

“Me?” He chuckles, flashing me his gorgeous grin. “I’m falling head over heels for you, angel.”

My heart stutters in my chest, skipping a beat or two before starting to gallop. That’s a big admission, and the

scariest part is that I know how he feels. Because I feel the same way.

I don't have the words or the courage to say that yet though, so instead, I just pull him closer, kissing him softly.

Ransom kisses me back, wrapping his arms around my waist and pulling me tighter against his body. It starts soft and slow, but then our hands start roaming, and when he grips my ass, I moan into his mouth. His tongue presses in, tangling with mine, leaving me breathless, and I'm panting by the time we separate.

"You know what? We need to celebrate," he tells me, his blue-green eyes sparkling. "There's a lot of shit going wrong in our lives these days, but you're the best thing about any of it. And we need to do something fun. We're gonna take you out."

I couldn't stop the smile that spreads across my face if I tried.

WILLOW

THE GUYS SPEND the rest of the day at my apartment, and as evening rolls around, Victor and I stand in my bedroom.

He rifles through my closet, eyeing the offerings with a critical expression, rejecting things based on some system that only he understands, probably.

When Ransom said they were taking me out, he wasn't kidding, but none of them will tell me where we're going. Since I don't know how to dress for it, Vic offered to help—and after he vetoed most of my suggestions, I let him take the reins. He seems happier that way, and honestly, I am too. I like watching him move comfortably around my apartment.

He pulls a dress out of my closet, giving it an assessing look. It's one of the new ones from the haul of clothes I bought when Olivia helped me get settled in at my new place.

It's black and short, with a slit up one side, and even though the top is more modest, it will definitely show off the scars on my leg when I walk.

“Here,” he says. “Put this on.”

I make a face, wrinkling my nose. “I forgot I even bought that. It's... a little revealing, don't you think?”

Vic just raises an eyebrow, waiting for me to explain.

“It'll show my scars. I'm not sure if that's the one.”

“You'll look beautiful,” Vic says.

He doesn't say it the way Ransom would, all charm and flirtatiousness. With Victor, it's just open honesty. He says it like it's a statement of fact, and it stops me in my tracks, making me swallow hard.

I remember how he had me touch my scars when he was watching me through the cameras, and the way his voice sounded so wrecked and desperate, just from that. My stomach flutters, both at the memory and the way Vic looks at me now, and I nod.

I take the dress from him and start stripping right there, not even bothering to ask him to leave or step into the bathroom.

Victor's eyes are heavy as he watches me. He doesn't make any move to touch me or move closer at all, just like usual, but his gaze devours me. His eyes flick up and down my body, and it's almost like having his hands skim over me.

My breath catches as tension flares between us, and every movement I make is cataloged by Vic. He doesn't look away for a second, barely seeming to even blink as I start shimmying into the dress, letting the soft fabric slide over my skin.

I want so badly for him to pull me into his arms and kiss me. Or touch me. Or do anything other than just watch.

But he's rooted to the spot, still held back by the mountains of trauma I know he's experienced. I don't want to push him too far or make him feel like he's not enough, so I don't move any closer to him either. I just hold his gaze and then run my hand up my leg, letting my fingers graze over the patch of scar tissue that the slit in the dress shows off.

Vic groans, barely audible, and my clit throbs at the sound.

When the bedroom door opens, I jump, startled out of the moment as Ransom pokes his head in.

"Are you ready yet?" he asks. "We need to—"

He cuts himself off and steps halfway into the room, looking back and forth between the two of us. Then he snorts and shakes his head.

“Jesus. Only the two of you would have this much sexual tension while standing several feet apart, fully clothed.”

I laugh, and Victor rolls his eyes, giving me one last look before brushing past Ransom and going back into the living room.

After giving myself one last once over in the mirror, I follow them out so we can head downstairs and pile into Malice’s car.

I don’t even bother trying to figure out where we’re going until we get there. I know firsthand it’s impossible to wheedle information out of these three when they don’t want to give it, and it’s not like this is life or death or anything.

As it turns out, our destination is a dance club.

I’ve heard of Sin and Salvation before, mostly from when I used to wait tables at Sapphire, what feels like forever ago. Carl would often bitch about other establishments in Detroit doing a better business than his.

This place has nothing in common with the old strip club I used to work with, though. We step inside, and the thumping bass fills my body, catching me up in the beat of the song that’s playing.

It’s fairly dark inside, but it’s all so nice and modern looking, with strobing lights and little sections for people to sit and drink if they don’t want to join the mass of gyrating bodies on the dance floor.

Other than working at a strip club, I’ve never been clubbing before, and I just gaze around for a bit, taking in the sight of people letting themselves go and having fun.

A warm hand rests at the small of my back, and Malice steers me toward the bar for drinks.

There’s a guy behind the bar, leaning in to talk to the bartender over the music. He’s handsome in a classic model way, lean and tall with dark brown hair that looks soft to the touch. He flashes a grin to the bartender and pushes his glasses up before glancing over at us. Something I can’t identify

flashes through his expression as he sees the Voronin brothers, and he lifts his chin before coming over to us.

“Didn’t expect to see you three here,” he says. “I’m glad the intel we gave you was useful.”

All three of the brothers nod, and Ransom leans against the bar. “Thanks for that. It was just what we needed.”

“You know, our bartenders are actually supposed to be tending the bar,” another voice calls, and I look over in time to see a woman with silver hair pushing her way through the crowd to the bar. She pins the man who greeted us with a look, but he just grins at her.

“I’m not distracting anyone, I promise. We were talking business.”

“Right,” she deadpans, but she leans up to kiss him.

It takes a second for her to notice us, and when she does, her eyebrows shoot up. She looks warily at Malice, Vic, and Ransom, like she’s waiting for them to explain why we’re here.

“It’s cool,” the man with the glasses says, touching her shoulder. “They’re just here to enjoy the club. Right?”

“Yes,” Ransom assures them. “We’re just regular patrons tonight.”

The woman snorts, looking skeptical. Before she can speak again, another man joins them behind the bar, pulling her close to his body and kissing her hard enough that it dips her back a little.

He’s much bigger than the two of them, about on par with Malice’s level of broad-shouldered muscle. His shaggy hair falls into his face when he pulls back with a grin that sends a shiver up my spine.

I realize with a jolt that I’m staring, my eyes wide and eyebrows raised, and I have to shake myself, trying to contain my surprise at seeing this woman kissing two different men right here.

Ever since I started this thing with the Voronin brothers, I've felt a little weird. It's not like it's all that common to be... involved with three men at once. But here's this woman who's clearly with more than one guy too.

She notices my surprise, but instead of calling me out for it, she just smirks a little, her gaze darting between me and the three men flanking me.

"I'm River," she says. "And this is Ash and Knox." She nods to the one with glasses and the big one in turn. "They run the place. I'm just here to cause trouble."

"That's definitely your specialty," Ash drawls, leaning on the bar as he pulls a coin from his pocket and flips it over his knuckles. "But it's not like you don't put in just as many hours as the rest of us. You're going to make Gage look like he has a healthy work schedule if you keep this up."

She rolls her eyes, still held in the cradle of Knox's arms. He makes her look so small, compared to his bulk, but she seems comfortable there against him.

"Willow," I reply, introducing myself in return.

She nods. "Nice to meet you. Enjoy yourselves tonight. Don't make trouble."

That last bit is directed at the brothers, and her tone gets a little harder as she says it. Vic doesn't respond, and Malice just snorts under his breath. Ransom, the one who handles all the interpersonal things for his socially challenged brothers, just flashes a smile.

"We'll be on our best behavior. Promise."

River nods and then turns to kiss Ash and Knox again. "I'm heading home," she says. "Priest said he already put Cody to bed, and I'll try to pry Gage away from his laptop."

"Shouldn't be hard once you get there." Ash shoots her a wink.

"They'd better not wear you out before we get home," Knox mutters, nuzzling at her neck before letting her go.

River just laughs, wagging her eyebrows at both men before she slips through the crowd and disappears.

I find myself staring after her, feeling kind of floored. She seems to be involved with four men, assuming Gage and Priest are also her partners. That was definitely the way it sounded. And she makes it seem so... easy. Knox and that guy Ash both seemed perfectly happy with the arrangement, sharing her affection between them with no hints of awkwardness or jealousy.

Seeing it makes me feel less alone, giving me a boost of confidence that it's okay to have feelings for Malice, Ransom, and Victor.

If River and those men can make it work, then maybe we can too.

I'm still staring after River when Ransom nudges me, a grin on his face.

"Do you want a drink?" he asks, raising an eyebrow.

"Yeah," I tell him.

He orders for all of us, and when he presses a cold glass into my hands, I take a sip of it. It tastes good, fruity and sweet with just a little lingering burn of whatever alcohol is in it.

We head onto the dance floor after a few minutes, finding a little pocket of space for ourselves amid all the other bodies grinding on the floor.

I've never really done this before, never really danced at all, but before I can get too much in my head about how bad I'll probably be at it, the guys move in around me. Ransom pulls me close, and Malice fits himself in behind me, his broad frame solid against mine. They move to the music, and I follow their lead, letting myself go a bit.

I'm still riding high on the revelation of our feelings, and the booze in my system relaxes me even more. I let the beat of the music guide me, working my hips, taking turns touching Ransom and Malice as they stick close to me.

It's easy to lose myself like this. The songs blend into each other, each one riding the beat of the one that came before it. The lights flash, and I feel sticky with sweat from dancing and from the press of heat of the bodies all around us.

But it feels good.

For once, I'm not too in my head, not worrying about something or feeling out of place.

My phone vibrates at one point, startling me as it buzzes insistently in my bra where I've stashed it. I pull it out to check and see that it's Olivia.

I'll call her back tomorrow, I decide, swiping to ignore the call.

"No phones tonight, pretty girl." Ransom plucks the cell phone out of my hand and tucks it in his own pocket, giving me a roguish smile and a wink. "Just dancing."

"That's right." Malice presses in closer behind me, pinning me between him and Ransom again.

Their bodies are hard and familiar, and I grind against them as we dance. Malice puts his hands on my hips, and I put mine on Ransom's shoulders, and we move together, bodies rubbing and sliding to the beat.

Even on the dance floor, the differences between the two men are so clear. Ransom is smooth and sensual, his body flowing from one movement to the next, going with the flow of the song and following the thrumming bass line easily. Malice is powerful and dominant. His hands on my hips guide me as we dance together, and he presses himself insistently against me, keeping me pinned in place.

Victor doesn't touch me, of course. He barely even dances, really, standing close enough to us that he can see everything, but keeping himself apart from it, like usual. He bobs his head to the beat of the song blasting through the speakers, his gaze riveted to me as I move with his brothers. He looks almost hypnotized, and his eyes are just as intense as Ransom and Malice's touches.

He looks good standing there in all black, his untouchable features making people want to get closer to him. That's proven by all the women who give him second and third looks as they pass, trying to catch his attention, and the ones who move in to try to dance with him.

But Victor brushes them all off. One of them tries to reach for his shoulder, and he gives her a sharp look before stepping away. She pouts but leaves him alone, and Vic's focus goes right back to me, as if I'm the only thing he has eyes for.

Being the subject of his intense observation always feels good, and this is no exception. Between the way he's looking at me, and the way Malice and Ransom are touching me, my heart is racing and my body is humming, arousal growing sweet and hot in my belly.

Malice grabs a handful of my ass right there on the dance floor, possessive and insistent, and I gasp softly, pressing back into his big hands.

"You've got me so damn hard," he murmurs over the music, his lips finding my ear. "I bet every man in this place wishes he was me or my brothers right now. But too bad for them, you're already spoken for. You're already fucking claimed, aren't you?"

I highly doubt he's right about every guy in the club wanting me. Objectively, I'm not *that* beautiful, but it's hard to feel self-conscious about my scars or any other thing about myself the way I used to. The truth is, I don't give two shits what any of the men who look my way tonight think of me.

Because I *am* already claimed.

And the three brothers who've claimed me make me feel like I'm gorgeous. Like I'm *enough*, just as I am.

I nod, grinding back harder against Malice in response. "Yes. I am."

"When you say shit like that, you make it hard to resist sliding that dress up and fucking you right here on the dance floor," Ransom groans.

He leans down, kissing my neck and working his way up to my mouth, and I moan softly when our lips meet.

While he slides his tongue into my mouth, tasting and teasing me, Malice takes over at my neck. His kisses are little bites, nipping along my pulse point, finding all the places where I'm the most sensitive and staying there until I'm almost a puddle between them.

“Do you think we could get away with it? Do you think anyone would notice if we fucked you right now?”

Malice slides one hand up the slit in my dress as he speaks, and even with the scar tissue deadening the feeling a bit, it still sends a shiver up my spine. Ransom's hands move too, groping my chest, rubbing my nipples through the fabric of the lacy bra I put on for tonight.

My head is spinning, and when I feel the hard line of Malice's cock press against my ass, I gasp out loud. No one else can probably hear me over the thumping bass in the club, but I know Ransom does. When I look into his eyes, the usual bright blue-green has darkened like an ocean before a storm, and Malice growls low in my ear, nuzzling against me.

I'm not the only one turned on by this, and the electric energy passes between us like a feedback loop, every movement ramping it up higher and higher.

Ransom leans in with a smile, pressing a kiss under my ear. He grinds his hips forward, letting me know how hard he is.

“It doesn't have to be on the dance floor,” he murmurs. “But would you let us fuck you in this club? You look so damn sexy tonight, and we're so hungry for you.”

My breath catches in my chest, and I have to swallow a couple of times before I can get the words out. Yesterday was the last day of my period, so there's nothing to stop us—not that it ever stopped Malice. And as wild and impulsive as it sounds, I know exactly what I want.

“You can have me,” I manage, nodding in answer to Ransom's question. “I'm yours.”

He sucks in a breath as my words reach his ears over the heavy din of the music. He pulls back to look into my eyes, and whatever he sees there seems to snap the last of his self-control.

He picks me up, carrying me off the dance floor with Malice and Victor following close behind.

WILLOW

IF ANYONE we pass thinks it's weird to see Ransom carrying me, they don't say anything. I glance over in time to see a woman in a skimpy dress giving me a jealous look before her gaze drifts over the Voronin brothers, then we break away from the mass of people and the thumping music, heading down a smaller hall.

Ransom yanks open a door, and we spill into a bathroom. It's single occupancy, just big enough for all four of us.

Victor locks the door as Ransom puts me back on my feet and hauls me into another kiss. This one is deeper than any of the ones we shared on the dance floor, as if he's not holding anything back now. It feels like he's been waiting all night to do this, and I lean into it, kissing him back while my head swims.

Large, calloused hands grip my shoulders, and when I pant for breath as Ransom pulls back, Malice turns me to face him.

His gray eyes burn with the same heat I saw in his brother's eyes, and he looks even bigger than usual in this small space. He crushes me against his body, hands at my hips, fingers digging into the flesh there through my dress.

When he kisses me, it feels like being burned alive. Like he's pouring all of the chaos and passion that lives inside him into me, filling me up with it.

Ransom and Malice pass me back and forth, taking turns kissing me while Victor leans against the door, watching it all play out. While Ransom drops kisses to my neck and all the

skin of my chest that he can reach, Malice glides his hands over my hips, pulling them back so he can grind his hard cock against me.

“You feel that?” he pants. “You feel what you do to me?”

All I can do is nod and whimper, and he grunts, pressing his hips forward even harder.

“Malice, please,” I gasp out, breathless.

“Please *what*, Solnyshka? Use your words. You want us to fuck you right here, rough and dirty in this bathroom? You want us to fill you up the way you like?”

I nod, almost frantic. Every word he says makes my body burn more for them.

“Words, angel,” Ransom reminds me. “We want to hear you say it.”

“Please. Please, please, please. I want you to fuck me. I want you to—”

I’m cut off as Malice yanks me around to face him again. He stares down at me, expectant, and I let myself take what I want. I start undoing his pants, getting them open enough that he can shove them down, freeing his cock.

It juts out, hard and flushed, and my heart slams against my rib cage as I realize this is really about to happen. I’m going to fuck them in the bathroom of this club.

Malice’s fingers slide beneath my dress, hooking the waistband of my panties and dragging them down. When they hit the floor, he taps one of my feet with his own.

“Step out.”

I do, nudging the little scrap of fabric to the side. Cool air teases my bare pussy, and Malice’s hand delves between my legs again, one large finger sliding inside me as if to test how wet I am.

“You sore from last night?” he asks.

“No,” I say, even though I can definitely still feel the aftereffects of our rough sex.

He grins, feral and fierce. “Wrong answer, Solnyshka. That just means I’ll have to fuck you harder this time.”

My inner walls clench tightly in response to his words, and I know he can feel it, because his grin widens. He slides his finger out and then picks me up, leaving me to wrap my legs around him.

His cock is trapped between us, pressing against my pussy, and he drags me up and down the length of his shaft without actually sliding inside.

“You ready for me? I need to be inside you fucking *yesterday*.”

“You *were* inside me yesterday,” I point out, more wetness seeping from me and soaking his cock.

“Mouthy.” His gray eyes flash. “I like that about you.”

Without any more preamble, he lifts me higher, lining himself up before pulling me back down, impaling me on his thick length.

It gets easier to take him every time we do this, but especially after last night, my body protests at first. I bite down on his neck as he works his way inside, and he lets out a deep groan, his fingers squeezing my thighs.

“Let me in, Solnyshka. There you go.”

By the time he’s fully seated in me, I’m gasping and writhing in his arms, my nerve endings tingling and sparking with pleasure. And just like last night, Malice doesn’t hold back. Using his hold on my thighs to move my body with his, he pulls me down onto his cock over and over, thrusting his hips to meet me every time.

“Malice,” I whimper. “Oh god...”

I can feel the burn of Vic’s eyes as he watches, and Ransom moves in behind me, hitching my dress up higher over my ass.

“You’re so fucking beautiful,” he murmurs, running his hands over me.

I gasp sharply when I feel one of his fingers run along the crack of my ass. The feeling of him touching me there makes my toes curl, and when Ransom spreads my cheeks a bit so that he can slowly work the tip of one finger into me, I cry out, shaking against Malice.

“You like that?” Ransom asks, his voice rough.

“I—”

All I can do is nod, too breathlessly turned on by Malice fucking into me and Ransom playing with my ass to answer better than that. Words are a jumble in my brain, condensed down until all I really know is ‘yes’ and ‘more’ and ‘please.’

“You let us take your virginity,” Ransom muses, sliding his finger deeper. “And you did it so beautifully. Maybe one day you’ll let one of us be the first to fuck you here too.”

My fingernails rake over Malice’s back, digging into the fabric of his shirt as Ransom’s words set off a flurry of fireworks inside me.

“Yes...” I groan.

Ransom keeps teasing my ass as Malice works me up and down on his cock, and by the time my orgasm starts to crest, I feel like I’m about to fly into pieces. If it wasn’t for the two of them holding onto me, keeping me tethered, I’d be worried that I might pass out.

The finger in my ass presses in just a bit more, and it’s enough to have me burying my face in Malice’s shoulder, muffling my cries of pleasure as sensation peaks and I’m thrown headfirst into my climax.

I go tight around Malice’s cock, and he curses under his breath, fucking me harder and faster, his fingers digging into my skin with enough force that I know there will be bruises left behind.

But I don’t care.

I don’t care about anything except how good this feels, and I tremble as I try to catch my breath.

As if he's been holding out until I came first, Malice crushes his mouth to mine as he buries himself inside me, filling me up. His cock pulses, and despite the soreness between my legs, I clench my walls around him, milking every last bit of his release.

After a long moment, he goes still. Dropping his head to rest his forehead against mine, he surprises me by pressing a soft kiss to the tip of my nose.

"I've never known anyone like you, Solnyshka," he murmurs. "You're fucking... unbreakable."

I grin, because only Malice could say something like that and make it sound like a true compliment.

He lifts me off his cock and sets me on my feet, and my legs wobble, my entire body feeling a bit like jelly. But Ransom is right there, stepping in and pulling me into his arms, holding me tight against his body as he gazes down at me.

"I won't hold you to anything you just said," he tells me, heat and amusement gleaming in his eyes. "Because we all know promises made during sex can't be considered binding. But goddamn, pretty girl, I really want to fuck your perfect ass someday."

And just like that, I'm turned on all over again, my imagination running wild as I stare up at his gorgeous face. The thought of it is daunting, but the way my stomach flips when I think about letting him claim me that way is more from excitement than fear.

"I meant it," I whisper. "Someday... I want that."

He smiles, palming the back of my head and kissing me, hungry and playful.

"There's something else I want right now," he tells me as we separate.

"What's that?"

"Bend over," he says. "And grab your ankles."

I blanch at the command, my heart thudding against my ribs. It sounds so filthy and wrong, but I can't deny the way it makes my pussy throb, the lingering pleasure from the first orgasm mingling with the fresh desire Ransom is bringing out in me.

"You like it dirty, Solnyshka," Malice drawls from where he's standing nearby, sounding darkly amused. "Don't pretend you don't. We know you, remember? We might be the only three people in the world who know the *real* you."

I bite my lip, my cheeks burning, but he's right. They've seen a side of me I've never shown to anyone else, and I've let myself be completely uninhibited with them.

So there's no reason to hold back now.

Breathing hard, I slowly turn to face away from the three of them. Then I bend over, grabbing on to my ankles awkwardly. It's a little hard to keep my balance, especially with my legs as shaky as they are, and in this position, I'm totally exposed. My dress rides up in the back, showing off my ass.

Not satisfied by that, Ransom pushes it up even more, making sure nothing is hidden from them. My pussy is completely on display, and I'm sure it looks swollen and puffy from Malice's cock, and oozing his cum in a slow drip.

"Fucking beautiful," Ransom murmurs, sounding almost reverent. "I wish you could see yourself, angel. You look so good like this."

"She's fucking insatiable." Malice's voice is a deep burn. "Already full of cum and panting for more, aren't you?"

I whimper, swaying in place.

"He asked you a question," Vic says, speaking for the first time since we came in here. His voice seems even more powerful since he hasn't used it yet, and there's something about it that makes me shiver.

"Yes," I manage to pant out. "Fuck, please. Yes, I want more."

“Our beautiful little whore,” Malice growls, but he makes it sound more like a pet name than an insult. “Such a good fucking girl.”

“So good for us,” Ransom agrees.

