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A BILLIONAIRE'S
SECRETS

PROVOKED

An arranged marriage
that turned into my worst nightmare

SIMONE FOX

PROVOKED

A BILLIONAIRE'S SECRETS

BOOK TWO

SIMONE FOX



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CHAPTER 1

There were plenty of times where I truly thought my life was going to end, but not once had I ever been sad about it.

I never thought about where I'd eventually end up after it was all said and done. I never bothered putting energy toward a future that was never going to happen in the first place.

It wasn't until I'd been hanging off the side of a bridge, seventeen stories in the air with only a thin cable rope hooked to the carabiner at my waist to a man I barely knew, that I had the weirdest déjà vu moment.

"I swear to fuck, Caleb!" Max's grip on my hand tightened. "If you drop me, I'm coming back to haunt you!"

"Not if we both die."

"I'll stalk you in the afterlife, you fucking prick!"

When the cord finally snapped and we'd plunged down into the icy waters below I remembered the way that I had felt the moment my body had tipped backward into a brick wall behind me the first time my father hit me.

What did I do to deserve this? a small part of me would always wonder.

It wasn't until a survival instinct I never knew I had forced me to claw my way to the surface, breaking the tension of the waves drowning me long enough to suck in a lungful of air before being dragged back under.

That was when I truly knew that living wasn't as simple as not dying. It was a conscious effort to keep moving forward,

despite the obstacles constantly trying to pull you down into the dark depths of oblivion.

Had I known that back then all of those situations would pale in comparison to now, I wouldn't've believed my own self.

Because this...

This was infinitely worse.

"We'll find her, Caleb."

It's the sixth time Max had said that to me within the past six hours since he'd landed in New York and each time I heard the words, I could feel my heart tearing into thinner shreds.

Would I have changed anything if I knew what was to come?

The easy answer was yes. To go back in time and knock the sense into my past self, chastise my own hubris in thinking that I would be able to outsmart a billionaire hell-bent on controlling every piece of his property, and I was only days away from becoming a part of that pie myself.

It was easier to think that if I'd only done just that one simple action, none of this would be happening.

I wouldn't be neck-deep in despair over getting a girl involved in a dangerous lifestyle she had absolutely no business being dragged into. I wouldn't be trying to find my way back to her, trying to figure out if she was truly alive like I'd been promised or dead and long since buried somewhere in a field outside of the city where no one would bother to go look for her.

How much simpler would either of our lives be if I hadn't been tempted by suave words and the promise of something better?

But that wasn't fair, was it?

How could I tell myself any of that when it meant I wouldn't get to meet Sam in the first place?

Us crossing paths, our coming together, all because of one simple action of signing my name on a dotted line.

Was it worth it?

“Caleb.” A hand came down onto my shoulder, rattling me. “I’ve got that video sent over to Malcolm. He’s going to run the plates on the van that took her through the database. It should come up with something.”

Ever calming in the face of my own grief. That was Max for you.

I shrugged his hand off of me. The mere feeling of someone touching me right now made me feel even more volatile. A mere explosion was imminent at any moment if I didn’t keep myself in check. “How long’s that going to take exactly?”

Not even slightly perturbed, he shrugged. “Don’t know. A few hours, hopefully.”

The words made me grit my teeth in anger boiling into frustration. “We can’t wait that long. It’s already been ten hours since she’d been gone. We wait any longer and who knows where the fuck they’re going to take her?”

It wasn’t his fault, I tried to remind myself. Max didn’t deserve to be on the receiving end of my temper. He’d dropped everything to come help me, forgoing whatever duties he had outstanding with the Machiavellis. He’d been on the first plane over here and now was standing in the middle of Sam’s half-destroyed apartment with maps strewn over her coffee table pen-marked with locations that the van had been sighted at.

I’d spent hours on the streets while Max was up in the air, praying that whatever alley I turned down next would somehow lead me straight to her. Like she’d suddenly been deemed too high-risk and dumped before anything bad could actually happen.

It was a stupid hope that I held onto, even with Liam’s words ringing in my ears over and over again, mocking me the

more that time went on and the longer she was stuck with that sociopath and the men he employed.

But I'd found nothing.

Returning to her apartment empty-handed was the worst kind of weight on my shoulders. Knowing that she was out there somewhere scared and with people that would sell her for a few hundred dollars so long as Liam ordered it. Her life was at the mercy of someone she'd never even met.

And I hoped like fuck I could keep it that way.

A chime pinged on one of the tablets closest to Max. He reached for it, plucking it off of the coffee table while swiping a finger over the glossy screen.

“Looks like he's still looking into it. But he screen-grabbed some stills from the CCTV footage from across the street when she was dragged down the fire escape.”

My heart leaped into my chest as he turned the tablet toward me. All of the images were in fact grainy as fuck, but there were distinct differences between all of the masked attackers. One of them had their shirt sleeves pulled up, revealing tattoos on each arm—a rookie mistake. Another had their mask skewed in the back, showing off a shock of blond hair underneath that hadn't been bothered to be tucked into the collar of his shirt—another mistake.