The quiet hiss of a zipper fills the space, and a moment later, Ransom steps up behind me, one hand on my hip as he guides himself to my entrance. When he starts to push in, I let out a low, guttural sound.

“I know Malice really gave it to you,” he croons, running a hand soothingly down my back. “So I’ll take it easy. I’ll make you feel so good.”

I nod, or try to. My hair is falling around my face, blood rushing to my head and making it hard to focus. If I had the words, I would tell him that everything they do to me feels good, but I don’t. So I just moan softly as he starts to fuck me with slow, even strokes.

“There you go,” he encourages, the piercings on his cock sliding against my walls as he drags out and presses back in. “Fuck, I’ve been dying to be inside you all night.”

My body is on fire with sensation, and if it wasn’t for his hands on my hips, I would definitely already have fallen over. The heavy thump of the bass is a distant sound, and I can barely remember that we’re only yards away from hundreds of people drinking and talking and dancing out in the main part of the club. Nothing else exists but what’s happening in this little room, the four of us locked in a bubble that nothing can penetrate.

“I can... take more,” I gasp out, bumping my ass against Ransom a little.

I know he’s trying to take care of me, but whether they meant to or not, the Voronin brothers have taught me to crave pain in almost the same way I crave pleasure. One heightens the other.

“Fuck, pretty girl,” he grits out. “You’re too fucking good.”

He picks up his pace, no longer holding back as much. It's hard to stay upright as he starts driving into me more forcefully, but my fingers grip my ankles tighter, and I try to breathe through the pleasure, holding on for dear life.

"Goddamn," Ransom mutters under his breath. "So tight. So wet. So perfect. Our perfect little angel."

A second orgasm is building in me, faster than the first, already moving through my veins with the speed of honey warmed up over a fire, just as sweet and all-consuming. Ransom doesn't slow down or let up, and I start to go tighter around him, my body tensing as pleasure threatens to overtake me.

"Rans—" I manage to gasp out. "I'm—"

"That's it," he urges. "Come on, angel. Let us see how fucking beautiful you are when you're falling apart."

I whimper at his words, and it only takes another couple of strokes before the tight ball of pleasure gathering low in my belly explodes outward.

My brain whites out, everything going fuzzy and unclear as the orgasm takes over. Ransom keeps fucking me, chasing his own release, and the feeling of him spilling into my oversensitive pussy makes my body clench.

I'm panting for breath when he finally pulls out and helps me stand up straight, and my legs feel like they could give out at any moment. When he wraps his arms around me from behind, I melt into his touch, feeling the warm trickle of his cum as it joins the mess that smears my thighs.

"Beautiful," Ransom breathes, murmuring right in my ear. "I'll never get tired of seeing you like this. There's nothing better in the whole damn world."

I'm exhausted and worn out, completely satisfied... and also *not*, somehow. Because there's still something missing. Without consciously thinking about it, I glance over at Victor, and even though Ransom can't see what's in my expression, he must be able to guess.

He turns us a little so that we're facing Victor more fully, still holding me loosely in his arms as he addresses his brother.

"Hey, Vic. You told me one time that you only jerk off on certain days of the week. Is that still true?"

Vic's gaze darts from me to Ransom, and then back to me. "Yes."

"Is today one of those days?"

"Yes."

Ransom's lips find my ear, and although he pitches his voice a little lower on the next words, I know Vic can still hear them. "Why don't you ask him if he's already taken care of himself today, angel?"

My heart pounds a little harder, and silence fills the bathroom for a long moment as I lock eyes with Vic, who stares right back at me.

"Have you?" I whisper.

"Have I what?" His voice is so strained it's almost unrecognizable.

"Have you jerked off today?" The question comes out easier than I would have expected—maybe because I'm finally getting better at dirty talk, or maybe because I'm just so desperate to know the answer.

Vic's tongue darts out to lick his lips, his hands clenched tightly at his sides. "No. I haven't."

"Do you want to?"

Another pause, then he nods. "Yes."

"I want to see," I whisper, barely daring to say the words.

The room goes quiet for another interminable beat, and I swear the thundering of my heart is louder than the beat of the music from outside the room. I have no idea if he'll say yes, no idea if this will undo all the progress the two of us have made. It could send him retreating back into himself... but I feel like I have to try.

I have to let him know that I want him.

“What if you help him out?” Ransom murmurs, his nose brushing my ear. “Give him something to jerk off to. Show him what he wants, what he’s been craving so bad. Let him see you.”

I don’t know quite what Ransom has in mind, but I nod anyway, my gaze still locked on Vic.

Ransom kisses my ear, then glances over, sharing a look with Malice. The tattooed man steps forward, and together, the two of them lift me up onto the sink. I shiver as the cool, smooth surface touches my bare ass.

Then Malice and Ransom each grip one of my legs and spread me open, their fingers locked around my knees.

I squirm a little, not really trying to close my legs but more just testing their grips, and Ransom grins at me, his thumb brushing the inside of my knee. I’m held open, everything on display for Vic. My pussy is still pink and clearly used, smeared with my own arousal and the remnants of Malice’s and Ransom’s cum.

I feel filthy and depraved, but also strangely powerful as Victor stares at me, his gaze tracking over my body before landing at the spot between my legs. He reaches down to palm himself through his pants, gripping his cock tightly, and the sight makes my breath catch.

“Please, Vic,” I whisper, gripping the edge of the sink. “You’ve watched me so many times. Now I want to see you. I want you to finish... on me.”

His Adam’s apple bobs as he swallows. His jaw is tight, every muscle in his body taut.

Then he steps closer, a hungry look passing over his features, edging out anything neutral or blank in his expression. His nostrils flare with each sharp inhale, and when he reaches me, he comes to a stop less than a foot away.

No one speaks as his hands fumble at his fly, and when he shoves his pants down enough to pull his cock out, it’s already

hard and flushed, the tip wet with precum. Proof that he's been turned on this whole time, watching his brothers fuck me.

My body aches for him, and I want to touch him or something, but I keep my hands to myself, watching intently as he starts to stroke himself.

It's careful and deliberate, just like it was the only other time I've seen him do this, as if he's gotten it down to a science.

He can't seem to settle on where to look as he jerks himself off with quick, efficient movements. His eyes roam over my face and body, tracking over my scars before returning to the spot where cum leaks from my core.

His breath gets faster, the muscles in his cheeks jumping as he clenches his jaw rhythmically, and when he moves even closer, my breath seizes in my chest.

For a moment, I wonder if he's about to slide into me and fuck me right here.

But he doesn't.

He gets close enough that I can feel the heat of him, that I can smell the mixture of arousal and his own natural scent. The head of his cock is just an inch away from my pussy, but I don't try to get closer.

Instead, I just watch, almost transfixed, as his fist moves over his shaft.

With a low, ragged grunt, he starts to move faster, thrusting into his own hand a little. Each push of his hips brings him that much closer to me, and even though we never touch, I can feel the connection burning between us, fierce and overwhelming.

He curses, his rhythm faltering in a way that makes me think he's close to the edge, and I swear my heart stops beating in anticipation.

"Please," I breathe. "Please, Vic. Give it to me."

His body jerks like he's been hit from behind, and a ragged noise spills from his lips. His fist flies over his cock, and when

he finally comes, I moan at the hot burst of it.

He's so close to me that he basically spills himself right into my pussy, and when he grunts out his pleasure, it sounds almost like the orgasm took a piece of his soul with it.

Cum splashes onto my thighs too, and I reach down, rubbing it into my skin instinctively, like I can't get enough.

When I glance back up, Victor is watching me, and there's so much emotion burning in his eyes. More than I've ever seen before.

He stares at me, and I stare back, letting him see everything I'm feeling too.

The moment stretches out, his eyes bouncing between mine as we each slowly catch our breath. Then Vic's lips twitch into a ghost of a smile before he steps away. He tucks his cock back into his pants, and Malice leans in and kisses me, pressing me back against the mirror over the sink.

Ransom swoops in too, stealing a kiss of his own, and I'm left panting and dizzy when they lean back. They help me down from the sink, and Ransom gets some paper towels and wets them, kneeling down so he can clean me up.

He kisses the inside of my knee as he finishes, making goosebumps pepper my skin, and when he looks up, warmth shines in his eyes.

His words from earlier tonight filter through my mind, when we were talking about Vic in my bedroom.

You're good for him.

Maybe that really is true. And no matter how long I spent trying to deny it, now that I've opened my heart up a little, I can see that the other side of that is true too.

These men are good for me.

WILLOW

THE NEXT DAY AT SCHOOL, I feel like I'm in a bit of a daze, but in a nice way. My classes have been going well, despite everything else that's been going on in my life. And even with the distractions I currently have, I'm still able to focus on papers and homework better than when I was juggling long hours at the strip club and constantly stressing about money.

I feel so much lighter now than I did then, and it's doing wonders for my grades.

As I'm walking across campus from one class to another, my phone vibrates in my pocket, and I pull it out.

Olivia's name flashes on the screen, and I make a face, feeling guilty about ignoring her call last night.

I answer now, putting the phone up to my ear.

"Willow. How are you feeling?" she asks as soon as I pick up.

"Oh." I blink. "I'm okay."

"That's a relief. I heard through the grapevine that you didn't go on your date with Joshua this weekend since you weren't feeling well, and I wanted to check in."

I wince at that. Right. I almost forgot about that lie. I remember Malice's threat about killing Joshua if he touched me, and shake my head. I'm going to have to think of a way to let Joshua down politely. Not that we actually had anything going, since we never even went out on a single date, but I'll

need to make it clear I'm not interested in starting anything up with him.

But I feel like I should talk to him before I tell Olivia anything—especially since gossip seems to spread fast in her circle—so I silently ask her to forgive me for lying.

“I'm pretty sure it was just a twenty-four hour thing,” I tell her. “Or something I ate, maybe. I'm okay now.”

“That's good. I called you last night, but you didn't answer, so I was concerned.”

“Yeah, I just passed out early watching a little TV. I wanted to be well-rested for classes today.”

I can hear the smile in her voice when she responds. “You're such a diligent student. I really am very proud of you, Willow.”

“Thanks,” I murmur, touched.

I'm about to ask if she needed anything other than to check in on me, but before I can, she clears her throat.

“There's... actually another reason why I'm calling.”

“What is it?” Something knots up in my stomach as I speak. Olivia sounds almost nervous herself, as if she doesn't want to tell me whatever it is, and that can't be good.

“Well...” She hesitates for a second, then sighs. “It's your mother. Yesterday, she came to my house, and it was far from pleasant.”

“Oh, no.”

“She essentially demanded that I give her money.”

My jaw drops, and my heart goes with it. “What?”

Olivia sighs. “Yes. She just showed up unannounced, and it seemed like she was high on something, the same way she was when she came to the museum. She told me I owed her and that she deserved it for raising you.”

My face burns with embarrassment, and I'm glad this is a phone conversation so Olivia can't see it. There's anger there

too, because what the fuck? Misty and I had that whole conversation about how she was going to try to be better. How she was going to get clean and take charge of her life.

And *this* is how she decided to take charge of her life?

“I’m so sorry,” I tell my grandmother. “She said she wasn’t going to do stuff like that anymore, and then she...”

I trail off, not even sure what to say.

“It’s not your fault, dear girl,” Olivia replies, her voice firm. “I offered to help Misty with rehab if she wants to get clean. I’m perfectly willing to cover the costs of that, but I told her that I wouldn’t be giving her any money outright.”

“Thank you,” I whisper, swallowing the lump in my throat.

“Of course. She is your adoptive mother, after all, and she seems to be struggling right now.”

I feel like laughing, although it’s not funny at all. Misty is struggling? If she is, it’s because of the position she’s put herself in. I’ve tried to help her, Olivia tried to offer rehab, but of course that wasn’t good enough for Misty. Nothing is ever enough.

When I hang up with Olivia, I glance at the time on my phone. I still have one more class, and I don’t want to miss it, so I try to shove down everything I’m feeling and focus on school.

The notes I take are a disjointed mess, though, and my mind keeps replaying the conversation I had with Olivia over and over. The minute the professor releases us, I make a beeline for my car and start driving toward Misty’s place.

I’m fuming, my hands tight on the steering wheel, and I hit the brakes hard as I pull up outside her house. Storming up to the front door, I burst inside, not even bothering to knock.

Misty steps out of the kitchen, looking surprised.

“Hi, baby. What are you—”

“You promised,” I snap, cutting her off. “You said you were going to be better. You said you were going to try. And I

believed you because I always do, even though you'd think I'd know better by now!"

"What—"

I shake my head before she can say anything else. Before she can try to spin this to make me feel sorry for her.

"No, I don't want to hear it. This is the last fucking time. You've lied to me and manipulated me for my whole life, and now you're doing it to other people too!"

Misty must finally figure out what I'm talking about, because her lips tighten at the corners, her chin lifting defiantly.

"It's not like that," she says. "Everything I ever did was for you. Everything I did was to try to keep a roof over our heads and food in the fridge. I don't know why you hate me so much for that. For trying to take care of you."

It's the same song and dance, and I try to harden my heart against it. Every time I get close to cutting her off or telling her we're done, she comes up with some way to keep me here. To keep me thinking that she cares about me and she's done all of this for me instead of her own selfish ends.

"Stop lying!" I shout. "Just for once, stop lying to me. Olivia offered to pay for your rehab. What about that? What about how you said you were going to get clean?"

She rolls her eyes, resting her hands on her hips. "I told her no. I don't need some hoity toity bitch who doesn't know the first thing about me telling me what I have to do. She could've just given me the money and I would have used it to get clean. But I'm not going to be treated like a child."

My hands curl into fists at my sides, and I can hear the blood rushing in my head.

"You always have an excuse, don't you?" I whisper, my eyes burning. "So many fucking excuses. So much bullshit. People try to help you, and you throw it back in their faces."

"Don't talk to me like that." Misty scowls. "I'm still your mother."

“God, *stop!* Just stop it. I’ve given you so many chances. Even after everything you’ve done! You’ve lied to me, you’ve stolen from me, you’ve let me get hurt. But I’m always fucking there for you! When you’re passed out in your own vomit or getting molested by some asshole or incoherent on the side of the road, I’m always there, and for what? So you can turn around and ruin my relationship with the only real family I have?”

Misty’s head jerks back, and she looks almost surprised by the force of my emotions. Maybe she wasn’t expecting me to push back like this. I’ve let her get away with shit over and over and over, so why wouldn’t she think this time would be the same?

But it’s not.

I’m done.

“I took care of you,” she says, her voice turning a bit plaintive as she takes a step forward. “Without me, you’d be in foster care somewhere.”

“Yeah? Well, maybe that would’ve been better,” I say, my voice cold and hard. “Maybe I wouldn’t have had to spend my childhood babysitting an adult who could never keep her shit together. But you know what, Mom? I’m finished. I don’t want you in my life anymore. I’m done cleaning up your messes and playing damage control. I’m just *done*. And you know what? It’s not because I finally found a real blood relative. It’s because you’ve always been a horrible excuse for a mother.”

Before she can say anything else, I turn and stride out of the house, feeling caught up in a tidal wave of emotions.

My hands are still clenched hard, and I have to remind myself to breathe when I get back to my car, trying not to speed all the way back to my apartment.

When I get home, I put on a home improvement show and throw something together for dinner. Usually that relaxes me, but I still feel sick to my stomach and agitated.

I pick up my phone, about to text Victor, but I stop before I send the message.

The things he texts me usually help me feel better, but right now, I need more than that. I need to hear his voice, to listen to the calm, even tone of it as he speaks in his measured way. So I hit the call button instead.

The phone rings exactly three times before he answers.

“Willow.” His cool, even voice is immediately soothing, and I relax on the couch, letting out a breath as he asks, “What’s going on?”

“I—” My eyes burn, and I swallow. “I think I just cut off my mom. For good.”

“You think?” he asks.

I shake my head. “No. I know I did. I just... couldn’t do it anymore. Everything with her is always such a fight. It’s always her lying to me and treating me like shit and then turning around and needing me. And whenever she needed me, I always went. I was always there to pick up the pieces of whatever she broke. I’m so tired of it, Vic.”

“Did something happen?” he asks, his voice quiet.

I let out a breath and tell him the whole story. Misty promising me she was going to get clean, saying she didn’t want to lose me and she would do what it took to keep me in her life. Her going to Olivia’s and demanding money, then scoffing in her face at being offered a way to get clean that didn’t involve my grandmother just writing her a check.

“She has a lot of nerve, I’ll say that for her,” Vic comments when I finish.

I snort softly. “Yeah, she does. She’s never lacked nerve, just common fucking sense. And I guess the part that hurts most is, I used to really believe she cared about me—on some level, at least. That even though she fucked up and used me, she really did love me. But then she goes to my grandmother, who I’ve only known for a couple of months, and demands *money* for raising me. Like Olivia owes her for taking care of me when there was no one else.”

I keep talking, and Vic lets me get it all off of my chest. He asks questions here and there, makes soft noises to let me

know he's still listening, but mostly, he just hears me out. All of my emotions come out in a tumble, and for someone who seems so detached from his own emotions more often than not, he seems to understand mine well.

When I've finally run out of words, the line goes quiet for a moment. Then Vic's voice comes through again, low in my ear.

"I'm sorry."

I exhale a slow breath, realizing that my chest doesn't feel as tight anymore. All of that was weighing on me so heavily, and it feels good to finally have the burden lifted.

"Thanks," I tell him softly. "For letting me say all of that."

"Of course. I understand a bit, how it can feel."

"I know," I whisper. "I think that's why I called you." More than anyone else I know, Victor seems to understand this side of me—the battered, bruised, and broken side. I hate that our trauma bonds us, but it does. "How are you doing?" I ask, changing the subject.

He makes a noise that could almost be a small laugh. "The same as ever. I'm just working."

"Still trying to find a way to track down X?"

"Yes. We don't have any leads yet, but I'm working on it."

I hear the clacking of his keyboard in the background, and I smile a little, imagining him with his phone pressed between his ear and his shoulder, listening to me while he keeps working.

"Can I ask you something?"

"You can," he replies. The *but I might not answer* part is silent and implied, and it makes me smile even more. That's just how he is.

"What do you like about working with computers so much? How did you even get into it?"

There's a soft hum as Vic considers the question.

“I like it because it’s orderly,” he finally says. “Computers work on a system. Ones and zeros. It’s mathematical, and the engineering is set up so that you should get the same result every time you do something in the same way. There’s very little chaos to it. It just makes sense.”

I nod. “Yeah, I can see why that would appeal to you.”

“It does,” he agrees. “Whenever things in life are out of my control, there’s at least something that works the way it should, and that helps. I find hacking to be... soothing.”

That makes me chuckle. “You’re good at it,” I tell him.

“I should be. I started when I was young, mostly just messing around to see what I could do. When Malice, Ransom, and I started doing jobs before we built our shop, those skills came in handy. So I keep them sharp, the same way you would keep any skill or tool well maintained.”

The way he talks is so even and calm, and the sound of it washes over me like a soothing river.

It gets dark in the living room as we keep talking. This might be the most words we’ve ever exchanged in all the time I’ve known the brothers, but Vic doesn’t seem anxious to hang up, and neither am I. He answers more of my questions and asks a few of his own, teasing me about home improvement shows and the fact that I don’t throw away leftovers until they’re way past their prime.

My eyes close after a while, and I curl up on my side, still cradling the phone to my ear.

I’m not even aware of the exact moment that sleep creeps up on me, but it finally does.

VICTOR

THE GLOW from my computers casts a soft light into the room as I sit in my chair, listening to Willow's breathing even out on the other end of the call.

It's a soft, rhythmic noise, and I find myself subconsciously matching it, inhaling and exhaling when she does. She's asleep. I can tell from the way she's breathing, and judging from the fact that the cameras in her room show that her bed is empty, she's fallen asleep on the couch.

I smile at the image of her I can conjure up in my imagination—her delicate body curled up on the cushions, a blanket tucked haphazardly around her, her long lashes brushing her cheeks.

“Goodnight, butterfly,” I murmur softly, then end the call.

It feels almost too quiet in my room without the sound of her voice or her breathing, but I get back to work, hunting through the footage from the drop point again to see if there's anything usable at all.

As I work, a notification pops up in the bottom corner of my screen, telling me I have a new encrypted message.

Fuck. I don't even need to check it to know it's going to be from X.

I break the encryption and scan the message quickly, my lips twisting into a frown.

He's got another job for us already.

We'll have to complete it within the next ten days, and it's blackmail this time, getting dirt on someone and delivering it to X as usual.

I read over the message a few times, committing the details to memory before I get up and head downstairs.

Malice is in the kitchen, sitting at the table with his tattoo gun, adding to the ever growing piece of ink that he's been working on for a while. He's hunched over his arm, the room quiet except for the buzz of the machine and his soft breathing.

He looks up when I walk in, raising an eyebrow.

"We have another job," I tell him.

He rolls his eyes. "Fucking fantastic. What is it this time?"

"Blackmail. But it'll involve another drop, so that's another chance to try to put a camera where we can hopefully get something that will lead us to X."

Malice nods. "That's something, at least."

"Should I wake up Ransom and fill him in?"

"Nah, just tell him in the morning. Someone should get some sleep around here."

We exchange a look at that, and I know Malice feels the same way I do. Ransom is in this shit with us most of the time, but he's not as hardened as Malice or as detached as I am. We want to keep it that way.

"It's odd," I say, watching as the needle of the tattoo gun moves faster than my eye can track, stabbing the ink into Malice's skin again and again.

"What is?"

"Thinking about what things could be like if we manage to get X off of our backs."

"Yeah." Malice grunts. "Doing jobs we want to do and having some fucking control over our lives. Imagine that."

I snort. "Sounds like paradise."

“I’ve got some plans, at least. I want to expand the business, make it so we can keep money coming in without having to deal with shit-heads we don’t want to do business with. I think we could do it.”

I nod. It’s not hard to picture. Ransom has the charisma to keep people coming back—and make up for Malice’s outbursts when they happen—and we’re all good at what we do.

But there is one thing that worries me about it.

“I keep thinking about Willow,” I admit. “And the future. She has a whole new life now. She’s not that scared girl we met at the brothel anymore. Compared to what her grandmother has given her and can keep giving her, what can we really offer? We’ve carved out this spot for ourselves in the underground of Detroit, but it’s not like we’re on the top of the food chain. Not even close. What can we give her?”

Malice stops the tattoo gun and looks up at me. “Loyalty. Freedom. A place where she can be herself. Seems like she’s been lacking that in her life, so I think that’s a pretty good start.”

I think about what she told me about her adoptive mother, and how Misty always lied and manipulated her. Maybe my twin does have a point there.

Willow isn’t one to place material things over people anyway.

Ransom walks in before I can speak again, yawning and rubbing one eye. “You forgot to mention the screaming orgasms,” he says, grinning as he joins our conversation.

Malice huffs a laugh, raising one shoulder. “Thought that went without saying.”

Ransom grins and grabs the bottle of whiskey, plopping down at the table. “Can’t believe you were having a meeting without me. The fuck is this?”

“It’s not a meeting,” Malice fires back. “We’re just talking.”

A smile tugs at my lips as I watch them interact. But at the same time, inside, a part of me still feels inadequate. Ransom and Malice joke so easily about how they've gotten Willow off, but I've never given her the same thing. I've never even touched her.

As much as I want to, I still feel like I'm locked up in the cage of my mind half the time. It's not easy to break free, and sometimes I don't know if I ever will.

And if I did, if I let go of control completely... I'm not sure what would happen.

"We've got a new job, by the way," Malice says, drawing me out of my thoughts as he fills Ransom in.

Ransom groans, putting his head down on the table for a second.

"Fucking hell," he groans. "Although I guess it's good in the long run. It'll give us another chance to try to find out who X is." Then he chuckles, but there's no humor in it. "You know, before he kills us."

WILLOW

THE FLAMES LEAP and snap around me, the heat pressing in against my skin. I feel like I'm being seared from the inside out, and the fear in my chest, mixed with the smoke billowing around me, makes it hard to breathe.

I know I have to get away. Every frantic beat of my heart reminds me of that, and I start running, trying not to lose my footing or end up tumbling as the old, rotted wood goes up in flames quickly.

I can hear Ilya coming after me, the thunder of his feet on the floor, and I don't even dare to look back. I keep my eyes facing forward, afraid to turn around and see him too close.

But out of the corner of my eye, something else catches my attention. A dark, twisted shape in the shadows. It's not Ilya, who I can still hear behind me, but when I look closer, the shadow turns into the shape of a man, stepping out of the darkness and moving in close.

My heart stutters, and I jump at the sight of him, startled and caught off guard. I don't know who he is, and I can't make out his features. But it doesn't really matter. My goal is still the same.

Get the fuck out of here and get away.

I run as fast as I can, the desperation to escape this building before it comes crumbling down around me pushing me to move faster and faster. I don't want to die here. I don't want to be caught or burned alive.

I have to get out.

I have to—

The dream slips away, and I wake up with a soft gasp. My heart is pounding just as hard as it was in my nightmare, and I press a hand over my chest, taking deep breaths to try to calm myself down.

Gradually, the fear and the phantom feeling of heat on my skin start to go away, and I lie back, staring up at the ceiling with a frown on my face.

I've been having the dreams about Ilya off and on since the night he kidnapped me, but this is the first time someone else has been there. Which doesn't make much sense. Why am I dreaming about some other man?

I didn't recognize him as someone from school or any of the other terrible men I've met in my life, but it could have been any of them, I guess. Maybe my subconscious is pulling different men who've scared me in the past into that one nightmare. Maybe it was a john of my mom's or something, someone I don't remember by face, but my mind remembers as being worthy of being afraid of.

It's hard to say, and I don't have time to lie around dwelling on it. It's morning, only a few minutes before my alarm is set to go off, so I slide out of bed and turn it off early. Then I pad into the bathroom to take a shower, washing away the last remnants of the cold fear sweat and getting ready to head to school.

Classes are easy. I turn in a couple of assignments I've been working on, and when the day finally wraps up, I get in my car and drive to Olivia's house.

“Willow!”

She welcomes me with the same warmth she always does, and there's no sign that she's upset with me for Misty coming over and making an ass of herself.

But once we're settled in the massive living room, I can't help but bring it up.

“I'm so sorry about what happened with my mom,” I tell her, my stomach twisting. “I don't know why she thought that

was an okay thing to do. I don't know what goes on in her head most of the time, honestly. But she promised me she was going to stop doing stuff like that after what happened at the museum."

"It isn't your fault," Olivia says, her voice calm. "I know you've been doing your best with her, and her actions are not reflective upon you."

It's hard to believe that, especially knowing that in the circles my grandmother travels in, family and breeding and all of that means a lot. People would definitely judge me for the things my adoptive mom has done—hell, they probably already do.

"Still," I say. "If she ever does anything like that again, please let me know. I tried to tell her how out of line it was, but I don't know if it got through to her. I blew up at her and cut ties, which I probably should've done a long time ago."

"You had your reasons for not doing so, I'm sure." Olivia laces her fingers together on her lap. "She was all you had for a long time, so I understand why you didn't. And the offer to help her with rehab still stands."

"Thank you," I whisper, my lips shaking a little as I smile at her.

Olivia pats my hand, then brightens.

"Oh, I have something I want to show you," she says, getting up and walking over to a shelf on the wall. "I dug this out the other day, and I thought you would like to see it."

That perks me up, and I watch as she comes back over with a photo album. She sits down next to me, and we flip through it together, starting from the front, where she shows me pictures of my father when he was a kid.

"Curtis was a rambunctious boy." Olivia chuckles, tracing her fingers over a picture of him covered in mud and grinning brightly. He looks a bit like me, with a similarly shaped nose and dark blond hair. "He always liked to run and play, and we'd find him outside in the dirt more often than not. It drove

his teachers mad sometimes, but he was still at the top of his classes.”

She turns a page, smiling at a picture of my dad standing with a much younger version of herself. The two of them have massive ice cream cones in their hands, and they look like they’re on a beach somewhere, enjoying themselves.

She shows me photo after photo, and I take them all in, listening to her stories about where they were taken and what they were doing.

I’ll never get to know my dad, but seeing these snippets of his life feels like I’m getting a part of him back. Obviously, my childhood was different than his, but when I look at the pictures, I can see certain similarities. The way his eyes crinkle at the corner when he smiles brightly. Something in the line of his jaw and the slight upturn of his nose.

It makes me feel warm to think that we might have been similar, even in little ways.

“He’s always smiling so much,” I murmur, reaching out to touch the plastic over one of the pictures lightly.

Olivia nods. “He was happy. We tried to give him anything he could have wanted, and he thrived for a good long while.”

There’s a hitch in her voice, and I can tell she’s getting misty-eyed just talking about this. She clearly misses her son, and I’m sure that now that her husband is dead too, she feels lonely without her family.

I can understand how that feels.

“Willow,” she murmurs, looking at me. “There’s actually something I wanted to talk to you about.”

“Sure.” I straighten up. “What’s going on?”

She doesn’t seem upset, but there’s still a little flutter in my stomach, because this feels like it’s about to be something serious.

“As you know, I was more than happy to get you back into school, since that’s what you wanted,” she says. “But the truth is, you don’t need to go.”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, I would like you to help me run the Stanton estate. It’s just been me here in this big house since my husband died, and I want to bring you into the fold. You’re family, and I can’t think of anyone else more perfect for the job.”

My jaw falls open slightly. That’s definitely not where I saw this conversation going.

“What... what would that entail?” I ask.

“Well, there would be no need for you to get a degree, since you won’t need it to apply for a job. You would work with me, managing the holdings and business interests of the estate, and when I die, it would all pass on to you.”

“Wow,” I breathe, not sure what else to say.

“I would also love to see you get married and start a family of your own.” Olivia smiles, hope shining in her eyes. “Joshua seems very taken with you. And I... well, after so many years of thinking I would have no legacy, the idea of great-grandchildren running around this place just makes me smile.”

Joshua.

Shit, I still haven’t told him I’m really not interested in doing a raincheck on our cancelled date. So maybe my grandmother still thinks there might be something between us.

But marriage... *children*. And leaving school?

I sit in silence for a second, a bit floored by her offer. I don’t even know what to say—there’s this whole life, a whole world that my grandmother is offering to me. I could learn how to help her manage the estate, learn about the businesses and investments that she has, and then it sounds like I would take over running them someday. I would truly become a part of the world I’ve been dancing around the edges of ever since Olivia met me at the hospital that night.

It’s so generous, but at the same time, it feels a little overwhelming. Like too much all at once. Being financially stable, having a family? Those are things I’ve wanted my whole life. Taking Olivia’s offer would basically make sure

that there's no chance I'll ever end up like Misty, which has been my biggest fear for a long time.

But it's a lot, trying to decide the path my life will take in one afternoon.

Olivia watches me, and I hesitate, still not sure what to say.

"You don't need to answer now," she reassures me, smiling. "But I've been alone for a while now, and it's not like I'm getting any younger." She laughs softly. "I'd like to know that my family estate will live on, that the Stanton name will continue, and that you'll be taken care of by a well-connected man. One who's worthy of you."

She gives me a look when she says that, and I fight the urge to blush. She clearly has certain ideas about what would make a man worthy of me.

"Thank you for everything," I tell her. "Really. I don't know where I'd be without you now, and the fact that you want me to help you run the estate... it means so much to me. That you'd trust me with that. I'll definitely think about it."

"That's all I ask." Olivia pulls me into a hug, and I go easily, leaning into her soft embrace. "Sometimes I can't believe it," she murmurs. "After your father died, I tried to make peace with having no children or grandchildren—but I always felt that hole in my life. I always felt the absence. I'm so grateful you're here."

A lump rises in my throat, and my eyes sting with unshed tears. It feels like all my life, I've been waiting for someone to want me like this. To want me just because I'm family and they care about me, not because they can use me for their own ends. It's so different from how Misty always makes me feel, and I don't think I'll ever be able to adequately express my gratitude to Olivia.

When she pulls back, I clear my throat, trying to get ahold of myself so I don't start crying in her parlor.

"I'm grateful too," I tell her. "I'm so, so glad I met you. Not just because of how much you've helped me, but because I've wanted a real family for so long."

She nods. “I often find myself wishing that I could’ve found you sooner, but we can make the best of the time we have now. And I want you to know that your father and your grandfather would have been so proud of the person you’ve become. And your birth mother too, in her own way. You’ve worked hard for everything you have, and your life has been difficult, but you are still such a strong young woman.”

I stare down at my lap, laughing a little. “You’re going to make me cry all over your nice couch,” I warn.

She chuckles, shaking her head. “Alright, I’ll stop. But I mean every word.”

We chat for a while longer, and then I head out, hugging Olivia one more time before I go to my car.

The drive back to my apartment feels faster than usual, probably because my head is so full of thoughts. I keep mulling over what Olivia said and what she offered me, and how it’s everything I’ve ever dreamed of.

It’s all on the table now, all those things I’ve wanted forever... but it feels more confusing than I thought it would. Less appealing than I expected it to be.

I pull up to my building, and as I pull the key from the ignition, I catch sight of a familiar motorcycle out front with an even more familiar man on it.

Ransom grins and gives me a little wave, and I grin right back, tucking my keys away and getting out of the car.

“What are you doing here?” I ask him.

Rather than answering my question, he jerks his chin toward the back of his bike.

“Hop on.”

But I don’t argue. I just climb onto the back of his motorcycle, wrapping my arms around his muscled torso. My heart races as he revs the engine and peels out.

RANSOM

BETWEEN THE FEELING of Willow's arms around me, the rumble of my Ducati, and the wind rushing by, I'm in fucking heaven. Riding bikes has always been good for me, giving me a much needed thrill, but there's something about riding with Willow that makes it even better.

I take us in the direction of one of my favorite spots, a stretch of the city that's mostly empty, except for some lots that have been 'under development' for years now.

I come here sometimes to ride and clear my head, racing up and down the uninterrupted roads until everything that was stressing me out starts to fall away.

Now I want to show it to Willow.

When we get there, I stop the bike, and Willow hops off, looking around. Before she can get too far, I grab her around the waist and pull her back in, hauling her onto the bike seat in front of me so we're facing each other, her legs draped over mine.

"So, are you going to tell me what this is about?" she asks.

There's a light in her eyes that tells me she's not at all upset about me bringing her here, and I smile at her, reaching up to trace the curve of her cheek.

"What, do I need a reason to come see you?" I ask.

"No, you don't," she says, leaning into my touch. "I was just wondering if anything is wrong."

“Nah.” I shake my head. “For once, there’s no crisis. I just... wanted to see you. I missed you. I feel like I’m always missing you these days. I got used to having you in my bed every night, and now you’re not there anymore.”

“Oh,” she says softly. “Well, it’s good to see you now.” Willow kisses my cheek and then leans back a bit. “Since you said there’s no crisis, I’m guessing there’s no news either.”

“Not yet. Vic’s still doing what he can, but we’re just hoping that this next drop will give us some more info to work with. A face or a license plate or something we can use.”

“Do you think X is the one doing the pickups himself?” she asks.

“Doubtful. Someone that powerful and connected probably has a lot of flunkies doing the dirty work for him. But if we can get some kind of identifier, hopefully it’ll be enough to lead us to X in the end.”

“Hm.” She purses her lips, frowning a little. “I’m glad you have a plan, but I hate that it means you have to keep doing jobs for X. Especially if they’re getting more dangerous.”

I lean forward and nuzzle at her neck, humming in agreement. “It would definitely be better if we didn’t have to. But if it leads to us being free from this asshole, then it’s worth it.”

“I guess so.”

I pull back, scanning her face. There’s a little line between her eyebrows, and her eyes are narrowed slightly. It’s the same expression she had when I saw her pull up in front of her apartment. I tap her nose with a finger, startling a laugh out of her.

“You seem like you’re thinking too hard,” I tell her. “You looked like that when I saw you in your car before too. Is something wrong?”

Willow sighs, blowing out a breath. “No, nothing’s wrong, exactly. I just have a lot on my mind.”

“I’ve been told I’m a good listener. If you want to get whatever it is off your chest.”

She hesitates for a second, and then nods. “I saw my grandmother earlier, and she made me an offer. A really amazing offer.”

She explains, telling me how she’s been given the chance to help run the Stanton estate and all the perks that would come with that.

My eyes widen as I listen, because she’s right. That *is* an amazing offer. Not having to worry about school or getting a job, just settling into a life that’s already carved out and ready for her... that’s the kind of shit that one-percenters do, and the rest of us just fucking dream about.

“It could completely change my life,” Willow says. “I mean, Olivia is family, and she has all these connections. She knows basically everyone who’s anyone in this city and probably beyond it too. I could throw myself into that. I could learn how to do what she does. I could drop out of school like she wants, since I wouldn’t need to finish my degree. I wasn’t even sure what I wanted to do for a career anyway; I just wanted to improve my life situation. I wanted things to be better than they were. And this would do that. In a big way.”

I listen to her talk, and as much as she’s pointing out all the good parts of this deal, she still seems conflicted, as if she’s not totally sold on it.

It’s definitely not my place to tell her what to do here, but I offer what insight I have. “I remember you were really attached to school when you were staying with us,” I tell her. “You missed it and wanted to get back to it.”

Willow nods. “I know. But with all the new opportunities that have come up, I’m not sure if I’m just holding onto that because I’m being stubborn, or if that’s what would really be best for me. I just don’t know.”

I watch as the emotions play out over her face, drawing her a little closer to me on the seat of my bike.

“Can I tell you something?” she asks suddenly, her brown eyes shining.

“Of course. You can tell me anything.”

“Sometimes... sometimes I still feel like I don’t belong in my grandmother’s world. Olivia has done so much for me, so much to make me feel welcome, but there’s always a part of me that just feels like I don’t *fit* there.”

I nod. It makes sense. In my mind, she’s worth a million of the kind of people Olivia Stanton hangs around with, but that’s different than feeling like she fits in with them.

And not feeling like you fit? Doubting your place in the world? That’s something I know a hell of a lot about.

I hesitate for a second, tracing a pattern on her back with my fingertips as I get lost in memories of my own. When I speak again, my voice is low.

“Yeah. I get how that is. I’ve never told anyone this, but Malice and Victor are only my half-brothers. They share all the same DNA, and sometimes it makes me feel like I don’t belong either.”

Willow’s eyes go wide, her lips parting on a soft inhale.

“I... I had no idea,” she whispers.

“Neither do they.” I shrug, leaning back a little and letting out a breath.

Her brows shoot up toward her hairline. “Really? I thought you three shared everything.”

“We do, mostly,” I tell her. “It’s just... fuck, I don’t know. I haven’t found a way to tell them yet. Part of me is afraid, I guess. That it’ll make them look at me differently if they know we’re not fully brothers.”

Willow reaches out, stroking a gentle hand up my arm. It’s comforting to have her here, to tell her this and have it not change the way she looks at me.

“So you guys have the same mom?” she asks.

I snort, shaking my head. “I wish. Our dad cheated on Diana—Vic and Malice’s mom. Because he was a total piece of shit like that. Then the other woman got pregnant and had a baby. Me. I was less than a year old when she died, and dear old dad was just going to leave me to be taken in by whoever found me, I guess. But Diana found out about it all and offered to raise me.”

“Wow,” Willow breathes, looking stunned.

“Right? I was the product of her husband cheating on her, but Diana was too kind-hearted to punish me for that or let me end up in the system. It made me love her even more when I found out the truth about everything. Because she cared about me as much as she did about Malice and Vic, even though I wasn’t her real son. And it fucking sucks, remembering that she wasn’t my real mom.”

“She was real enough,” Willow murmurs. “She loved you and she raised you. That makes her your family.”

She leans forward and kisses me, and I close my eyes, banding my arms tightly around her.

“Thank you for telling me,” she whispers. “I’m glad I know.”

“Me too,” I say roughly.

Our lips separate, and she rests her forehead against mine, her breath brushing my skin. “I hope one day you’ll be able to tell Malice and Vic too. I know they won’t think any less of you. They love you, and I don’t see how that could ever change. You’ve been with them through everything. You’re their brother.”

Her words are soft and quiet, but they hit me right in the chest. I’ve kept that secret for so fucking long, and although there have been plenty of days where I’ve almost forgotten about it, almost forgotten the fact that Vic and Mal share something I’ll never have, there were other days where it weighed on me.

My dad was the one who told me. He did it to fuck with my head, to make me doubt myself, like the fucking master

manipulator he was. And after he and Diana both died, I was the only person in the world who knew the truth.

Now one other person knows, and I'm glad as hell that it's Willow.

I kiss her again, harder this time, letting the full breadth of my emotions pour into the connection of our lips. She responds immediately, her small fingers sliding through my hair as her tongue slides against mine.

"Thank you, angel," I mutter into her mouth. "Fucking thank you."

I bite down on her lower lip softly as I finish speaking, making her gasp. Then she moans, her hips hitching closer to mine, and I chuckle.

Her hands start roaming, moving up my arms and over my shoulders, and I let my own hands move to her lower back, pulling her in closer so there's almost no space left between us.

That's the way it should always be. Nothing between us at all.

When she finally pulls back to catch her breath, her brown eyes are darker, making the little flecks of amber in them stand out. Her lips are a little swollen, making them look even more full and plush, and I groan.

"You look so fucking good like this," I tell her. "Still sweet, but with that edge of the dirty girl in you that makes you so irresistible."

"Then don't resist," she shoots back, her eyes gleaming.

"I have no fucking plans to, pretty girl."

I smirk, leaning in to kiss her again, trailing my mouth down her neck while she shivers against me.

"Good," she pants.

She's grinding against me harder now, rubbing the heat of her clothed pussy against the rising hardness of my cock, and I love that she's basically dry humping me on my bike. It

doesn't even seem like she cares that we're out in the open. It's not a well-trafficked area, but still, anyone could see her if they happened by.

But maybe she likes that.

Maybe that makes it even better.

A wicked idea forms in my head, and I grin, unhooking her legs from over mine so that she's sitting more fully on the seat. Then I reach around her to start the Ducati back up.

Willow gasps at the sudden rumble of the engine, her eyes flying wide as she clutches on to me. "What—"

"Don't stop," I tell her with a wink. "I'm only giving you more to work with."

I rev the engine, and I can see the moment when it hits her what I'm doing. Her jaw drops open, a gorgeous flush rising up her cheeks—but she doesn't need any more urging from me to take what she needs. Her hips start to move again, grinding down on the bike seat, pressing closer to the vibrations that rumble through her.

"Is that good?" I ask, a teasing smirk on my lips. "Are you going to hump my bike until you come for me?"

"Ransom..." She clamps her bottom lip between her teeth, but she doesn't look away from me, and she doesn't stop the little rolls of her hips. "Oh, fuck."

I work the throttle, giving the engine little revs as I watch the expression on her face, following her lead as I help her get herself off.

"That's it," I murmur, my cock so fucking hard I could bust a nut in my pants. "That's it, beautiful. Just let it go. I know you want to."

Her hands rest on my shoulders, and she uses the leverage to help guide her movements, little whimpers and moans pouring from her lips. With the bike still in neutral, I rev the engine again, and she cries out softly, pressing down harder, her hips moving faster and faster.

"You close?" I rasp.

“Yes...” The word is hardly more than a breath. Her eyes are closed, her face screwed up in concentration as she chases her pleasure, and I don’t think I’ve ever seen anything more fucking stunning than this.

I rev the Ducati one more time, watching as the vibrations hit her like a shock.

Her mouth falls open on a silent cry. Her body goes rigid for a second before the pleasure explodes inside her, and she trembles through her orgasm.

I can feel it as she clings to me, the way each burst of pleasure wracks her body, and it’s fucking intoxicating. Having her like this, coming apart on my bike while we sit here in this empty lot, is hot as fuck.

My cock gives a demanding pulse against the confines of my pants as I release the throttle, pissed at being left out of the fun, but this wasn’t really about getting me off. It was about Willow. And it was so fucking worth it.

“What did you think about that?” I ask, lifting her chin with my fingers so I can look her in the eyes.

Willow laughs breathlessly. Her cheeks are still flushed, and the smile that spreads across her face makes a warm ache fill my heart.

“That was... holy shit. I just humped a bike!”

I belt out a laugh at that, grinning at her. “Are you starting to get the appeal of motorcycles?”

“I mean, I thought I got it before, but now... I just... oh, my god.”

I lean in and kiss her again, soaking up more of her sunny presence. I’m about to suggest we go get something to eat because it’s definitely dinner time, but then her phone buzzes quietly in her pocket.