These guys, whoever the fuck they were, weren't very professional. And if they were, their experience wasn't high-level. Petty break-ins and home invasions were probably more their style. Nothing like the heist they'd pulled off.

Which made me all the more angry that they'd gotten the jump on me. I'd been overpowered so easily that, in the moment, it felt like I was facing up against ten of them and not the handful that had actually infiltrated and successfully extracted Sam.

Not to mention the two boys that were clearly sent as a honey-trap to distract me.

That was the thing about Sam. She made me vulnerable. It was never my intention to let her in, let her have access to the

pieces of me that blinded me to the dangers that surrounded us.

I could trust Max to keep himself safe, but Sam? Not so much. Not when she was naive to the people trying to make us all into pawns.

I pushed the tablet away from me. “There’s nothing we can identify from that.”

“Yeah, but it’s a start at least.”

I fought the urge to swipe my hand across the coffee table and send everything on it scattering to the floor.

“A start isn’t *good enough*.”

“I’m sorry, Caleb. That’s all I got for you right now.”

I knew that. He was only trying to help. I should be grateful.

But I was so fucking angry.

There was a soft *click* from the tablet in Max’s hands as he locked it, followed by a sigh.

“We’ll find her, Caleb.”

I really hate those fucking words.

CHAPTER 2

I left Max at Sam's while I headed back to the penthouse.

I doubted Ava was there, but even if she was, I wasn't worried about her trying something stupid. Though her stubbornness put her into hot water at the worst of times—like trying to go against me—she had also let herself be unnecessarily provoked in an already volatile situation.

There was a part of me that found it ironic that all of this started because she'd been too territorial to let me have my relationship with Sam and instead decided to completely obliterate our otherwise already rocky relationship by going off the deep-end and siccing her father on me.

For all of her prim and prissy attitude problems, it was amazing to me that she'd let herself get so wrapped up in the fantasy of trying to control me like a dog that she never stopped to think about me biting her for doing so.

It was common knowledge not to bite the hand that fed you, but even more so of the one who held the lead not to choke the beast because it was only a matter of time before it reared back and took off a finger or two out of retaliation.

Though maybe that was giving Ava far more credit than she deserved.

All she had to do was let me continue with my relationship on the down-low and all of this could've been avoided.

I unlocked the penthouse door, and darkness was the only thing that greeted me.

The blinds over the windows were still drawn and not a single light in the entire place was on, aside from a small ambiance shifting one over in the corner of the living room that reflected off of the back wall.

There were no sounds coming from Ava's side of the penthouse, nor was there any sign that she'd been here at all within the past few days.

It wouldn't surprise me if her father had suggested her moving out temporarily to give me my space. Even if Liam's motivation for doing all of this was bordering psychopathic, he still had a strange sense of empathy for me. Like that of a misbehaving child sent into time-out.

I had no doubt that in a few days, my phone would be ringing with a call from him checking on how I was doing—a laughable slap in the face, honestly, after all of this shit he'd put me through.

How the fuck did he *think* I would be doing?

Flipping on the light in the kitchen, I headed down Ava's hallway.

Even with my almost one hundred percent guarantee that she wasn't here, I wasn't going to be foolish and not check. Because if there was a chance that she was for some reason hiding out here, she best believe I was going to be dragging her by her hair out to the living room and demanding answers.

I didn't give a fuck if she had no idea what was going on; she was going to give me answers to as much as I could extract out of her. And whether that was from business dealings she knew her father was doing with shady burglars or abandoned buildings that were in his name that he usually kept hostages in, I'd pull it out of her.

No matter how much she begged and screamed at me to stop.

When I pushed the door to her room open, more darkness greeted me.

Now that I thought about it, maybe Liam's suggestion for her vacating the place was less about giving me space and

more to do with making sure his daughter wasn't tied up and dragged to the bathtub to be waterboarded.

If Liam thought I was a loose cannon before, he was going to slowly realize that the depths of my insanity went far deeper than his own.

If he hurt someone I cared about, that was grounds for a lot worse than death.

Flicking on a light, I squinted at the sudden shift in brightness while running my eyes over the room. It was the same size as mine with a large bed, a few pieces of furniture scattered around, and a small sitting area a few feet away from the foot of the bed frame.

It was all tastefully decorated in a pastel baroque sort of way that weirdly fit Ava's aesthetic. Bougie and classic with a hint of over-the-top drama—Ava to a T.

It didn't take long for me to work my way around her room, clean of anything incriminating, unfortunately. It seemed as though she'd taken everything important with her before leaving, a fact that made me sigh in frustration before flicking off the light and leaving.

I doubted I'd run into her any time soon. There was a possibility of finding her at the office, but the chances of that were slim to none. She'd had no reason to go there when I'd been working and we were amicable. Why would she go there after all of this? Especially with the possibility of me showing up unannounced and vying for round two of our spat now turned conflict.

Rubbing my hands over my face, I sighed and sagged into the kitchen counter.

What could I do?