“Oh, hold on,” she says. “Let me get that.”

She pulls the cell phone out, glancing at the screen, and a puzzled look crosses her face. She swipes to answer the call, raising it to her ear.

“Hello? Yes, this is... What?”

I don't know what the other person on the line said, but the change in Willow is immediate. She stiffens, her face turning pale, as if all the blood has drained from it at once.

Shit. This can't be good.

WILLOW

“YOU HAVE TO COME RIGHT NOW!” a hysterical voice cries into my ear. “I went over to Misty’s house because she was blaring her music again, but when I found her... the door was open and she was just lying there.”

“What?” I ask again, not feeling like I can wrap my mind around what she’s saying.

It’s a neighbor, one of the people who lives close enough to my mom to be affected by her bullshit. She only has my number because she used to call me to get Misty to stop being loud or if the guys Misty had over were being too rowdy.

I never thought she’d be using my number to call me for this.

“I already called 9-1-1,” she continues. “But she’s not breathing, I don’t think.”

The words go into my ear and filter through to my brain, but it all feels like a jumble. My heart is still racing from the orgasm I just had on Ransom’s bike, but now the buzz in my veins is from fear instead of exhilaration.

“Misty!” I jump when the woman yells my adoptive mother’s name right in my ear, trying to revive her. “Misty, you have to wake up, you hear me?”

My skin chills, and I shake myself out of the stupor that’s creeping over me.

“We’re on the way,” I tell her, feeling like my voice is coming from someone else. “Just... do what you can.”

I hang up, and the phone nearly slips from my numb fingers. Ransom catches it before it can fall to the ground, staring at me with concern in his blue-green eyes.

“What happened? Willow?”

“I... we have to go to my mom’s house. Right now. She... I think she overdosed or something, but she’s...”

The words feel strange coming out of my mouth, like I can’t quite believe I’m saying them.

There have been some close calls with Misty before, when she mixed things she shouldn’t have or got so drunk that she ended up blacking out in the kitchen, but it’s never gone this far. She’s never been...

“I’ll take you,” Ransom is saying, and I blink, making myself focus on his voice. “Come on.”

He helps me down from the front of the bike, and I get back on behind him, wrapping my arms tight around his waist. He starts the bike up again and peels out, and I tell him which way to go, almost on autopilot.

My mind races as I cling to him, trying to think of what could have happened and why.

I know Ransom is probably breaking the speed limit to get us there, but it feels like time has slowed to a crawl, and my skin itches with the need to be there already.

I can’t believe this is happening. I can’t believe that she would...

I feel numb. The wind rushing by doesn’t even sting my cheeks, because I’ve blocked out everything but the choking feeling of dread that fills my chest.

We screech up to Misty’s house several minutes later, and I stumble trying to get off the bike. Ransom moves to help me, but before he can, I find my footing and race up the drive way to the door.

At the moment, I can’t even remember the name of the neighbor who called me, but the scene is exactly what she described. My mom is lying on the living room floor, pale and

unresponsive. She's sprawled out, like she maybe fell or passed out or something, dressed in just a pair of underwear and a tank top.

There's no life to her, nothing to indicate that she's still with us, and the neighbor is doing CPR, alternating between pressing down on Misty's chest and blowing into her mouth.

Her arms tremble, like she's been doing it for a long time, and I can tell she's both losing strength and not doing a very good job in the first place.

"Here," Ransom says, stepping up behind me. "Let me."

She looks up, startled, but moves aside a second later to let Ransom to step in. He has much better form than she did, doing the chest compressions neatly and counting them out before he breathes into Misty's mouth.

He does a few rounds of that and then looks up at me, worry in his eyes.

I stare down at my mom, feeling cold all over.

Her eyes are closed, and in a way, she looks more peaceful than she probably ever has before. But that's wrong. She's not supposed to be like this.

So quiet. So still.

She's always been loud and fiery, her temper just a few seconds from flaring.

This just... isn't her. Not how she's supposed to be.

Sirens blare in the distance, and I stand like a statue staring down at Ransom and my mom, feeling frozen to the spot.

The paramedics arrive a minute later, hustling into the house. They lean down to speak to Ransom, who moves out of their way, letting them take over. He comes over to me, wrapping his arms around my body, pulling me out of the way so they can do their work.

I can feel the heat of him against me, feel the steady thrum of his heart, but everything else feels numb and cold.

“Are you family?” one of the paramedics asks me, coming over.

I have to blink a couple of times to make myself focus and then I nod. “Yes. I—I’m her daughter.”

“We need you to answer a few questions for us if you can, honey. Does your mother use drugs?” She asks the question gently, like she’s trying not to upset me more, and I take a deep breath.

“Yes,” I reply. “Sometimes.”

“Okay. Can you tell us what she might have taken tonight?”

I shake my head. “Um... I don’t know. She does a few different things. Weed, sometimes coke, maybe some others if she can get her hands on them. But I wasn’t here today. I don’t know what she did.”

Another paramedic questions the neighbor, asking her how long ago she found Misty and if she saw her earlier in the day.

Two of them stay near Misty’s body, trying to resuscitate her, and I can’t tear my eyes away. No matter what they do, Misty stays still and pale and lifeless.

Eventually, they sit back, trading a look with each other.

“I’m sorry,” one of them says, looking up at me. “There’s nothing we can do.”

“Time of death?” another asks, but I don’t hear the response.

My legs buckle, suddenly refusing to support my weight. If it weren’t for Ransom behind me, holding on to me, I would’ve collapsed to the floor. But he keeps his arms around me and holds me close as I suck in desperate gulps of air, trying to focus on breathing.

“Hey,” he murmurs, his strong arms tightening. “I’m right here. It’s okay.”

I shake my head, tears streaming down my face. It’s not okay. There’s nothing okay about this. The only mother I’ve

ever known is dead, and all I can do is watch as the paramedics load her body onto a stretcher and remove her from the house.

“I’m so sorry.” The paramedic who spoke to me earlier steps back over to us. “But we’ll need you to come with us to ID the body.”

The body.

Because that’s all Misty is now. Just a lifeless body. Another dead hooker in a city where that happens way too often.

All I can do is nod, my throat stuck and my mouth dry.

Everything feels like a blur as we leave the house I grew up in. Ransom helps me onto his bike and tells me to hold on. When I barely make a move to do so, he grabs my wrists and wraps my arms around him, squeezing my hand gently.

We speed off to the morgue, and even just thinking that word makes my stomach drop over and over again.

When we get there, I’m surprised to see Malice and Vic waiting already. Ransom must have texted them on the way out of the house. Neither of them says anything, but the three brothers are a solid presence at my back as I go through the bureaucracy of what needs to be done in the aftermath of a death.

I answer questions as best as I can, about Misty’s name and birthday. I tell the story of getting a call from the neighbor and rushing over, and how I hadn’t seen Misty in a couple of days.

I don’t mention the fight we had, or how I told her I was done with her, but it weighs on my heart all the same.

I feel like a robot, going through the motions, answering questions, filling out forms, doing what they tell me to do without much thought.

It takes hours.

Or at least, that’s what it feels like. Every time I think we might be done, there’s another thing to do. I can’t even be

annoyed about it because all I feel is grief and guilt and regret. It all swirls around inside me, fucking my head up and tearing at my heart.

Misty and I were never close, but it still feels awful that the last thing that happened between us was a big fight.

When I'm finally released, with the promise that they'll call me if they need anything else, I stand on the sidewalk in front of the building with the guys.

They sat through all of it with me, and I'm so fucking grateful for that.

"Come on, Solnyshka." Malice's voice is deep and solemn as he rests a hand on the small of my back. "We'll take you home."

I just nod mutely, and they get me into the car Malice and Victor came in.

Instead of driving me to my apartment, they take me to their warehouse, I'm relieved to see the familiar space as we pull into the garage. The last thing I want is to be alone with my thoughts right now.

They bring me inside and sit me down on the couch. Vic pours whiskey and presses the glass into my hand.

I don't really sip it, just hold it, letting the feeling of the cool glass and the sharp scent of whiskey anchor me in the moment. I feel so numb, so lost.

Malice crouches in front of me, and the usually harsh lines of his face are gentle and concerned. His eyes search my face, and he puts his hands on my cheeks, wiping away the tears that don't seem to want to stop falling.

"Solnyshka," he murmurs. "What do you need?"

I blink at him, and it's like I'm truly seeing him for the first time today. Even though I've talked so much in the last few hours, my voice still comes out raspy and shaky when I speak.

"Nothing. I don't need anything."

“That’s not true. You look like you’re about to fall apart. What can we do?”

My tongue darts out, and my lips taste salty from my tears. “I don’t...”

A heaving sob gets caught in my chest. I feel like I have too much trapped inside me, but at the same time, I feel empty. Numb. A dark, heavy, sick feeling is creeping through my limbs, and I have the horrible feeling that if it reaches my heart, the overworked organ will stop beating entirely.

I don’t want that to happen. I don’t want to lose myself under this oppressive ocean of numbness.

I want to feel something *good*.

Ransom steps up beside Malice, and Victor comes to stand on his other side, all three of them gazing at me. The scent of whiskey tickles my nose, dragging up a memory of another time all three of them stared at me so intently in this very room.

But it wasn’t worry in their eyes then. It was heat.

That’s what I want. I want to go back to that night, when everything felt so fucking perfect.

“I...” A shudder moves through my body, and I wrap my arms around myself, looking at the men with pleading eyes. “I need you to make me come. Make me feel something besides this.”

WILLOW

SOMETHING BURNS HOT in Malice's eyes. There's desire in there, undeniable and intense, but it's so much more than just that.

There's also protectiveness. Possessiveness. Like he'd do anything in this moment to take care of me.

In a flash, he moves, picking me up off the couch so he can sit down where I was sitting, then pulling me onto his lap to straddle him. One of his hands comes up to tangle in my hair, and he drags me close, catching my lips in a kiss.

It's as dominant and forceful as always, and I need that right now. He takes the lead, working my mouth open with his tongue and laying his claim there until I'm breathless. Despite the rough way he's kissing me, I feel strangely... cared for.

Because he's not just taking what he wants. He's giving me what he knows I *need*.

It sends a thrill up my spine, and I lean into that, wanting the pleasure to eclipse everything else.

Fingers trail through my hair, and when I tip my head back to look, I see Ransom standing there. His hands roam, groping my breasts and then catching my chin so he can keep my head tipped back.

He leans down and kisses me, our lips meeting upside down as he takes over where Malice left off.

This kiss is more sensual, deeper and more exploring, and I make a soft noise against Ransom's mouth, melting between

them. His fingers catch my nipple through my shirt, and I moan, arching a bit like I'm asking for more.

Our lips separate as he pulls back, his eyes intent and his usual charming smile replaced by a serious expression.

“Arms up, angel,” he murmurs, and when I obey, he helps me out of my shirt and bra, leaving me topless on Malice's lap.

Malice lets out a low, hungry noise, and I can feel his dark eyes roaming over my skin, taking in my breasts, my hardening nipples, and the scars that are now on display.

I don't shy away from any of it. I let him look his fill, my heart pounding.

“Fucking beautiful,” Malice says, and his voice has a low edge to it that makes me shudder against him.

“Gorgeous,” Ransom agrees. His hands go back to groping my breasts, and now that there's no fabric between them, I can feel every callous on his palms as he squeezes and plays with them.

“Oh fuck...” I moan, squirming between them.

Ransom pinches my nipple in response, rolling it between his fingers.

“We'll take care of you,” he promises. “We've got you, angel. We won't let you fall.”

I know he's not just talking about supporting me physically, or keeping me from tumbling off of Malice's lap. He's talking about my heart. My soul. They won't let me fracture into pieces.

Malice's hands go to my hips, and he drags me in closer. He grinds me down against him, and I can feel the hard line of his cock, getting thicker and harder as he works his hips upward.

My breath starts to come in hard, short gasps, heat rising in my body. Between the two of them, they're dragging me back from the edge of that abyss of numbness, reminding me how to *feel* as I try to keep my body and mind from shutting down.

“Goddamn,” Malice pants. He jerks his hips up, grinding hard against my still clothed pussy. “Give me more. I want you to come just like this.”

“You can do that for him, can’t you?” Ransom asks. “Get yourself off on his cock. Keep riding him.”

He’s still playing with my breasts with both hands, squeezing and groping them. Each time he pinches a nipple, a jolt of sensation shoots right to my pussy, and I squirm, arousal starting to edge out the other emotions churning inside me.

A broken sob pours from my lips, and when Malice cups my face, his thumbs brushing my cheeks, I realize I’m still crying. He kisses me through it, my tears mingling with the distinctive taste of *him* in our kiss, and I crush my mouth harder to his, throwing myself headfirst into the connection between us.

In this moment, the connection I have with him and his brothers feels like the only thing that can save me. The only lifeline I have.

“Beautiful...”

The voice is low and reverent, and I recognize it immediately as Vic’s. Instead of sitting on the chair across from us, he’s right next to us on the couch, so close that I can see the hints of gray in his striking blue eyes as Malice drags his lips away from mine and begins to press open-mouthed kisses to my neck.

My eyes lock with Victor’s, and when he reaches out to swipe a tear away from my cheek with a single knuckle, I shudder, grinding harder against Malice.

It’s so little, just a barely there touch.

But it means so fucking much.

And even though there’s a certain tenderness to it, the heat in his eyes makes my body respond in kind, sparks shooting through my limbs and banishing the coldness there.

Ransom slides his hand through my hair again, gripping the strands close to the scalp and tilting my head to give Malice more room to work. He tugs gently, just enough to make my scalp tingle, and the feeling goes right to my clit.

“You feel that?” he whispers as Victor withdraws his hand, his gaze still locked on me. “You feel the way we’ve all got you? You’re fucking safe with us, pretty girl. We’ll take care of you, I promise.”

I nod, warmth spreading through my chest as Malice digs his fingers into my ass, dragging me over his cock again and again.

“That’s it,” Ransom encourages. “Come for us. You can let go.”

“Don’t hold back,” Malice grits out, biting down on the spot where my shoulder and neck meet.

“I—”

That’s all I get out before I’m coming apart with a soft cry, grinding against Malice, arching into Ransom’s touch, my eyes closed and my lips parted as the pleasure overtakes me.

My orgasm hits me with wave after wave of sensation, and by the time I’ve worked through all of it, I’m panting hard, slumped in Malice’s lap.

He wraps a protective arm around me, smoothing down my hair as I rest my head on his shoulder and breathe in his scent.

“You feel better?” he asks, his voice rumbling in my ear.

I nod. I do feel better, even though I’m so far from being *okay* that it’s laughable. But I feel more human and less like a zombie. I don’t feel like I’m teetering on the edge of a gaping dark hole anymore.

And most of all, I don’t feel alone.

Ransom leans in to press a kiss to my cheek, and then Malice tightens his arms around me, moving like he’s going to stand up.

“What are you doing?” I ask, clinging to him.

“You need to get some rest. And maybe some food too. You’ve been through a lot.”

Panic rises up in me, so sharp and swift that it steals my breath. On the edges of my brain are all the things I don’t want to think about, all the grief and confusion and pain that I’m not ready to deal with yet, and I don’t want to let them back in.

“No!” I pant, lifting my head to look at Malice. “I don’t want food, or rest. I need... more. I need you to... to make me feel...”

I trail off, not even sure what to say. Not quite sure how to articulate what it is I’m asking for. All I know is that I don’t want this to be over yet.

Malice and Ransom share a look, and I can see concern in their expressions. He settles back on the couch and lifts my chin between two fingers, holding my face still so he can look into my eyes.

“What do you need, Solnyshka?” he asks. “What do you want? Tell us.”

I lick my lips, trying to find the words. But I’m too worked up and overwhelmed, everything beating down on me so hard that it’s hard to form words at all, let alone the right ones.

I want them to fuck me.

To take me and use me and ruin me.

But I don’t know how to say that.

Before I can try to make them understand, Victor speaks up.

“Put her on her hands and knees,” he says quietly.

My gaze flashes to him where he’s sitting beside us, and although his expression gives almost nothing away, I can see both desire and understanding burning in his eyes.

He knows. He knows what I need.

I nod frantically, my heart pounding hard in my chest. Malice and Ransom look back to me, and Ransom tips my head back again.

“Is that what you want?” he asks.

“Yes.” I nod again, grateful that I’ve been spared from trying to figure out how to ask for it.

Between the two of them, they lift me off of Malice’s lap. Malice’s hands are rougher than Ransom’s as he drags my pants and underwear off, leaving me naked.

Having the three of them clothed while I’m completely bare and on display for them makes wetness seep from me, the feeling of vulnerability only adding to the arousal building low inside me.

Malice and Ransom stand on either side of me, Victor still watching from the couch, the three of them forming what almost feels like a shield around me. A barrier that nothing else can penetrate.

“You heard what Vic said,” Malice tells me, his voice like gravel. “On your hands and knees.”

The speed of my pulse kicks up even more, memories of the first time I got on my hands and knees and crawled to him flitting through my mind. I drop onto all fours, feeling even more exposed as they take in the curves of my body, the way my hair tumbles around my face, and the wetness that coats my inner thighs.

“Good girl,” Ransom praises. When I look up, he’s standing over me, his hand pressed to the bulge in his pants. “Should we let Vic decide what happens next? Since this was his idea?”

My gaze darts to Vic again. He’s sitting on the edge of the couch, his eyes locked on me as if he couldn’t look away even if the building was collapsing around our ears. I nod, my blood rushing loudly in my ears.

“Yes,” I whisper to him. “Keep talking. Tell me what to do like you did that night you watched me in my bedroom.”

Vic's nostrils flare, his jaw clenching. His fingers tap rapidly on his thighs before he curls them into fists.

"Suck Ransom's dick," he tells me hoarsely. "While Malice fucks you from behind."

All the oxygen seems to leave the room for a minute, and my thighs clench, wanting to squeeze together as my clit throbs. I glance between Malice and Ransom, lifting one hand from the floor to tuck my hair behind my ear.

"I want that," I murmur. "Please."

"Fucking hell." Ransom looks almost strung out with desire as he tugs off his shirt and then drops his hand to the button of his pants, shucking off his clothes quickly. Malice follows suit, and I drink in the sight of them.

They're both so beautiful in their own ways. Malice is all hard edges and sharp angles, big enough to be a threat no matter what he's doing. His scars and tattoos stand out in the light in the living room, and he makes no move to hide them, just like always. And then there's Ransom, muscled in a leaner way, charming and sweet and so fucking handsome.

"Love when you look at me like that, angel."

He grins as he catches me staring at him, and my eyes drop down to his cock, fully hard and jutting out from his body.

"Come here," I whisper.

He kneels in front of me, putting his cock right in front of my face. The sight of the light glinting off his row of piercings makes my mouth water, but before I can move to take him between my lips, Malice moves in behind me.

He's such a massive presence that I can't help but be aware of him, and I hold my breath as he grabs twin handfuls of my ass, spreading my cheeks so nothing is hidden from him.

He drags a finger along the puckered hole there, and I gasp sharply, surprised by the sudden fierce pulse of desire that shoots through me. I'm no longer crying, I realize. The wild tangle of emotions that threatened to swamp me earlier feels more distant now, less intense and overwhelming.

Fingers tangle in my hair, and Ransom catches my attention, drawing my focus back to him.

His cock is only an inch from my face, a bead of precum leaking from the tip, and I give in to the desire to taste him, dipping my head and dragging my tongue along his shaft.

“Fuck,” he groans. “Your mouth is so damned perfect.”

I let myself explore him, feeling his piercings, rolling my tongue over the places where metal goes through flesh and listening to the way Ransom’s breathing changes as he starts to get more turned on.

His skin is clean and salty, and there’s a slight metallic tang from the piercings, but it all works together to make my mouth water, saliva coating his length.

“Come on, angel,” Ransom urges, his hips pressing forward a little. “Let me feel how good you can be.”

My eyes flash up to his face as I take him deeper into my mouth. I go slow to begin with, working my way down, rubbing my tongue along the underside of his shaft.

Ransom lets out a low, ragged breath, and I start bobbing my head a bit faster, settling into it and letting it keep my head clear.

Behind me, Malice’s large hands are still kneading my ass cheeks, gripping me and spreading me open as if he can’t get enough of the sight. When he finally lets go, he draws one hand back and delivers a sharp slap to my ass, making me cry out around Ransom’s cock. The sting fades almost immediately, turning into a burning heat that makes me moan.

“You like that?” Malice growls, and I whine softly around Ransom’s cock, doing my best to nod a little without releasing him from my mouth.

“I think that’s a yes,” Ransom pants.

Malice chuckles darkly. “Good. Because I need you nice and soaked for me, Solnyshka. You’ve got me so fucking hard, I’m gonna batter this pussy until you beg for mercy.”

He presses inside me, taking his time, going slowly enough that I can feel every single inch of his cock as it fills me up.

I let out a strangled sound that comes out muffled from Ransom's dick in my mouth, and my body leans into the burning stretch of Malice working his way into me. It feels so good. The pleasure of it buzzes under my skin, making me feel almost high. Euphoric.

They start off at a measured pace, Malice drawing his cock out in long strokes and then pushing back in, filling me up over and over again. Ransom keeps time with him, working his own hips in a rhythm with the bobbing of my head.

I feel deliciously full, trapped between their bodies, impaled by both of them. It's so much that I can't think about anything else. All I can do is focus on the pleasure of it.

"Harder," Vic commands after a moment, his voice strained.

As if he's just been waiting for the word, Malice's fingers bite into my hips, and I know I'm going to have bruises in the shape of his fingertips later. But that's what I want. I want there to be reminders of what happened tonight, marks that I'll carry with me as I try to get through the next few days.

He slams into my body, which rocks me forward, making me take more of Ransom's cock in my mouth. His smooth crown hits the back of my throat, and I gag a little, but I don't stop.

"Fuck," Ransom hisses. "Just like that. Take us both."

As if there's any other choice. As if I could ever want anything else.

"You're so fucking tight," Malice growls. He sounds almost angry about it, but I know he's not. The sounds of skin slapping against skin ring out in the room, and he uses his hold on me to spread my ass cheeks apart again, then spits on the tight little ring of muscle.

I whimper, tears gathering in my eyes for an entirely new reason as I struggle to catch my breath through the barrage of sensations.

“You want this hole filled too?” Malice growls. “You want me to play with your ass?”

“Mhmhm.” I mumble around Ransom, nodding desperately.

My head spins as Malice starts working one of his thumbs into my ass, and I feel myself floating higher and higher. My pussy clenches around his cock, making him curse under his breath, and my whole body throbs. I’m shaking, hurtling toward an orgasm that feels like it will wreck me in the best way.

“She’s close. Keep going,” Victor rasps.

I glance at him out of the corner of my eye to see that he’s standing now, having moved closer to get a better view. His cock is still tucked away in his pants, but his hand is over it, palming the hard line of it while he watches us, unblinking.

Dragging my mouth away from Ransom’s cock for a second, I gasp, “Is today a day when you...?”

“No.” He shakes his head, his entire body taut.

He knows what I’m getting at. I know Ransom said that Vic is so regimented that he only jerks off on certain days. And today isn’t one of them.

But I need him to be part of this. I want to see him let go like he did at the club that night, to feel his cum on my skin.

Malice twists his thumb in my ass, making a guttural cry spill from my lips, and Ransom’s hand delves into my hair, grabbing the strands tightly.

“Can you make an exception?” I whisper to Vic, raw need clear in my voice. “Please. I want to feel you. I want you so much.”

Vic’s eyes flash, arousal and something like fear mingling in their depths. I’m almost certain he’s going to deny me, but then he drags his hand upward to the button of his pants, working it open. He pulls his zipper down and fetches out his cock, letting me see that it’s thick and flushed and so fucking beautiful.

He starts stroking himself, hard and fast, like he couldn't stop even if he wanted to.

My eyes stay locked on the sight, even when Ransom uses his grip on my hair to pull my mouth back onto his cock.

And now it really does feel like I have all three of them. Malice is behind me, fucking me hard, pounding into my body as his thumb explores my ass, forcing me to take every bit of it. Ransom thrusts into my mouth, working with the rhythm of Malice rocking me forward, hissing when the head of his cock hits the back of my throat.

And then there's Victor, stroking himself, his eyes intent on the sight in front of him.

That slow burn of pleasure that started in my belly flares higher, moving molasses thick and undeniable as it spreads through all of me. I can't hold back how good it feels, and when my orgasm sweeps me up, I'm caught up in it completely.

I clench around Malice's cock, drooling around Ransom.

"Shit," Malice growls, and I feel his thrusts start to lose some of their measured quality, going erratic and wild as he fucks into me with abandon, chasing his own climax.

Ransom is right there with him, fucking my mouth, and when the hot, salty spurt of his cum hits my throat, I swallow everything I can, trying to keep up as my body hums with the aftershocks of my pleasure.

Malice finishes next, slamming into me balls deep as he unloads inside me. His fingers dig into my flesh, little points of pain that ground me through the waves of pleasure.

That just leaves Victor.

His jaw is tight and his pupils are blown wide with lust as he fists his cock, his hips jerking with the motion. He comes in a rush, shaking and trembling and hunching over a little as the spurts of his cum spill out over his hand, landing on the carpet and a little bit on me.

His chest heaves as he sucks in air, and the silence in the room is broken only by the sound of all four of us breathing raggedly.

Now that the rush over blinding pleasure has faded, I feel spent and exhausted. My arms tremble, and once Malice and Ransom pull out of me, my body gives up on trying to stay upright.

I collapse onto the floor in a heap, fighting to get my pulse under control. I feel sore and sticky, but so much more *whole* than I did before.

“Come on, pretty girl.” Ransom’s quiet voice breaks the silence. “Let’s get you to bed. For real, this time.”

I just nod, letting him pull me into his arms and take me upstairs. I’m barely coherent as he cleans me up quickly and then tucks me into his bed.

As soon as I hit the soft, familiar warmth of his sheets, I fall asleep, curling up in his embrace.

VICTOR

IT'S LATE.

Malice went upstairs to go to bed not long after Ransom carried Willow up. I cleaned away the mess in the living room, then headed up to my room as well.

But I can't sleep.

My body is buzzing, keyed up and on high alert after what happened downstairs. Every time I try to focus on something else, my mind keeps replaying that scene—the sight of Willow, the way she gave herself over to us, the sound of her begging me to touch myself.

She looked so needy. So *wrecked*.

I've never experienced anything like that before, and it was incredible. But at the same time, it took me out of my regulated activities, and that has me feeling strange and off balance.

It's always hard to sleep when I feel like things are wrong, so instead, I'm sitting in front of my computer, working on pulling anything else useful out of the footage we got from our last drop for X.

I go through it frame by frame, taking note of everything from the shadows in each frame to the blurry images in the distance. Anything that might lead us in the right direction.

At this point, I've been through it all countless times, but I keep checking, half because I want to make sure I'm not missing anything, and half because it's soothing to me. The

work is methodical and routine, and it feels good to fall into those regimented actions after veering so wildly off course earlier.

After a while, I get up and stretch, rolling my neck and letting the tense muscles ease up. Although it's close to two a.m., I'm still not tired at all, so I head downstairs to get a glass of water—but I stop short in the kitchen doorway when I see Willow sitting at the table.

I didn't realize she was awake.

"How are you?" I ask, my voice hushed in the quiet of the kitchen.

"I'm okay," she mumbles back, glancing up from where she's been staring at the tabletop.

"Did you sleep at all?"

She shrugs a shoulder. "For a little while, but then I just—" She shakes her head. "I didn't want to wake Ransom up, so I came down here instead."

There's a glass of water in front of her, and without even really thinking about it, I start pulling things down from the cabinets to put together a late-night snack for her.

It just feels like the right thing to do right now.

"What are you doing?" she asks, watching me as I pull the peanut butter out of my cabinet.

"Are you hungry?"

Her stomach growls, answering that question for her, and she blushes a little. "Yeah. I guess so."

"I'm making you something to eat," I tell her.

She smiles softly, and I can feel her eyes on me as I work, cracking eggs into a bowl, careful not to get any shell in. I add in milk and cinnamon, whisking until it's smooth. Then I spread peanut butter on slices of bread, putting them together into little sandwiches while I get a pan heating up.

"I remember the first time you cooked for me," Willow murmurs. "When I was sick and you were mad that I was

eating too much ramen. Do you remember that?”

I snort, but nod. It feels like a long time ago now. One of the first times that this bright, strange woman made me do something I wouldn't have ordinarily done.

“You needed real food,” I say.

“It was good.”

I add butter to the hot pan, and the sound of it sizzling fills the room.

“Misty never really cooked for me,” Willow murmurs, speaking about her adoptive mother for the first time since we left the morgue. “She didn't know how, for one thing. She'd burn water if you left her alone in the kitchen.” She lets out a breath, dragging her fingernail over a small mark on the table. “I keep... going back and forth. Feeling so conflicted. She was my mom, you know? I wouldn't be here if it wasn't for her. I don't know where I'd be. I feel so sad that she's gone, but at the same time, I just feel numb.”

“I think that's normal,” I tell her, then glance over my shoulder. “Although you can take that with a grain of salt coming from me.”

She chews on her lips, her gaze going unfocused. “I had just told Misty I was done with her. That I didn't want her in my life anymore. And I meant it. After all the shit she pulled, after everything she put me through, I was really done. She was barely a mom to me, so what am I even mourning? I don't know.”

Her voice is soft in the kitchen, and I can hear the confusion in her voice, how lost she feels. I wish I had answers for her, or at least knew how to make her feel better.

But comforting people has never been my strong suit.

I make the peanut butter sandwiches into French toast, frying them up in the pan before loading them onto a plate with butter and syrup, then bringing it over to Willow at the table.

“It’s okay to mourn for someone who doesn’t deserve it,” I tell her, settling at the table beside her. “To feel the hole they left in your life. Your mother was a constant, in a way. And now that constant is gone.”

Willow seems to consider that, cutting into the French toast and taking a bite. “You sound like you know how that feels,” she says.

“I do. I hated my father. We all did, but he took a special interest in me.”

“Malice told me once that he wanted you to be his soldier or something like that.”

I nod. “Yes. He abused me from a very young age, claiming it was to make me stronger.”

“That’s so fucked up,” Willow breathes, setting her fork down for a moment.

“It is.” I nudge her plate a little closer and watch her start to eat again, realizing as I do that besides my brothers, I’ve never talked about this with anyone else. “Some days, he would hold my head underwater, increasing the duration each time. Other days he’d break my fingers one by one, and if I cried out or showed that he had hurt me, it would be worse the next time. He’d say that if I could master myself, if I could endure all those things, then no one would be able to stop us.”

Her brows pull together. “‘Us’?”

“Me and him. He thought that someday, after everything he’d done, we would work together as a team. That we’d take over Detroit together.”

“God.” She grimaces.

“But despite everything he did to me,” I continue, “the thing that truly made me hate him was the fact that he was cruel to our mother and my brothers. Arguably, none of what he did to them was as bad as what he did to me, since I was his *special project*. But the fact that he hurt them was a step too far.”

Willow meets my eyes, and for a second, it seems like she wants to reach for me, but she doesn't. "He sounds horrible. Every time you guys talk about him, I'm glad he's dead."

"We are too. So I don't mourn his death—I was a part of it, after all. The three of us killed him to protect our mother, to make sure he could never lay a hand on her again. But even still, when he was dead, there was an absence there that I felt. I didn't miss the man himself, but it was like I was mourning what never was. All the things father never was to me and what he never would be now. His death made it so I would never have a father who loved and took care of me, only one who abused me and broke me. One who turned me into a freak."

I only say it to make her see that I understand how she feels, and that there's no shame in mourning someone who hurt you. It comes out like a statement of fact more than anything. I know what my father did to me, and I know that how I am now is different than I would've been if he hadn't treated me so badly.

Still, Willow looks up sharply at my words, pausing in cutting the last of her food.

"I don't think you're a freak," she says, her voice firm in the dimly lit kitchen. "I think you're so strong. I think you're amazing, Vic. Your father was horrible to you, and you're still here. You're smart and resilient, and it always seems like there's nothing you can't do. You shouldn't have had to go through all that, but you're not a freak and you're not broken."

My chest goes tight, my lungs seeming to stop working halfway through an inhale. Her eyes are soft, but there's fire there, the proof of her conviction in what she's saying.

She really believes that.

She doesn't think I'm damaged beyond repair.

As our gazes lock, I feel so drawn to her. Like we're two magnets that have been spinning around each other, and now a force bigger than either of us is pushing us together.

I couldn't stop it if I tried, and I lean in closer, breathing in the scent of her hair and skin. Willow leans in too, her breathing shallow and her lips slightly parted.

There's not much space between us at all now, and my fingers itch with the need to touch her. I've never really allowed myself to do that. There have been a few small brushes here and there, and the time when I held her down on the couch while Malice tattooed her. I wiped a tear off her cheek earlier tonight, but I've never just touched her for the pleasure of it.

I want to now. So fucking badly.

For once, I give in to the urge, letting my hand reach out, my fingers sliding over her waist where she sits and down the side of one hip.

Willow shivers, but she doesn't move away. She swallows, the muscles of her throat shifting with the action, and her eyes are large and luminous as she looks at me.

The tip of one finger slips under the hem of the shirt she's wearing, and I can feel the heat of her bare skin.

She sucks in a breath, dragging her bottom lip through her teeth.

"Victor," she whispers, and just the sound of my name in her mouth makes me shudder.

All of my carefully held control, already weakened by everything that's happened tonight, snaps for a moment. Everything narrows down to a point of pure want, and I lean forward, closing the last of that distance between us.

Her mouth is right there, and I can't resist, pressing my lips to hers softly.

The reaction is *instantaneous*.

Sensations explode inside me, overwhelming and powerful. I can feel Willow's breath against my lips as she kisses me back, and when she makes a soft noise in the back of her throat, I tug her roughly closer. I surge to my feet,

standing up so suddenly that my chair nearly topples over as I pull her up with me.

My fingers dig into her skin, as if now that I've touched her, I'll never be able to let her go. I kiss her harder, nearly bowing her backward with the force of it, slipping my tongue into her mouth and tasting syrup and peanut butter and the intoxicating flavor of Willow herself.

I can't get enough. It all goes to my head... and straight down to my cock. It's a hard, throbbing line in my pants, and I groan against her lips, only pulling away long enough to suck in small snatches of air.

Her arms wrap around me, her delicate fingers sliding over my shoulders, the muscles of my back, my neck...

And it's too much.

The surge of arousal coursing through me peaks in a sudden, uncontrollable rush.

My hips jerk, my cock swelling and pulsing as I come in my pants, wetness soaking the front of my boxer briefs.

I rip myself away from her, breathing hard as I stagger backward a step.

For a second, Willow and I just stare at each other. My emotions are a riot, out of control. It's so much. More than I can handle. I can't take it.

Without a word, I turn and stride out of the kitchen, shame and frustration and confusion and desire raging inside me like a hurricane. I don't look back, and I don't stop moving until I've returned to the sanctuary of my room.

Shutting the door, I sag against it and rest my head in my hands, trying to wrestle my demons back under control.

WILLOW

I STAND in the middle of the kitchen, my heart beating out a heavy rhythm as I stare at the door Vic just disappeared through. I can't move, can barely even think, stunned by what just happened. My lips are still kiss bruised, and my body is buzzing.

It was so hot. Possibly the hottest kiss of my life.

There was so much pent up need in it, so many things leading up to that moment. I've been wanting to kiss Victor for so long, wanting to feel him touch me, to be connected to him like that. And it was amazing to finally get to feel it.

But then... he shut down again.

It makes sense, in a way. He's so regimented, relying on rules and routines to get him through the day and keep him from spiraling. He already broke those rules once tonight, jerking off on a day that he wasn't meant to, just because I begged him to.

And now this.

I chew on my lip, remembering what he told me about his dad and how his father abused him. All of those habits Vic has are just his way of coping with that.

Shit. Maybe I pushed him too hard. Maybe it went too far. The last thing I want is for him to start avoiding me now. Just thinking about that possibility makes my heart hurt.

Part of me wants to go after him, but a bigger part of me isn't sure I should. If I push for him to talk to me now, I might

only make it worse, and that isn't what I want to do. He's not good at talking about stuff like this, and he probably needs the space.

I chew my lip for a moment, then pick up my phone from where I left it on the table and send him a text. It's always been easier for us to talk like this, and I really, really hope that will be true this time too.

ME: *Thank you for the French toast. It made me feel better.*

I feel like I'm holding my breath, waiting to see if he's going to respond. Three dots appear at the bottom of the screen, proof that he's there, that he's typing something. Then they disappear. Then reappear again. I can just imagine him back in his room, safe in the glow of his screens, typing and deleting several messages before he lands on what he wants to say.

Finally, my phone buzzes with a message.

VICTOR: *You're welcome. I don't like seeing you sad.*

As I'm reading that text, another one comes through.

VICTOR: *Goodnight, butterfly.*

I gaze at the two messages, feeling so many things as I read them over and over. There's so much in my head and on my heart, I almost wonder how my body can contain it all.

The food—and Vic's company—really did make me feel better. It's late, and even though I'm not tired at all, I should probably at least try to get more sleep. I move to head back upstairs, but as I make my way across the living room, Malice comes down the steps.

The tightness in his face eases when he sees me standing there.

"I saw that you weren't in Ransom's room," he murmurs. "I got worried."

Warmth spreads through me to hear him admit that. I like that the brothers worry about me, and it hits me in a rush how cared for I feel when I'm with them. Ransom carried me up to

bed earlier. Vic made me food because he knew I'd be hungry, and Malice came to check that I was okay. They care, and they each show it in their own little ways.

“Sorry,” I whisper back. “I just... couldn't sleep.”

Malice nods. “Do you want to go back to bed?”

I shake my head. “No. I feel like my mind is going too fast to sleep.”

“I get that,” he says. “Come on.”

He joins me in the living room, picking up the bottle of whiskey by the neck as we settle next to each other on the couch. He takes a swig and then passes it to me, and I follow suit.

I never was much of a drinker before, but I'm starting to get used to the way this whiskey burns going down, lighting a fire in my belly.

“You alright?” he asks, tipping his head to look at me. It's different from the way Ransom and Vic check on me, but I can feel the sincerity in it all the same. He's gruff, but that doesn't stop him from giving a shit.

I shrug. “I guess. Vic made me food.”

Malice snorts. “He does that. When in doubt, cook something.”

I debate if I should tell him what happened with Vic, but Malice probably knows him better than anyone. They're twins, and I know they share a special bond because of that. They've gone through so much together, so he can probably tell me if I need to be worried that Vic is going to freeze me out now.

“Can I... ask you something?” I whisper.

“Sure. What's up?”

“When Vic was down here earlier, we... something happened between us. Something that's never happened before. And he seemed like he was upset when he left. I'm just worried that I might have messed things up with him, which I really don't want to do.”

Malice is quiet for a second, and then he shakes his head. “You didn’t mess up. Vic’s got a whole shitload of demons he’s dealing with, and that’s just how life is for him. But he cares about you, and nothing’s gonna change that. Same goes for all of us.”

I swallow hard, my heart clenching. My stomach flutters a bit at the straightforward way he said that, and I look up at him to find him staring right back at me. Something wordless passes between us, full of feelings and a sense of security that I’ve never really felt before.

“Thanks,” I murmur softly.

He shrugs a shoulder. Then he cocks his head, arching a brow. “When I’ve got too much shit on my mind, I work on my tattoo. That’s the thing that usually helps. Do you want me to add to yours?”

I feel a pulse of nervousness at the question, but I already know my answer. “Yes. Please.”

Malice smiles, something a bit softer than his usual sharp-edged grin, then goes to get his tattoo gun. It takes him a minute to set things up, and when he’s ready, gestures to me. “Shirt off, Solnyshka.”

I pull my shirt over my head, sitting back on the couch. My heart pounds, because I remember how much it hurt the first time, but I don’t flinch away when Malice comes near me with the buzzing gun.

“You never told me what the 24 means,” I murmur, clutching the couch cushion with one hand as the burn of the needle jabbing into me starts up.

For a second, I think he’s not going to answer. His eyes are focused, his hand steady as he moves the tattoo gun over my skin. Then he starts to speak.

“After that prison gang tried to kill me, I went after their leader and killed him,” he says. It comes out matter-of-fact, and I’m struck all over again by what brutal lives the Voronin brothers have lived. “That’s what saved me in prison. I made a name for myself, made people realize they shouldn’t fuck with

me. After I killed him, I spent twenty-four days in solitary. It was fucking awful, but when I got out, people respected me.”

“Oh,” I breathe, tightening my grip on the couch. “So that number must mean a lot to you.”

He nods. “It’s a symbol of that moment. The day I decided I was never going to be a victim again and took my shit into my own hands.”

I swallow hard, knowing how much it must mean for him to be telling me this. The first time I asked, he wouldn’t say why he’d chosen that design, and I’m glad to know the whole story, as dark as it is.

“Thanks for telling me,” I murmur. “It makes me like the tattoo even more.”

A hint of a smile flickers over his face, and he pauses to wipe away some of the blood and ink so that he can see the new addition to my tattoo more clearly.

When he puts the gun back to my skin, I wince, the pain starting up again. When he goes over the same patch a few times, I have to bite my lip to keep from groaning in pain, and I take deep, even breaths, trying to get myself to relax.

“Touch yourself,” Malice instructs, his eyes darting up to meet mine, looking almost black in the dim light. “It’ll take your mind off the pain, just like it did the first time.”

My heart thunders, a million memories flashing through my mind all at once. I release my grip on the couch to do as he says, but he catches my wrist with his free hand, holding my gaze for just a second.

“Don’t let yourself come,” he adds. “Not until I’m finished.”

I nod, licking my lips when he releases me. It’s still so odd to be turned on from this, but as soon as my hand snakes its way down to my pussy, the spark of heat in my veins bursts into an inferno.

My clit throbs, and I start to get wet. I take my time, sliding fingers along my folds and teasing my clit lightly.

I feel debauched, doing this right here in the living room with Malice on his knees in front of me, adding to the tattoo on my chest. But at the same time, I feel beautiful too. And empowered, doing this thing that would have brought me so much shame before.

My body hums right along with the tattoo gun as I touch myself, teasing my clit in slow circles that make my breath catch. I fight to keep my hips still, not wanting to jerk too much and ruin the lines and curves of Malice's work.

A whimper spills from my lips as I press one finger inside myself, keeping it shallow enough to be a tease, but deep enough that I can feel it.

"Good girl," Malice says, his voice husky and low as he keeps his eyes on his work. "Tell me how it feels."

"G-good," I stammer. I let my eyes drift closed, using my own wetness to slick the slide of my fingers against my clit as I rub it. "Fuck, it feels so good."

I bite back a moan when he goes over another sore spot, pressing harder on my clit to combat the pain with pleasure.

"Are you close?" he asks.

"Almost," I breathe back, my fingers moving faster.

It would be so easy to tip myself over the edge, but he told me not to come until he gives me permission, and I want to wait, even if it's driving me crazy.

Every time I get to the brink of falling apart, I pull back, touching myself more slowly and easing up the pressure until it's feather-light. Pleasure and pain mingle together the same way they did the first time Malice tattooed me. They each serve as a counterpoint to the other, ramping each other higher and higher, and before I know it, I'm a whimpering mess.

I keep holding back, but the tension builds and builds, keeping me poised right there on the edge of it. My breath shudders out of me, and I chew on my lip, working hard to stay still.

Finally, Malice lifts the tattoo gun away from my skin.

“Come for me,” he orders. “Now.”

That’s all I need to hear. I plunge my fingers deeper into my pussy, fucking myself with them as the heel of my hand grinds against my clit. Malice leans in, catching my lips in a kiss, and he swallows my sharp cry as my orgasm breaks over me.

I shudder against him, riding out the waves of it as white hot pleasure make its way through my body until I’m left spent.

When our lips separate, I’m breathing hard, and I slump back against the couch. The place where he tattooed me stings, throbbing in time with my heartbeat, but I don’t mind the dull ache—especially when I look down and see what he added to the ink on my chest.

Interwoven with the 2 and the 4 are three sets of initials: MV, RV, and VV.

Malice tangles his fingers in my hair, resting his forehead against mine. He’s so close that I can smell the whiskey on his breath, mixed with the dark, musky spice of his aftershave.

“I never wanted a woman to be mine before,” he murmurs gruffly. “Never wanted a woman to be *ours*. Until I met you.”

WILLOW

THE NEXT SEVERAL days are a blur of schoolwork and dealing with the aftermath of my adoptive mother's death. There are more questions to answer, and the funeral to plan, which of course falls to me. It'll be a small, basic affair—because truth be told, there aren't a lot of people who will come to mourn Misty Hayes. I half considered not doing anything at all, but it feels like her death needs to be marked somehow, even if it's just me there to do it.

It feels weird to be going to school and doing normal things in the aftermath of Misty's death, but I guess life really does go on for the living.

A few days after my mom's overdose, April approaches me as I'm leaving class. I tense immediately, old habits flaring up. She's been nicer to me lately, but it's hard to forget the times when almost every interaction between us involved her saying something horrible to me.

"Hey, Willow, I'm sorry to hear about your mom," she says, and she actually does look remorseful.

I blink, surprised that she even knows about that. Although I guess I shouldn't be. She clearly thrives on gossip and knowing what's going on with people at our school. And now that I'm on her radar as someone who "matters," I guess she's keeping tabs on things in my life too.

"Thank you," I murmur quietly, then keep walking before she can say anything else.

It's nice that her bullying has stopped. Between whatever April has told people about my new family connections and the fact that Colin DeVry isn't on campus at all this summer, things at school have gotten a lot easier.

But even so, I feel weird about the fact that things have shifted so drastically between us, when nothing has really changed except the fact that I now have a wealthy family.

I go about my day, trying to focus on my classes despite the to-do list for my mother's funeral that keeps cycling through my head. I still need to pass my summer classes if I want to be ready to dive in when the fall semester starts.

That is, if I end up going to school in the fall.

I still haven't given Olivia an answer about whether I'd like to accept her offer and start helping her manage the estate. I spoke to her the day after my mom died, but of course it didn't come up then, and she didn't ask about it.

I'm glad she's giving me time to think about it, although with so much going on, I haven't really had a chance to sit down and think through what I really want for my future.

There's still time, I tell myself. Just get through the funeral first, then go from there.

As I head across campus after my last class of the day, I catch sight of April again. She and some of her friends are clustered in a little group near the quad. They're on the other side of a line of trees, so they don't see me as I walk up the path, but their voices reach me as I approach.

"If that was my mother, I think *I'd* have died instead," April is saying, her tone lofty and cruel. "That woman was clearly druggie trash, and I bet Willow is just like her. Now she thinks she's so fucking elite, but she was always trash to begin with. Watch, Olivia Stanton is going to regret taking her in and making her part of the family when Willow shows her true colors and ends up dead in a ditch somewhere from an overdose."

Her friends all laugh, and I stop in place, my eyes burning.

Anger fills me, and my hands curl into fists. At the end of the day, I don't give a shit what April Simms thinks about me. She doesn't know me at all. But I hate how fucking two-faced she is. That she would tell me she's sorry for my loss one minute, then turn around and talk shit behind my back the next.

Her words of sympathy ring hollow now, and it makes me question all over again whether I can really survive in the world of the wealthy and well-connected. I'm not as good as April is at hiding my feelings or playing the game.

Will I ever really fit into the high society life? Do I even want to? Or will I always be a target for people who look at me and see nothing but my past and the way I was raised?

It sounds exhausting, and it makes my heart hurt.

I don't want to live a lie. I feel like I wasted too much time doing that already, denying things about myself just because I was afraid they would mean I was too much like my mom.

Fuck that. And fuck April too.

Shaking my head, I keep walking, leaving April and her cronies to their shit talking session. I don't want to hear anything else they have to say.

I let my anger carry me across campus to the parking lot, then get in my car. My fingers wrap tightly around the steering wheel as I leave campus, still fuming over what a two-faced bitch April is.

I need to get a dress for Misty's funeral, since I don't have anything appropriate in black. Really, I just want to go home. Or go to the brothers' place and have them take my mind off things, but I need to do this, so I pull into a shopping center not far from my place.

As I get out of the car, I pull out my phone and call Victor. Things have actually been okay with us since the incident in the kitchen, and I've been relieved to find out that Malice was right when he said I didn't totally mess things up. Neither of us has mentioned what happened, but at least we're still talking and Vic isn't hiding from me or anything.

He answers after three rings like usual. “Willow. Is everything alright?”

“Yeah.” I nod, then blow out a breath. “I’m just pissed off, and I needed to hear a friendly voice.”

“What happened?” he asks. I can hear the soft clack of a keyboard in the background, and the sound is soothing, making me think of the quiet dimness of his room.

“There’s this girl who goes to my school. April. We’ve never gotten along because she always acted like she was so much better than me. But of course now that I’m Olivia Stanton’s long-lost granddaughter, she’s turned over a new leaf—to my face, at least.”

“Of course.” Vic hums. “That’s how it always goes.”

“Yeah, apparently so. She’s been talking to me more and more, and it’s not like I want to be her friend or anything, but it was nice to not be tormented all the fucking time.”

“Let me guess. She had a change of heart?”

“Not even!” I burst out. “She came up to me today and said she was sorry about what happened with my mom. But then just as I was leaving campus, I heard her and her friends saying my mom was trash and I’m going to end up just like her. It’s just so fucking stupid. I didn’t need her sympathy in the first place. She could have just said *nothing*. But because of who my grandmother is, she thinks pretending to be nice is going to get her family an in with Olivia or something? I don’t even know.”

Vic is quiet for a second, but I can hear his breathing on the other end.

“People like that aren’t worth your time,” he says finally. “You’re worth a hundred of her, and you would be even if you didn’t have a penny to your name. I hope you know that.”

“Thanks,” I murmur, the tightness in my chest unwinding a little. “You always know what to say.”

“Not always.” He pauses, and there’s a note in his voice that makes me think he’s thinking of what happened between

us in the kitchen. “But I’m glad it helps,” he adds.

“It does. A lot.”

“Are you still on campus?”

“No, I need a dress for Misty’s funeral, so I’m out shopping. I figured Nordstrom would have something that will work—not that I’ve ever been to a funeral before. Got any advice on what I should get?”

I see the department store up ahead, with a crush of shoppers heading toward it. I make a face, because I really don’t want to have to wade through a sea of people to get to where I want to go, so I cut through a little side alley between shops, trying to go around to the other side.

“You’ll be fine in basic black,” Vic assures me. “Do you want—”

Whatever his next words are, I don’t hear them.

Someone grabs me from behind, knocking the phone from my hand. Fear explodes in my chest, sudden and sharp, and I open my mouth to scream, but before I can, a heavy cloth bag is dropped over my head.

Everything goes dark, the bag muffling the sounds around me and disorienting me. I lash out, trying to strike the large, muscled body behind me with an elbow, a fist, a foot—anything. But none of my blows land well enough, and a thick arm wraps around my throat, keeping me from screaming as I’m lifted off my feet.

Memories of being kidnapped by Ilya surge through me, and terror floods my limbs as my wrists are bound and I’m shoved into a small, tight space. There’s a heavy slam, and when I hear the rumble of a car engine, I realize they’ve pushed me into a trunk.

“No! *Help!*”

I scream, but the sound is drowned out by the roar of the engine as the car peels out.

RANSOM

SPARKS FLY from the grinder I'm using, and I cut along the edge of the car door, bobbing my head to the beat of the music playing in the garage.

It feels good to be back to work. Although Ethan went out of his way to fuck over our business, he hasn't ruined it completely. There are still some people out there willing to work with us, so we can rebuild from what we lost.

I'm in the zone, enjoying the feel of the tools in my hand as I work on the car.

In a lull between songs, I hear a shout from upstairs. I frown, silencing the music, on instant alert.

When nothing else follows, I drop my tools and head up to the second floor. Malice is already at the top of the stairs, and I shoot him a look as I fall into step beside him.

"Did you hear that?" I ask.

He nods, and we push our way into Vic's room to see him typing frantically on his keyboard.

"What the fuck is going on?" Malice demands, folding his arms.

"I don't know." Vic's voice is tight, and he doesn't look away from the screen, fingers flying over the keyboard.

"Um, we're gonna need more than that." I step closer to his bank of computers, trying to prompt him to explain something. "Why were you shouting?"

“I was on the phone with Willow,” he bites out. “And then the line suddenly went dead.”

My stomach drops. “What the fuck?”

“It’s possible her battery died. Or it’s possible she dropped her phone and broke it or something,” Vic continues. “But I swear I heard the sounds of a scuffle before the call ended.”

“Shit,” I mutter under my breath.

Vic glances at me, and I can see the same deep worry in his eyes.

“Where was she when the call dropped?” Malice’s voice is tense.

“Dammit,” Vic curses. “I’m not sure. She said she was going to Nordstrom, but there are at least three in this area. I’m scanning each one.”

Malice and I can’t do much other than stand like sentinels and watch as Vic combs through footage near each shop that Willow could have gone to. It’s frustrating as hell, but we have no way of knowing which she would have picked. One is closer to her campus, one is closer to her apartment, and one is a bit farther out, but closer to where her grandmother lives.

Vic moves as fast as he can, but he has to be precise if he’s going to make sure not to miss anything. It’s agonizing, watching him scrub through footage and seeing nothing helpful.

All I can think about is when Ilya took Willow. We didn’t get there in time, and if it hadn’t been for that fire that killed Ilya, he could have tortured and murdered Willow then.

And we couldn’t have done anything to stop him.

We can’t let it get that far this time. We have to fucking get to her before anyone else can hurt her, but to do that, we have to fucking find her first.

My heart is in my throat, and Malice looks just as agitated beside me, his arms crossed over his chest as his fingers clench and unclench. Every second Vic spends going through footage feels like an eternity, and the knot in my gut gets

bigger and bigger as he crosses off the store near her grandmother's place and then the one near her campus.

"I thought she would have gone there," Vic mutters, jabbing at keys angrily. "She was leaving school when she called."

"Maybe she wanted to shop closer to home," I suggest, knowing good and well that if we don't find her at that one, we'll have nothing to go on.

I can't even stomach that thought.

Vic brings up the footage from the one closer to her apartment, and for a few agonizing minutes, we see nothing. Then he inhales sharply and points at the screen.

"There. That's her."

And there's no doubt about it. It's Willow, getting out of her car in the parking lot of the plaza, her phone pressed to her ear. That does something to ease the feeling of dread crawling up my spine, but it's not enough.

Vic zooms in on that footage, following Willow as she crosses the street, her phone held up to her ear. She ducks into an alley at one point, looking like she's taking a shortcut to the store.

"Fuck," Vic hisses.

He types some more and then pulls up a camera from the alley. The footage here is dark and grainy, but we can make out the shape of a tall person in a mask grabbing Willow and dragging her away to a car.

"Someone's got her," Mal growls. "Someone fucking took her. Where the fuck did they go?"

"Give me a second." Vic's fingers fly over the keyboard as he gets to work using security and traffic camera footage to track the car and figure out where the hell Willow's abductor took her.

Malice and I lean in close, offering a second and third set of eyes, watching for the car they shoved her in as the seconds

tick down. Every second we spend looking is one less second we'll have to go and save her, and I fucking hate it.

“Who the hell took her?”

Pure fury laces Mal's voice, and I know how he feels.

With Ilya, we at least knew what he wanted. He was after us, and he planned on using Willow to get what he wanted. But with this shit, we're in the dark. We thought she would be safe after Ilya went down, or we never would've let her out of our fucking sight.

Malice grips the back of Victor's chair, squeezing so tight that the leather on the back starts to creak in protest. His jaw is clenched and his eyes are hard as he stares at the screen.

“We never should have let her leave here,” he mutters. “We should have kept her living with us. Kept watching her closely. Kept eyes on her at all times.”

He sounds like he's on the verge of losing his shit entirely, and I know he and Vic are thinking the same thing I am.

We can't fucking lose her.

WILLOW

THE TRUNK IS small and cramped, and no matter which way I try to squirm, I can't move much. The bag over my head makes it hard to get enough air, and each breath I take is shallow and panicked. My heart is racing so hard that I swear I can hear it over the hum of the car engine. I have no idea where my captor is taking me or what he wants, but my mind flashes back to Ransom talking about X and the guys saying that they needed to keep an eye on me in case he decided to lash out at them by hurting me.

Is that what this is?

There's no way to know, and that makes it even worse.

I pat around in the trunk as well as I can with my wrists tied behind my back, trying to find something, *anything*, to grab on to and use as a weapon. Maybe once whoever abducted me lets me out, I can fight my way free somehow.

I try to keep track of how long we've been driving, to see if I can figure out how far away he's taking me, but it's so disorienting in this trunk that it feels like it's warping my sense of time.

When the car finally stops, it could have been an hour or ten minutes, as far as I know.

I hear a car door open, and someone gets out. I can make out the sound of footsteps coming around the side of the car, and adrenaline spikes in my gut, making me nauseated. When he opens the trunk, I'll have just a small window of time to try to get away.

As soon as the trunk pops open, I push myself up and hurl myself forward. Not being able to see makes everything so much harder, and I stumble on the way out of the trunk. I hit the ground hard and try to scramble away, but someone grabs me before I can get any distance.

I'm yanked backward, a strong hand tightening around my arm and torquing my shoulder. I struggle, trying to find some slack in my binds, but then I recognize the cold press of something hard and metallic at my back.

A gun.

Instantly, I freeze, dread and fear rising up in the back of my throat like bile.

The trunk slams closed, and then the gun presses more firmly against my back.

"Walk," someone says—a deep, masculine voice that I don't recognize.

I don't have any other choice but to do as he says, so I take one step and then another, letting him lead me somewhere I can't see. Our footsteps echo around us, and it feels like a big, open space.

Maybe a parking garage? Or something like that.

He marches me along for a few minutes, then grunts out, "Stop."

I do, and he reaches around me to open a door. The surface beneath my feet changes as we step through, going from echoey concrete to what feels like linoleum.

We're in a building of some kind, I guess.

For a second, I debate about screaming for help, but then dismiss that idea. It can't be worth it in the long run, and this guy wouldn't be marching me along at gunpoint if anyone could see us.

He prods me up three flights of stairs and then down a hallway. We pass through another door, then I feel the man grab my shoulder. He shoves me down, and I panic for a second, my body tensing in anticipating of hitting the floor.

But instead, my ass lands in the seat of a chair, and he ties me to it before yanking the bag off my head.

Light floods my eyes, blinding me. I blink rapidly, trying to adjust to the sudden flood of brightness after spending all that time in the dark. As my vision starts to adjust a little, I realize there's a large light pointed at me from a short distance away. It's the only light in the space, and it makes the rest of the room seem dark and indistinct.

I can see the shadowy shape of my captor moving around, but I can't make out his face in the darkness. I hear him muttering to himself, and then there's a clicking sound. After a few seconds, it hits me that it's the click of a camera.

Is he taking pictures of me?

My skin crawls, and I look frantically around the dim, shadowy room, trying to figure out some way out of this. I can't see much, and the ropes are tied too tightly for me to get free.

No. Not again. Please, not again.

I barely escaped my encounter with Ilya in one piece. It was truly only luck that the fire started, trapping him under a beam as the building burned and allowing me to flee. I won't be so lucky a second time, I know it.

Terror builds up in me, putting a sour taste in my mouth and making my stomach roil. Being kidnapped once was bad enough, and the first time doesn't make the second time any easier to handle. If anything, it's *worse*—because I know how bad my odds are.

The chair I'm in this time isn't wooden, it's metal. So there's no chance of breaking it to escape like I did before. I have no idea how to get free.

My throat is dry, and I have to unstick my tongue from the roof of my mouth so I can speak. I peer into the light, squinting to try to get a better view of the man in the darkness.

“What do you want with me?” I demand, trying to stop my voice from shaking with fear.

“I would’ve thought that was obvious,” the man says, snorting. “Blackmail.”

He takes a few steps forward as he speaks, and even though his face is partially shadowed outside the light that’s shining so brightly on me, I can finally make out his features.

There’s nothing special about him from what I can see. He looks like any guy on the street, dark haired and dark eyed. His nose looks like it might have been broken a couple of times, but he doesn’t have anything that makes him stand out.

For a wild moment, I have the strangest sense of déjà vu, though. There’s nothing remarkable about him, but I feel like I know him, even though I don’t know why or from where.

I stare at him for several long seconds, and then it hits me in a rush, making my stomach drop.

He’s... the man from my dream.

He was there, in my dream of being kidnapped by Ilya. In most of my nightmares, all I could see was an indistinct shadow in the flames, and there were moments when I felt like there was a monster in the shadows. And in one version of the nightmare, I remember seeing a second man’s face, someone besides Ilya—but I couldn’t place him. I couldn’t distinguish him from the long list of men who have done horrible things in my life.

But I saw his face. *This man’s face.*

There’s no way my mind could’ve conjured up an image of his features weeks ago if this is the first time I’m actually seeing him.

Which means he was there that night. He must’ve been.

I was probably still too out of it from the drugs and too deep in my panic attack to really register it. But my subconscious did, apparently. He was in that old building, hidden in the shadows somewhere.

“It’s you,” I whisper, the words coming before I can stop them. “You were there that night. I remember you.”

The man's face hardens, and he glares at me. "I wondered if you saw me. Not that it matters. I won't make the same mistakes that Russian did. I'm going to use you as leverage, and I won't let you escape like you did that night."

The confirmation that I was right leaves me reeling. Goosebumps break out over my skin, and I shake my head.

"No. You can't—"

My words break off as he steps closer and backhands me across the face. Pain explodes through my cheek, and I'm left gasping, spots dancing before my eyes.

"Shut the fuck up," he snarls. "This isn't about you, and no amount of begging will help."

"I'm not begging," I say, my jaw aching from his slap as I force the words out. "I'm just—"

He backhands me again, going for the same cheek. My head whips sideways, a cry of pain bursting from my lips.

"I know what you're doing. You're trying to distract me. Like you distracted the Russian, tempting him until he let his guard down." The man's face twists into a grin, savage and threatening. "Well, luckily, I won't be so easily swayed. Although I'm sure a whore like you who likes to take three men at once knows her way around a cock, I've got other plans for you."

My eyes widen, my breath sticking in my throat at his comment about me taking three men at once. I haven't actually done that, but this means he knows about me and the Voronin brothers.

"What are you going to do to me?" I ask hoarsely.

I know it's risky to keep pushing him by asking questions. I'm not sure how many more hits I can take before I pass out, but I need to keep him talking. I need to know what he's planning.

He raises his hand again, but this time, instead of hitting me, he grips my chin tightly, forcing me to look up at him as he lowers his head a little.

“The Russian wanted vengeance, and so do I. Unfortunately for him, I couldn’t let him kill you that night. I had to stop him, since you were needed for another purpose and those fucking brothers refused to let you go.”

My mind races as I try to process everything he’s saying, and my voice is barely a whisper as I ask, “*You* stopped Ilya?”

“Of course.” The man snorts. “It never struck you as odd that you, puny little thing that you are, managed to escape, while that Ilya guy died in the fire? I knocked him out, then let the flames do the rest.”

I feel like I’m spinning, or maybe the room itself is spinning. Everything I thought I knew about the night of my abduction is unraveling, disjointed images and memories whirling through my head.

“Why did you save me, then?” I breathe. “Why save me only to kidnap me now?”

He tightens his grip, his fingers digging painfully into my skin. “Here’s a little lesson on how the world works, girlie. The best way to get what you want from someone is to threaten a person they care about. And that’s exactly what I’m gonna do.” He chuckles, the sound tinged with vicious cruelty. “And once I’ve gotten what I want? Well, hell, I think I’ll just kill you anyway.”

My stomach clenches, and I squirm in his grasp, trying to wrench my chin out of his hold. He’s still staring at me, his face only a foot away from mine, and as I look up at his strangely familiar features, a sudden terrifying certainty hits me.

This man is X. He has to be.

He knows the Voronin brothers are attached to me. He’s probably known it ever since they refused to turn me over when he demanded they give me to him.

He must’ve found out that they’re planning to double-cross him. Maybe whoever he sent to do the pickup spotted the hidden camera Malice planted at the drop site, and he’s

realized they're trying to figure out who he is and take him out.

So he's going to use me to stop them.

MALICE

I TAKE a turn at breakneck speed, the tires squealing in protest as the car screeches around the corner. Vic doesn't even say anything, just holding on to the handle by the window and keeping his gaze locked straight ahead.

That's how I know my twin is as serious about finding Willow as we all are. Usually, he'd be giving me shit for my sloppy driving, but none of us care about that right now.

There's only one thing on our minds. One thought pulsing urgently through the car as if all three of us share a brain.

Find Willow.

Find Willow.

Find Willow.

We were able to track the car that took her, thank fuck. It was hard, and only due to Vic's exceptional skills at hacking and tracing shit that we were able to pick up the trail at all.

Using the footage Vic got, we figured out that whoever this fucker is, he took her to a building on the outskirts of Detroit. It wasn't much to go on, but we didn't have time to do more recon or strategizing. So as soon as we had that info, we piled into my car and peeled out.

Now we're getting close, and as we get nearer to the building where we think she's being held, Ransom and Vic start to prepare, grim expressions on both of their faces.

They're both armed, and they check their weapons and go over the gear we have with us. We have no way of knowing

what's waiting for us in there, so before we left the warehouse, we hastily stocked the car with everything we thought we might need. In all the video footage we were able to scan, it looked like just one guy was responsible for nabbing Willow—but maybe he has friends or backup who were waiting for him at the spot he took her to.

We have to be prepared for whatever the fuck is about to go down.

One man. Ten men. Doesn't fucking matter.

I'll kill them all if I have to, to get her back.

I pull the car to a stop a block away from the building, grabbing my own gun and stuffing it into the waistband of my pants as I meet Vic's and Ransom's gazes.

"Ready?" I ask.

"Yeah." Ransom's voice is hard. "Let's fucking do this."

"If he's already hurt Willow..."

Vic trails off, his jaw clenching. The fingers of one hand were tapping on his thigh for most of the drive here, and I can tell he's more agitated than he usually lets himself get, his emotions churning just beneath the surface.

And he doesn't need to finish that sentence. It's unspoken, but we all know what he's thinking. If the man who took Willow has tortured her or hurt her in any way, we won't just kill him. We'll end him slowly and fucking painfully.

"Yeah." I nod, reaching out to grip Vic's shoulder, grounding and steadying him. "We know. We won't let that happen."

He sucks in a breath and lets it out, giving me a sharp nod to let me know he's good to go. I shove my car door open, and we all get out, our gazes scanning our surroundings with practiced thoroughness. All three of us are on edge and wary. Walking into something like this is dangerous as fuck, but there was never any doubt that we would come.

We failed Willow once, putting her in danger even as we tried to protect her. We won't let that happen again.

Vic jerks his chin to the left, and we all head in the direction he indicated, approaching the building from the side. The place Willow's kidnapper took her to looks like an office building more than a warehouse or something like that, but it's clearly empty, sitting abandoned like so many structures on the edges of Detroit.

There are a few places to take cover, dumpsters and small trees, and we use them to stay hidden as we approach the building, our weapons drawn.

It's a damn good thing we have signals in place for shit like this. The three of us have been working together for so long, doing jobs together since before I went to prison, which means we don't even have to speak as we move. When Vic signals for us to pause, we do, waiting while he peers ahead. When he gives the all clear, we keep moving.

The outer door is locked when we get to it, and Vic moves silently ahead to start picking it. He's the best at this sort of thing, his hands steady and sure despite the tension in his body. Ransom and I take up spots on either side of him, guns raised as we scan for threats.

Less than two minutes later, the lock clicks, and Vic pushes the door open, letting us inside.

Ransom covers Vic as he shuts the door, and I scan the entryway quickly, checking for threats and any surveillance equipment. But I come up empty.

"You see any signs of cameras?" I ask Vic, knowing he's better at spotting hidden cameras than I am.

He glances around, then shakes his head. "No."

"Let's keep moving, then."

Just like the outside, the interior of the building makes it clear that the place is abandoned. We pass through several empty rooms as we move through it, checking each one for Willow or anyone trying to slow our approach.

"Clear down here," Ransom whispers, and we move as a unit up the stairs.

The second floor is just like the first. No signs of life. No gunmen waiting in the shadows to take us out. But that doesn't make me feel any better as we head to the third floor—because there's no sign of Willow yet either.

She's here. She has to be. Vic wasn't wrong.

We move along the hall quietly, and we get about halfway down it when a sound up ahead makes me stop in my tracks. My brothers stop too, all of us listening intently.

My heart pounds like a drum, hard and fast.

Is that her?

The three of us exchange glances, adjusting our grips on our weapons. Vic makes a signal with his hand, and we move toward the sound in unison. We keep our footsteps light, cautious and wary, but we move as fast as we can.

If it is her, we need to get there. Now.

There's a closed door at the end of the corridor, and as we near it, I hear another sound. A man's voice, muffled, but clearly audible.

I hold up a hand, getting my brothers' attention. Using gestures and hand signals, we coordinate our attack in silence. We have to get in fast and hit hard, taking out whoever's in there before they can hurt Willow. It's risky, but we have no other choice.

Vic's gun has a silencer on it, and I nod to him, stepping aside with Ransom so he can shoot the lock off the door.

He steps forward, lining up his shot as Ransom and I press our backs against the wall on either side of the door.

I catch Vic's gaze, and we silently count down like we've done dozens of times before.

Three...

Two...

One.

Vic squeezes the trigger, shooting out the lock, and as pieces of drywall and wood explode outward, I pivot toward the door and kick it in, putting all my strength behind the blow. It gives way, swinging inward, and the three of us move in formation, pouring through the now open doorway.

The room is dark, and before I can get my bearings, a bright light swings around to face us.

“Fuck!” Ransom curses, and the three of us break apart, moving in different directions to create separate targets as we search for our enemy.

“Malice, watch out!”

Willow’s voice is a harsh shriek, and I glance up, catching sight of a shadow hurtling toward me. I pivot, but not fast enough—the dark shape plows into my side, tackling me hard.

The brunt of the blow lands on the side where I’m still healing, and it’s a damned good thing that the injury has healed up pretty well by now. But it still knocks the wind out of me, the hit knocking me off balance more than it would’ve if he’d struck my other side.

I grunt, staggering as I fight to keep my footing and my attacker tries to bring me down.

Before the fucker can get another hit off on me, I lash out, pistol whipping him in the temple and then trying to shoot him, but he grapples with me for the weapon. He must’ve realized that he hit a weak spot with his first tackle, because he punches my side, a left hook that lands directly on my freshly healed wound.

Nausea rushes through me, and he uses the small window where my guard is down to twist the gun out of my grip, sending it clattering across the floor.

He shoves me hard against the wall and pulls his own gun from the waistband of his pants, but before he can press his advantage, Ransom bum rushes him.

“Pin him!” I snarl to Ransom as they struggle in the dim light. “He’s got a fucking gun!”

Willow's kidnapper throws an elbow backward, catching Ransom in the throat, and when my brother splutters and coughs, the other man breaks out of his hold.

He steps away quickly, opening up space between them as he raises his weapon, aiming right for Ransom.

But before he can pull the trigger, a quiet sound cuts through the air—a gun firing through a silencer.

The bullet from Vic's gun slams into the kidnapper's chest with a wet thud, and the man staggers backward. He lets out a guttural noise, swaying on his feet... and then he falls face down onto the floor in a heap.

Silence falls in the room, and it seems almost deafening after the shouts and sounds of fighting that filled it a moment ago.

"Check on Willow," I tell Ransom, breathing hard, my gaze never leaving the prone body on the floor. "Make sure she's alright."

He moves quickly toward the spot where she's tied up to a chair, and I'm vaguely aware of Vic following him. I want to go too, want to pull Willow against my body until I can feel her heart beating against mine—just to prove to myself that she really is still alive, and that she's in one piece. At least she's in good shape and conscious enough to have called out to me earlier, and I cling to that small reassurance as I stride over to the body on the ground.

Someone has to make sure this fucker is dead and gone. To make sure he's breathed his last breath and can never put his hands on Willow again.

Reaching down, I grab the gun from the man's limp, lifeless fingers, training the weapon on him as I nudge him with my foot. Across the room, I can hear my brothers talking to Willow, her soft, shaky voice a counterpoint to their deep baritones.

I nudge the man's large body harder, rolling him over onto his back so I can see his face.

The room is still dim, the single bright light pointed against a wall now, but there's enough illumination that I can make out his features. And as soon as I do, shock jolts through me, edging out the adrenaline and anger I've been running on since we burst in here.

Willow's kidnapper isn't just some faceless asshole. I know this guy.

It's Darius fucking Ledger, and he's dead.

"What the fuck?" I mutter under my breath, my brow furrowing.

This is who abducted Willow? Why?

"Hey," I call to the others. "Get over here."

They make their way over to join me, Ransom supporting Willow around the waist and Vic hovering on her other side. His hands aren't on her the way Ransom's are, but he's close enough that he's almost touching her.

As soon as they stop by my side, I reach out, pulling Willow into my arms and crushing her to me. We need to figure out what the fuck Darius was doing, but right now, I just need to hold my Solnyshka.

My sunshine.

Willow squeaks in surprise at the sharpness of my movement, but she doesn't fight my hold, melting into it as she wraps her arms around me as well. I can feel her shaking, tremors of fear running through her even though she's safe now, and it just makes me hold her tighter, my jaw clenched tight.

We got here in time.

We managed to save her.

Thank fuck.

"I thought..." Her words choke off in a breathless sob, and she shakes her head, burying her face against my chest.

"You're safe," I tell her, my voice strained. "We've got you."

She nods but doesn't pull away, and I breathe her in, wishing I could keep her wrapped in my arms forever.

Finally, we separate. I run my hands over her, checking for injuries even though I'm sure both Ransom and Victor did that already. There's a bruise blooming on her cheek, and it makes me want to bring Darius back to life again just so we can kill him more slowly and a hell of a lot more painfully.

"I'm alright," Willow whispers as my fingertips ghost over the mark on her face. "Really. I'm okay. It... it could've been so much worse."

"He deserved to die screaming for this," I tell her, not even caring that it makes me sound like a violent psychopath. Willow knows who I am and what I'm capable of by now, so the fact that I'd be willing to kill for her—to torture and maim for her—shouldn't come as any kind of surprise.

She lets out a shaky breath, reaching up to trail her fingers over my cheek in a mirror of what I'm doing to her. Her large brown eyes gleam in the dim light as she holds my gaze for a moment, and then she finally turns to look at her attacker where he's sprawled on the ground.

"So he really is dead?"

"Yeah," I confirm. "Vic got a clean shot. The bullet probably stopped his heart. He's gone."

"Wait." Ransom drags out the word, frowning as we all stare down at the body. "Is that..."

"Yeah. Darius Ledger."

Willow blinks, glancing between us. "Do you know him?"

I nod. "Yeah, he was friends with our dad back in the day. We've had a few run-ins with him."

Her eyes go wide, her brows pulling together as if she's working something out in her head. "He said he planned to use me against you guys. Because you cared about me. He was going to use me to get revenge."

"Revenge for what?" Ransom murmurs, shaking his head.

“I think... this is X,” she whispers.

Ransom’s head shoots up, and Vic stiffens, glancing over at Willow. I tense up too, wary and confused.

“What do you mean, Solnyshka?” I press.

“He was there the night Ilya abducted me. He’s the reason I escaped. He saved me because he wanted me for something else. And he referenced you guys when he was talking to me. He knew we were... together.”

She leans closer to me as she speaks, as if she needs the warmth and comfort of my body. I wrap an arm tightly around her, listening intently to every word she utters as Victor taps his fingers against his leg next to us.

“I think Darius might’ve figured out you were trying to track down his identity,” Willow continues. “He said he planned to use me to get what he wanted, and that he’d kill me anyway in the end. So maybe he was going to either blackmail you into doing a job that would definitely get you killed or keep me captive until you agreed to give up trying to figure out who he was.”

“Son of a bitch,” Ransom mutters. “What the fuck? So *this* is X? Our dad’s old friend?”

“It makes sense,” I say slowly, trying to piece it all together. “When I ran into Darius a while ago, he was talking all this shit about how our dad trained us up, gave us all these skills, and then we turned around and used them against him to kill him. He seemed impressed by what we’d done. And he knew I’d been to prison, and he seemed pretty fucking amused by that fact.”

“Because if Willow is right, he was the one who pulled strings to get you out,” Victor adds, studying the body on the floor as if he could somehow revive it and make Darius spill all of his secrets.

We all go quiet for a long moment, staring down at the blood soaked body. Then Ransom leans in and spits on the corpse.

“I guess you won’t get a chance to scrub more footage from the second drop to try to find X, Vic,” he says. “It looks like we’ve already found him.”

WILLOW

HE'S DEAD.

That thought floats through my mind as Ransom leans back, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand. My gaze is still locked on the large body sprawled at an awkward angle on the floor, and I have a sudden memory of Ransom telling me that it gets easier to deal with death the more you're exposed to it—that the first time is hardest.

I hate to think of how true that is, but I don't feel the same kind of disquieted shock or horror I felt when I saw the brothers kill Nikolai, or when Vic murdered Carl in my living room.

As I stare at the blood soaking the front of Darius Ledger's shirt, all I feel is... relief.

It's done. He's gone.

He can't hurt me or the brothers ever again.

A shiver works its way through my body, and Malice pulls me tighter against his side. My limbs are still shaking a little, leftover adrenaline coursing through me, and I almost can't believe I'm still standing.

I almost died, today. Again.

This man—*X*—said he was going to kill me once he got what he wanted from the brothers, and I have no doubt that he would've made good on that threat.

But this time, my men came. They made it in time, rushing in and killing him before he could do more than give me a

nasty bruise on my cheek. They saved me.

I blink as it hits me in a rush that I just thought of them as ‘my men.’

Is that what they are? Mine?

The truth is, I want them to be. I went from fearing these three brothers to feeling such an unbreakable connection with each of them that I can’t imagine my life without them.

Malice still has a tight grip on me, and I shift in his hold to look up at him again.

“Thank you,” I whisper. “For coming for me.”

“We always fucking will.”

My heart thunders, and I lean up to kiss him. It’s warm and full of feeling, and he cups my face with one of his large hands, his thumb sliding over my jaw. When our lips break apart, he presses his forehead to mine, and we stay like that for a second, breathing each other in.

My legs are feeling a bit more steady, so I finally step out of his embrace. As soon as Malice lets me go, I find myself in Ransom’s embrace. His blue-green eyes glint in the dim light, and he stares down at me like he never wants to stop.

“I was so fucking worried about you, angel,” he murmurs, shaking his head. “If you thought we were stalking you before, we’re gonna be fucking unbearable now.”

I laugh softly, leaning into him. “Somehow I’m not surprised.”

“You shouldn’t be,” he says. “We’re never going to let anything like this shit happen to you again. Ever.”

Tears burn the backs of my eyes at the conviction and determination in his voice. I hug him tightly, burying my face against his shoulder, then I lean up and kiss him too. It’s deep and searching, as if he’s still trying to convince himself that I really am okay. That I’m here and whole.

When he releases me, Victor steps forward, standing right in front of me.

There's an intense look on his face, a mix of relief and turmoil. Our gazes meet, and he sucks in a ragged breath. Then, suddenly, he reaches out and pulls me into his arms.

A soft gasp falls from my lips, shock shooting through me.

The hug is stiff and a little awkward, as if he doesn't quite know how to do it, as if this is still hard for him. He doesn't pull me in as close as Malice or Ransom did, but his arms band around me as I rest my cheek against his chest, hugging him back.

It's like coming home, having the three of them here, feeling the connection that flows like water between us, and the fear and adrenaline that was coursing through me finally starts to ebb for good as my mind and body come to terms with the fact that I'm safe now.

Victor holds me for several beats longer than his brothers did, as if now that he's touched me, he doesn't want to let go. But finally, he clears his throat and steps back, his expression shuttering a little.

"We need to get out of here," Ransom says, drawing my attention.

"Yeah." Malice nods, glancing around the room. "I doubt there's anyone in this area who'd have heard the noises and called the cops, but we still need to get moving. Vic, check the body."

All three of them slip easily into business mode, something I've seen them do before. Just like when they came to deal with the body at my old apartment, they divide tasks, moving quickly and efficiently.

Vic pats the corpse down, grabbing a few things from Darius's pockets before nodding to his brothers. Then Malice and Ransom get to work wrapping the dead body in a tarp they found in the corner.

I shudder at the fact that it was there, not even wanting to think about what Darius planned to use it for.

"What do you think, Mal?" Ransom asks, dusting his hands off as he stands up. "Burn it here?"

Malice shakes his head. “Too close to the scene. We should take it farther out and dump it.”

Vic pulls his phone out of his pocket, tapping the screen a few times as he searches for something. Then he nods, looking satisfied. “There’s a place that looks viable not too far from here.”

“Perfect.”

Malice grabs the top half of the body, and Ransom picks up Darius’s tarp wrapped feet. I follow after them as they head out of the room and down the stairs.

It’s weird, seeing the place I was held hostage in now, since I had a bag over my head when I was brought in. There’s something distinctly creepy about this old, abandoned office building, but I’m grateful to be leaving it in one piece.

There’s no discussion at all of them leaving me behind or dropping me off somewhere before they go to deal with the body, and I’m glad for that, as strange as it feels to be a part of it. I’ve seen more people die in the last few months than I had in my whole life prior, and I don’t think I’ll ever truly get used to it, even if it doesn’t shock me quite the same way it used to.

But still, there’s nothing that could make me want to leave the Voronin brothers’ sides right now, and I get the sense they feel the same way.

We drive even farther out of the city, to an empty stretch of land where it seems like there’s no one around for miles. After getting away from the main road and into a wooded area, they unload the body and dig a hole, dumping it inside before lighting it on fire.

I stand back, trying not to look too closely as the body begins to burn. My stomach turns over as smoke rises into the air, and Ransom comes and wraps an arm around me, turning me away so I don’t have to watch.

He rests his chin on the top of my head, his hand smoothing over my back, and I feel his chest rise and fall as he lets out a breath.

“Darius motherfucking Ledger,” he mumbles. “Fucking hell. Out of all the theories I ever had about who X might’ve been, that guy never even made the list. I mean... we all thought X had to be pretty well-connected, right? With tons of resources to get Malice out of jail and hide his identity and all that.”

“Yeah.” Malice narrows his eyes, glancing toward the hole with the burning body. “But maybe that’s exactly what he wanted everyone to think. He saw the mistakes our dad made as he tried to make a name for himself in the underworld of Detroit. Dad couldn’t fucking stop himself from running his mouth, always talking shit and acting like more of a bigshot than he was when he couldn’t even back it up. So maybe Darius played the opposite tactic—act like you ain’t shit so people underestimate you.”

“It’s not a bad strategy,” Vic murmurs. “Like you said, Ransom, he was never even on our radar. He must have followed our story ever since Malice got arrested for Dad’s death. I can imagine Dad bragging about how good I was at tech, how he’d taught us to fight, and how we were gonna help him build his empire.”

Malice nods. “Yeah, so Darius knew we could handle all the jobs he sent us on.”

“And then he got pissed when we stopped playing his fucking game. He was probably looking for a way to regain control of the situation, to make sure he didn’t lose his control over us.” Ransom tucks a lock of my hair behind my ear, looking down at me. “Willow, you said he wanted to use you as leverage, right?”

I nod. “Yes. He said he was going to use me to get what he wanted from you because you care about me.”

Vic taps his thighs with his fingers, keeping the rhythm even. “So it’s possible that he thought taking Willow would put us back in line.”

“Or it might’ve been punishment,” Malice throws out. “Since he wanted Willow in the first place and we didn’t

deliver. He's obviously held a grudge about that this whole time."

"You said..." My voice dries up, and I lick my lips and try again. "You said you were pretty sure X wanted me because I was a virgin so he could sell me or something, right?"

All three of them nod, looking grim.

"But Darius told me that he was going to kill me either way," I point out. "Even if you gave him what he wanted, he wanted me dead. He wanted me to suffer."

Just saying it makes my veins go cold, and I look to the smoldering remains of the fire in the hole they dug, grateful all over again that this man is dead and can't hurt me now.

They all look pissed as fuck at the reminder of that.

"Piece of fucking shit," Malice snarls. He spits into the hole and then starts kicking dirt back over the ashes.

With the help of some accelerant, the body burned quickly. Once the remnants are covered up, we get back into the car. It's a mostly quiet drive back to their place, and I let out a little breath when I realize that's where they're taking me.

I just want to be with them right now. Even though the danger has passed, it's the only place I feel truly safe.

"We'll get your car later," Ransom promises.

I blink, remembering that it's parked near the Nordstrom. "That's fine. I don't need it right now."

As soon as we get back to their place, Vic heads toward the kitchen immediately. It's late in the day by now, and he starts making dinner, throwing himself into preparing something that smells amazing.

Ransom leads me upstairs and tells me I can shower if I want, and I'm grateful for it. Even though Darius barely touched me, I can still feel his hands on my skin and the cold press of his gun at my back.

Plus, it's nice to be clean and wrapped up in the scents of the bath products the guys use. Ransom leaves some of his

clothes on the bathroom counter for me, and once I've finished showering and dried off, I pull on his shirt—which is too big, but so comfortable.

The food is ready when I come back down, and we all head into the living room to eat it.

Malice puts on a movie, some mundane action flick where there are more witty one-liners than bloody shootouts, and we all relax. I'm tucked up on the couch between Malice and Ransom, and Vic sits on the floor in front of me, close enough that I could reach out and touch him.

After being kidnapped and fearing for my life, this comfortable, peaceful moment with the brothers is better than anything else I could've asked for.

With food and a few sips of whiskey in my belly, my tense muscles finally start to unwind. The warmth of the bodies surrounding me starts to lull me to sleep, and I guess it makes sense for my body to want to crash after how intense everything has been today.

I stifle a yawn, leaning a little into the solidness of Malice's large frame.

He shifts a bit, lifting one arm so I can tuck myself against him, and Ransom grabs my ankles, lifting my feet onto his lap.

"You should get some rest," he says. "You had a long day."

"Yeah," I mumble. "I'm definitely feeling it now."

"Stay out here though," Malice murmurs. He runs his fingers through my hair, and I nearly purr at how good that feels. "I'm not ready to let go of you yet, and Ransom's bed isn't fucking big enough for the four of us."

I laugh, a grin stretching my face as my heart thumps approvingly at his words.

"Okay," I whisper, yawning again. "I'll stay here."

It's easier than I would have thought to fall asleep between them. Malice has his fingers in my hair, and Ransom has one hand on my ankle, his thumb rubbing slow circles against my skin.

Vic isn't touching me, but I can feel his presence so close by, and I feel completely encased—warm and safe.

As I start to drift off to sleep, my mind wanders back to my grandmother's offer.

Olivia wants me to give up school to help run the family estate. She wants me to become a fully entrenched part of her world. It's an incredible opportunity, all things considered. I wouldn't have to worry about finishing my classes, choosing a career, or finding a job after college. It would all be laid out for me, wealth and security right at my fingertips.

But it would come with a cost too. She never explicitly said it, but I know that Olivia's offer would probably involve having to give up my connection and involvement with the Voronin brothers in some way. The way she stressed that she wanted to see me with a man who was worthy of me made that pretty clear.

And I don't want that.

I don't want to let them go.

They're too important to me now, and time and time again, they've proven that I'm important to them too. That they care about me and want me in their lives, even if it means they have to fight for me. Even kill for me.

So as tempting as it is to say yes to Olivia's offer... I can't.

I want to build my own life. I want to make something that's truly mine.

And more and more, I feel like I could do that with these men. They've seen every part of me—the darkness and the light, the good and the bad—and none of it has made them turn away. Despite what Vic wrote in that note to X, they don't see me as trash, or as worthless.

They make me feel... treasured.

The wealth and privilege that Olivia is offering would be amazing, but it would be like stepping into a pair of shoes that don't fit quite right. I would always feel clumsy and out of

place, trying to keep up and wondering what people in her circle really thought of me.

That's not where I belong.

This is.

Right here.

WILLOW

FOR THE NEXT SEVERAL DAYS, the guys live up to their promise to keep an eye on me—constantly.

They don't stalk me quite as heavily as they did after they killed Nikolai, but that's mainly just because they aren't trying to hide it at all. And because I guess it doesn't count as stalking when I want them there.

“We shouldn't have to be so cautious, should we?” I ask Ransom one day. “I mean, X is dead, right?”

Ransom just shrugs. “Eh. It's not like it's a hardship for us to look out for you. We want to be around you all the time anyway, so doing this is no big deal.”

I grin at that, leaning up to kiss him.

Since the guys aren't even bothering to be sneaky, I'm pretty sure people on campus have seen me with all of them. They've taken turns following me to my classes, appearing out of nowhere to escort me to lunch and drive me home at the end of the day.

There are definitely rumors flying—probably spread by April, who doesn't know the definition of minding her own business. I wouldn't be surprised if people are saying I'm a whore who's fucking three guys.

But I find that I don't really care.

The certainty that I found inside myself the other night is still there. I want these men, and I want to see what happens if

I stay with them. What April and her cronies think of me doesn't matter at all in the face of that.

I've developed a newfound confidence in who I am and what I want, and that's like a forcefield, letting April's judgmental stares and whispers bounce right off me.

Toward the end of the week, Victor goes with me to pick out a dress for the funeral, since I still haven't gotten one.

It's surprisingly fun to wander the aisles with him, watching as he pulls dresses off the racks and eyes them critically before either putting them back or slinging them over his arm.

At one point, he makes a face as he holds up two dresses, and I raise an eyebrow. "What is it?"

"These dresses are the same style, same cut. But two different shades of black," he complains.

I have to peer closely to see what he means, but then I can make out that he's right. One of them is an ashier black than the other, even though they look practically identical in every other way.

Vic grimaces at the dresses like the lack of quality control by the clothing company has personally offended him and puts them both back.

It's just like when he dressed me for the club. He has a shockingly good eye for what looks good, and everything he's picked out for me to try on flatters me in a way I wouldn't have expected. He doesn't seem like he would be the type to care about things like fashion, but I guess it does make sense in a way.

His meticulous nature and attention to detail give him a great eye.

After trying on a few of the dresses he picked out, I step out of the fitting room for the fourth time... and when Vic looks up, his entire face goes slack. He freezes, his gaze locked on me as if nothing could tear it away, and a full-body flush makes its way from my toes to my hairline, but I grin.

“I think this is the one,” I tell him.

“It is.” He nods, swallowing hard.

It’s not even a particularly sexy dress—that wouldn’t make any sense for a funeral—but I like that something about the way it fits me got that reaction out of him.

I slip back into the dressing room to change into my street clothes again, and we take the dress up to the register to pay, one more bit of preparation for the funeral taken care of.

The week passes quickly, between classes and handling the last-minute details of the burial arrangements, and before I know it, I look at the calendar and realize that her funeral is tomorrow.

The guys all came over in the evening, their suits for the funeral in garment bags slung over their shoulders as they file into my apartment.

“You shouldn’t be alone tonight,” Vic tells me, giving me one of those looks that conveys so much more than he probably means for it to.

My bed isn’t really big enough for the four of us, but it *is* bigger than Ransom’s, so we make it work, the three of them piling in around me after making me come three times—Ransom and Malice spooning me between them and Victor’s fingers lightly tangled in my hair. I fall asleep much more easily than I expected to, curled up in the warmth of their bodies.

The next day, we take our time getting ready and then pile into Victor’s car. I’m grateful for him driving so I don’t have to, and I’m quiet on the way to the cemetery.

“You doing okay?” Ransom asks. He’s sitting next to me in the back seat, and he leans in, bumping his shoulder against mine.

I try to force a smile before I remember that I don’t have to do that. I don’t have to pretend to be okay if I’m not with these guys.

“I don’t know,” I answer truthfully. “It’s just... strange, I guess. To be burying the only real family I had growing up.”

“Yeah, I get that,” he says. “But on the bright side, Misty wasn’t the only family you have. You’ve got the three of us, and you’ve got your grandma. You’re not alone, pretty girl.”

I rest my hand on his leg, leaning into him. “I know.”

It’s a dreary day, overcast with heavy cloud cover, and that seems fitting. We get to the cemetery and walk to the spot where the casket is set up.

It’s a subdued affair, with some flowers set up, and a picture of Misty on top of her closed casket. I knew she would never have wanted people staring down at her in death, and it was hard enough finding something appropriate for her to be buried in, in the mess of her closet. Finding the picture was hard too, since she rarely posed for anything, and most of the shots I could find of her had her looking strung out at parties, her face caked in makeup.

I managed to find something where she looks tired but almost peaceful, smiling off into the distance. I have no idea where it was taken or when, but I guess it doesn’t really matter.

There are very few mourners gathered, which I kind of expected. It’s not like Misty had a lot of family or friends. Her own parents died a long time ago, and she didn’t have any siblings. Our neighbor is there, the one who found her—and she probably came because she was there when Misty died, not because they were particularly close.

There’s a group of women and a few men who trickle in, all keeping to themselves. I recognize them as acquaintances of Misty’s, people she knew from the streets or adjacent work, and they all look strung out and tired.

It’s makes my heart hurt to think that this is all Misty had to show for her life. These are all the people who cared about her.

For the hundredth time, I remind myself that I don’t want this to be me. I don’t want to follow in her footsteps and end

up with a life like this. Or a death like this.

I reach down and feel for Ransom's hand, squeezing it tightly. Reminding myself that he's right. I do still have a family.

He squeezes back, his palm warm against mine.

Olivia arrives a moment later, and I brighten a little, grateful to see her.

"I'll be right back," I murmur to the guys, then go over to stand with my grandmother.

She's dressed in a simple black dress, but it's clearly expensive, and she puts everyone else here to shame without even trying. Some of Misty's friends eye her skeptically, as if they think she came to the wrong funeral or something.

"Hello, Willow," Olivia says when I come over. She pulls me into a gentle hug. "Are you holding up alright?"

I nod when we separate. "As well as I can, I guess."

"That's understandable. This is a difficult day, I'm sure. It's alright if you need some time."

I nod again, watching as Olivia shoots a sidelong glance at the three brothers who are hovering just a few yards away.

Her mouth tightens just a little, and my heart sinks. She's always made allowances for the fact that I kept them—remnants of my old life, in her mind—around even now that things have changed for me. She's never asked too many questions about why I hang out with them or told me I should cut them out of my life, but it's clear that she doesn't totally approve of them. And she seems to approve less and less the more obvious it becomes that I'm attached to them, and vice versa.

Does she suspect that there's something more than friendship between us? And what on earth would she do if that were the case?

I can't imagine she'd be thrilled to find out that her granddaughter is sleeping with three men, let alone three men who give off the kind of vibes that the Voronin brothers do.

Before Olivia can say anything else, the service starts, and I return to the guys' sides and stand between Malice and Victor, listening as the priest I hired starts to speak.

He opens with a brief poem, which makes me want to laugh in a kind of hysterical way because I'm pretty sure Misty never read a poem in her life. From there, he talks about life and death and mourning, but all of it is very general. It could be about anyone, and nothing he says has anything to do with Misty at all.

"It is the wish of everyone who passes on, that the ones they leave behind can live full, happy lives in their absence," he intones. "And although we mourn their passing, we must always remember they've gone on to something better than we can ever know. A place without suffering, without pain."

I bite my lip, wishing I could believe that. It would be nice if Misty was in some better place, or if I thought that she wanted me to live a good life now that she's gone. But all I can remember is the last fight we had, her yelling at me and making me feel terrible for what I have now, and me telling her that I was done.

Maybe death is peaceful, but life is messy and complicated, etched out in jagged lines and shades of gray.

I shake those thoughts out of my head as best I can. There's no use holding on to the past now. No use being upset about what could have been.

"Would anyone like to say a few words?"

The priest looks to me, and I nod, stepping forward.

I stand at the front of the small crowd, looking out at the few people who have gathered. None of Misty's friends look like they really care one way or another, but Olivia and the guys gaze back at me expectantly.

Olivia smiles and gives an encouraging nod, and I take a deep breath.

"My relationship with my mother wasn't the best," I begin. "It was complicated for as long as I can remember, probably from the day she took me in. I can't stand here and say that she

was the best mother. I can't tell you that she made me lunch every morning or made sure I was on time to school—or even that I went. I can't say that she made me feel loved and supported all the time... but I can tell you that she took me in. She gave me a roof over my head when I was a broken, abandoned little kid, when no one else wanted me. She kept me from growing up on the streets, or in foster care.”

A tear slips over my lower lid, and I blink it away and clear my throat before I continue.

“We fought sometimes. A lot of times, honestly. Sometimes it felt like *I* was the one who was the parent. But she was always there. She was a constant in my life. Now that she's gone, there's a hole where she was, and I don't know if that will ever heal. One thing I can definitely say is that Misty taught me how to survive. She showed me how to keep pressing forward no matter what, and I will always be grateful for that.” I swallow hard past the lump in my throat. “I really hope you are at peace now, Mom.”

I feel awkward as I walk back to my spot, and Malice rests a hand on the small of my back as I rejoin him and the others. The priest steps back up, asking if anyone else has anything they want to say, but no one does.

He nods solemnly, then begins to speak a final prayer, laying my adoptive mother to rest.

I stand there for a while after he finishes, not sure what to do or how I'm supposed to feel. Just like when I saw her sprawled out on the floor of her house, it feels strange and wrong for this to be happening. To know that she's in that casket, cold and still—the woman who barely ever stopped moving in life.

“Bye, Mom,” I whisper, then finally turn away.

People start to drift away now that the service is over. None of the attendees really speak to me, although a couple of them do nod in my direction on their way out.

I go over and thank the priest for his time, and he leaves too.

The funeral director is waiting a respectful distance away, prepared to step in and organize the closing of the grave once we leave. Farther off, I can see other people in the cemetery, paying their respects to lost loved ones.

When it's just me, the brothers, and Olivia left near my mom's grave, I head over to thank Olivia one more time for coming. Malice, Ransom, and Victor hang back, giving me space.

"Thank you for coming. It really does mean a lot that you're here," I tell my grandmother. "And to know that even though Misty is gone, I still have family left."

She smiles at me, reaching out to squeeze my hand. "Of course. I'm happy to be here. Not happy about the occasion, but... you understand."

"I do," I assure her. "And, um..." Nerves fill me as I take a breath to tell her the next part of what I need to say. I don't want to cause a rift between us, but I have to be honest. "I thought about the offer you made me. About quitting school and helping you run the estate."

Olivia perks up a little, hope rising in her features. "I'm glad you've been considering it. And?"

"It's such an incredibly generous offer, and I wanted to make sure I gave it the thought it deserves, but... I don't think I'm ready for that. I don't want to quit school, and I don't want to give up on making a life for myself. I don't feel right about being handed everything, to be honest. I want to prove to myself that I can forge a path of my own."

Olivia's smile falters a bit. Disappointment crosses her face, and it makes my chest go tight.

Dammit. Maybe I should've waited until another time to tell her.

But it wouldn't have made a difference. My answer would still be the same.

"I'm really sorry," I tell her. "I hope you know how grateful I am for everything you've done for me. And I still

want to be part of your life, part of your family. Just not in that way.”

Small frown lines surround her mouth as her lips turn down at the corners. She goes still, studying me for a long moment. Then she shakes her head and sighs. When she speaks, her voice is cool.

“You really can’t make this easy for me, can you?”

WILLOW

I BLINK FOR A SECOND, caught off guard by Olivia's words. I have no idea what she means by that, and it's the first time I've ever heard her sound... not quite disappointed, but something else entirely.

"I know it's not the answer you probably wanted," I start, trying to explain myself. "But I just think that—"

"I heard you the first time," she cuts me off. There's a sad look on her face as she gazes at me, her hands clasped in front of her. "I really wanted to make this pleasant for you, Willow. I was trying so hard to make sure you could at least be happy. There's no reason for it not to be pleasant—except that you're apparently as willful as your father, and you can't just take what's been offered to you and be grateful for it."

Nerves churn in my belly. I don't know Olivia all that well yet, but I've never seen her like this before. She's always been so kind, so willing to hear me out and take my thoughts into consideration. I wrap my arms around myself, suddenly feeling chilly even though the breeze is warm.

"What do you mean?"

Something subtle changes in Olivia's features. She usually has a calm, confident expression, but this is different. There's a sort of hard gleam in her eyes that I've never noticed before. She stands up a bit straighter than usual, her posture stiff and her gaze intense.

"If they would have simply brought you to me when you were a virgin like I asked, things would have been easier. But

alas, your friends seem to be just as willful as you are.”

Olivia’s gaze flicks toward the brothers as she speaks, and she smiles, but it doesn’t get anywhere close to her eyes.

My stomach flips over, feeling like it’s collapsing in on itself, and my blood runs cold. What the fuck does that mean? How does she...

No.

I stare at her for a long moment as something clicks in my mind, my mouth going dry.

No. No, how is this possible?

“W-what?” I choke out.

Behind me, I feel the guys moving closer. They must’ve picked up enough snatches of what we’re talking about to figure out that something is wrong, or maybe they just read it in my body language.

My mind is racing, trying to catch up as my heart thuds unevenly in my chest. None of this is right. Olivia has always been so kind and welcoming to me. I knew she’d be upset that I wasn’t going to take her offer, but I didn’t think it would turn into... this.

And she’s talking about things that she shouldn’t know about. Me being a virgin? People who were supposed to bring me to her? She’s talking about the Voronin brothers. But how does she know about any of this? What the hell is going on?

The questions tumble over each other in my head, and I feel like I’m spiraling, scrabbling for purchase as I careen down a slippery slope. My emotions were already in a mess because of the funeral, and now it feels like my entire body has gone numb with shock.

No. Please, no. Not her.

Olivia flicks her attention to the men as they step in to flank me. I can feel how tense the three of them are, and they must be as confused as I am.

“What’s going on?” Malice asks, suspicion clear in his voice. “Is everything alright, Solnyshka?”

“Ah, your three protectors.” My grandmother’s smile takes on a smug tilt, and she arches a brow, looking them over. “Always there to come to your rescue. So attached to you.” Her expression hardens as she looks Malice dead in the eyes. “But I’m afraid you’ve gotten attached to the wrong girl. Because Willow is spoken for.”

I can feel his body go tense beside me. “By who?” he growls.

“By whomever I say.” Olivia still sounds pleasant and polite, but there’s an edge to her tone, sharp as a razor.

“What the fuck is going on?” Ransom demands, sounding pissed. “You don’t have any right to tell Willow who she can be with.”

“Actually, I do.” One delicate eyebrow arches up slightly as my grandmother shifts her attention to Ransom. “And this time, the three of you won’t do anything to stop me.” She sighs. “You were such good little errand boys, jumping whenever I said jump. When I realized Roselyn had reappeared after all these years and fallen into your laps, I thought it would be easy. The transfer should’ve been so simple. But you just couldn’t let her go, could you?”

It feels like the world is dropping out from under me. My head is spinning, and I keep sucking in air through my nose, but it doesn’t seem to make a difference. I still feel like I’m drowning, gasping for breath on dry land as shock claws at me.

“Wait…” I choke out, still desperately hoping I’m wrong, or that this is just a bad dream. Some kind of waking nightmare. “You… you’re X?”

Olivia’s gaze lands on me again, and although she doesn’t answer my question, the look on her face says everything. There’s no confusion, no curiosity about what I mean by that. Just the same controlled confidence in her expression that makes her seem like an untouchable statue.

“I’m surprised Darius Ledger didn’t mention it to you,” she says coolly. “After all, he kidnapped you to try to use you as leverage to get out from under my employ. He owed me, just like your men here do, but just like them, he started to get sick of following my orders. So he tried to blackmail me into clearing his debt.”

I gape at her, my mind racing back to the room where Darius kept me tied to a chair. I remember him snapping a picture of me on his phone, but I figured he never got the chance to send it to the guys.

But that’s not who he planned to send it to at all. Not who he planned to use me against.

He took me captive because he knew I was important to *Olivia*, not the Voronin brothers.

“Thank you for dealing with him, by the way,” Olivia says to the three men clustered around me. “You really are quite good at what you do.”

“But Darius said he killed Ilya,” I blurt. “He was the one who was there when Ilya took me that night.”

“Yes,” she says, one of her delicate hands fluttering dismissively. “Because I had him keeping tabs on your little protectors, and he realized you had snuck out that night. He was supposed to bring you to me then, but you were taken by Ilya before that could happen. So I made... different arrangements.”

“*You’re X?*”

Victor’s voice sounds strained as the words burst out of him. I can practically hear the gears in his mind grinding painfully, like a machine with a handful of sand thrown in it. I understand it. I feel like I’ve been slapped in the face, the sudden revelation too much for my mind to comprehend.

And for him, a man who thrives on order and observation, to have missed this? It’s probably sending him reeling.

“Yes.” Olivia makes an impatient noise, as if annoyed about being asked the same question twice. “Well, my late husband was the one who pulled the strings to get your brother

out of jail. But when he passed away, I took over running the estate in his absence. That's when I found out that several of his business associates had cheated him not long before he died. So all I inherited was a legacy on the brink of ruin."

There's a touch of sadness in her voice when she talks about my grandfather, but now I have no idea how much of it is real and how much is an act.

Is *any* of it real?

Or is everything about her a façade?

She's been playing this game for weeks, ever since the night she came to the hospital and pretended she had only just learned that I was alive. She let me stay at her house, got me an apartment, and helped me get my feet under me. She's been so good at acting like a kindly grandmother, someone who cared about me.

"I've been doing what I can to bring our estate back to its former level of power," Olivia continues in a quiet voice, glancing behind us and smiling politely at the funeral director, who's still waiting at a distance. "But it's been difficult. Until, of course, I realized that my long-lost granddaughter was still alive. And staying with the three men my husband had blackmailed into helping him." She shifts her gaze back to us, her eyes cold and sharp. "It would have been so simple if you had just handed Willow over when I asked. But instead, I had to take a different route to get to her."

"I don't understand. If you wanted to hurt me, then why were you so nice to me?" I ask her, my voice shaking. "Why didn't you just..."

I shake my head, words failing me.

Her brows pull together. "My dear girl, I don't want to hurt you. I meant it when I said I want you to help me maintain the estate—to restore it to its former power. If you had just agreed to my offer, then perhaps this unpleasantness would never have needed to happen."

"But... why do you need me for that?" I say, shaking my head helplessly. "I don't know anything about running a

business empire or managing an estate.”

“No. But you seem to know plenty about spreading your legs,” she snaps coldly. “Which is what you’ll be doing for the husband I pick out for you. I need to align myself with another wealthy family in order to pull the estate back from financial collapse, and a marriage is the most effective way to do that.”

I gape at her, my stomach dropping. I have a sudden vivid memory of her talking about how important it was to her that I get married and start a family—*soon*. She seemed so thrilled about me going on a date with Joshua, even calling me when she found out I didn’t end up going out with him. I mistook it for grandmotherly concern, but that wasn’t why she cared about it at all.

What would have happened if I had accepted her offer? I wonder in a horrified daze. How long would she have kept up the charade of being a loving grandmother before she started pushing me to marry whatever man she had made an arrangement with? How long would it have been before she showed her true colors?

The idea of it makes me sick, imagining the slow realization hitting me as I discovered that my grandmother wasn’t the woman I thought she was.

Then again, I’m not sure whether finding out like this is any better.

“You want me to marry Joshua,” I breathe, and it’s half a question, half me vocalizing a realization. “That’s why you told me you thought he liked me. Why you encouraged me to go out with him.”

“No.” She fixes me with a hard look. “That was the less appealing deal for me, but I was willing to accept that marriage offer if you went along with it willingly. But you had to drag your feet every step of the way. Pretending to be sick, spending all your time with *them*.” She nods in the brothers’ direction, a sneer curling her lip. “So now that door is closed. The time where you had a choice is over. You’ll be marrying Troy Copeland. I’m sure you remember him.”

My stomach twists. The idea that my grandmother was fielding several marriage offers behind my back makes me sick in and of itself. But the thought of Troy Copeland makes my skin crawl. In every interaction I've had with him, he's been slimy and lecherous, looking at me like I'm some kind of freak while probably imagining fucking me at the same time.

"The fuck she is," Malice snarls. "She's not marrying anyone, you vicious cunt."

All three of the Voronin brothers start to move forward, clearly ready to put themselves between me and Olivia. Violence radiates from Malice like an aura, and I doubt they'd hesitate to hurt her if they have to, now that they know the truth.

But despite the terrifying picture the three of them make, Olivia doesn't even flinch. She stays put, standing tall and proud, her chin raised and her eyes unwavering.

"Do you really want to do that?" she asks sharply. "With all these witnesses around us?"

She nods to where a small family is paying their respects just a couple hundred feet away from where we're standing, then gestures subtly to the funeral director as well.

"There are so many people around who would call the police immediately if they saw three criminals assault a wealthy and well-connected old woman," she adds. "I know it's hard, but try to be smarter than that."

That brings them all up short, but I can see how much it's costing Malice. He's breathing hard, every muscle in his body tensed to attack, and Ransom puts a hand on his shoulder. He shrugs it off, but he doesn't make another move toward Olivia.

My grandmother nods triumphantly.

"There we are. That's better. Now let me put it to you plainly. All of you." Her gaze drifts over the four of us. "I will send Malice back to jail in an instant if Willow doesn't do what I want. Perhaps I'll even find cells for you two as well." She nods at Ransom and Victor. "The jobs you've done for me

are more than enough to put you three away for a very, very long time.”

Malice makes a sound low in his throat, and it breaks my heart. He sounds like a wounded animal—feral, angry, and desperate. My chest feels like there’s a boulder on top of it, pressing down on me and forcing all the air from my lungs.

Olivia turns back to me.

“It took me longer than I would have liked,” she says, “but I think I’ve finally found the proper incentive for you. I wish you were willing to help restore your family’s estate simply because you recognize what an opportunity it is. But if you won’t, then you’ll do it to protect these men, won’t you? Because I am serious. If you say no, I’ll have all three of them sent to prison, and you’ll never see them again.”

“Fuck you,” Victor hisses, his voice almost unrecognizable. Beside him, Ransom curls his hands into fists. All three of the men seem like they’re on the verge of losing control, of leaping forward and attacking Olivia despite all the risks.

But if they do that, even if they manage to take her down before the police come, they’ll end up in jail all the same.

Either way, they’ll be thrown in prison.

Unless...

A single thought flashes through my mind with perfect clarity. I have to protect them. They’ve protected me so many times, coming to my rescue, taking out people who tried to hurt me.

Now I have to do the same for them—no matter what it costs me.

I swallow hard and meet Olivia’s eyes, opening my mouth before the men can step forward.

“I’ll do it,” I tell her. “I’ll marry whoever you want.”

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