The obvious choice was to defy Liam and show him where to stick it, but the chances of that falling back on Sam simply out of spite were astronomical. There was no telling what Liam would take pleasure in doing to hurt her in order to keep me in line.

No matter what, his goal was to keep his investment, *me*, compliant. What did he care about hurting some random girl his daughter's company hired? It was one more expendable person on their payroll that they'd pay reparations for and wipe their hands clean of.

So long as the status quo was kept, they were fine burning whatever bridges and taking people down when they saw fit.

I felt lost, more than I ever had before.

What could I do against a man that was determined to keep me in his pocket? The metaphorical collar around my neck was growing tighter and tighter the longer I stayed stagnant and was forced into a corner of doing nothing.

Whatever Liam wanted, he got, and that there lay the entire problem in of itself. With a snap of his fingers, he'd been able to whisk Sam out of my life with absolutely no consequences. He'd taken my distress over it as a sign that he needed to coax me back into submission rather than for what it truly was—hardened defiance.

I suppose that was going to be his one downfall at the end of this. His ego was too focused on the wrong thing to really see the bigger picture, the stakes that he'd created for himself.

Not only had a fire been lit under me to find Sam and get her out of all of this, but it fueled that very nature of me to take down anyone that stood in my way.

The fact that Liam was confident enough to believe he could control me so easily would normally make me laugh because of the sheer audacity, but now only served to insult me. No matter how “well” he thought he treated me while caging me, it wouldn't compare to the actual freedom of having my own life outside of the confines of someone else's dictation.

That had been Ava's first mistake, after all, as well—believing that removing Sam from the equation, a choice I had made on my own to pursue, was going to force me into submission when all it'd done was the complete opposite.

The Harringtons, while fearsome, were also incredibly foolish.

My pocket vibrated, taking me out of my brewing thoughts with the hopes that it was Max on the other line with some good news.

Shoving my hand into my pants and pulling it out, I put the phone up to my ear without bothering to check the caller ID.

“Yeah.”

There was a scoff at the other end. “Is that seriously how you answer your phone calls? Don’t you know how unprofessional that is?”

I blinked in the empty space in front of me. A familiar voice that I wasn’t expecting humming in my ear.

“...Junior?”

He practically hissed through the receiver as he spat out, “I hate when you call me that.”

What the hell?

Why the fuck was he calling me?

“Did you need something?”

“Obviously.”

I waited, the silence on the other end stretching to an uncomfortable amount of time that had me gritting my teeth in annoyance. If the kid called me just to bother me because he was bored, he was going to be getting the chew-out of a lifetime.

I didn’t have fucking time to entertain a nineteen-year-old that had nothing better to do than bother his former staff.

“*What.*”

He huffed again. “Aren’t you going to apologize to me?”

“For *what?*”

If this was some elaborate prank, I was going to lose my fucking mind.

“For fuck’s sake, Winters. Do I have to spell it out for you?” he huffed.

“Apparently, because I have no idea what you want.”

“Don’t you think it’s in bad taste to steal my only other bodyguard? Did Max not tell you what’s been going on back here? What am I supposed to do if there’s a hit out on me? I need him and you went and gave him some sob story, so now he’s off cleaning up whatever fucking mess you’ve gotten yourself into.”

I blinked in surprise.

I supposed this call wasn’t exactly coming out of the blue, now that I thought about it. It would be one thing for the Machiavellis to run through their rotations like they were going out of business, but another to completely rely upon two contractors who’d only been with their family for less than a year.

Obviously our contracts came with special circumstances—it wasn’t every day that you could hire someone with my and Max’s skill sets with the simple promise of housing and a good paycheck. If anything, we’d been selling ourselves short.

But that had been the point from the beginning. Neither of us were looking for the glory of having to serve some big shot, and we had definitely seen our share of covert operations, so private corporations were out. After being released from our military duties, and our private contracts, we just wanted something more low key for a while. And guarding a kid seemed easy enough. To be fair, he was a mafia prince for a very well-known mafia family. But his dad didn’t seem to have much faith in him, so as far as protection went, let’s just say it was one of our easier assignments.

I shook myself back into reality. “I don’t know. That’s not my problem—or his, for that matter. You have plenty of other people on your rotation, Ricard.”

“Be serious. Would you trust any of them with your life, Winters?”

The kid had a point.

“Look, I get that you’re upset. But I can’t control what Max does any more than you can. I need him to help me in New York for a while. It’s up to him if he wants to come back to work for you or not after he’s done here.”

“For fuck’s sake,” he snapped. “Seriously. You have no fucking idea what’s going on back here. No fucking clue how much this has screwed me.”

I sighed.

Of course I would be the one that he’d take his anger out on since he’s clearly not going to Max with this attitude. And although he was annoying, he seemed smart enough not to want to screw up his chances of getting him back after all of this. Max clearly seemed important to him.

But at this point, I really couldn’t care less. I had shit to do, and being on the phone with a teenager throwing a temper tantrum wasn’t on my short list of priorities. The longer I stayed on this damn phone call, the shorter my time frame in getting Sam back became.

“Breathe, Ricard. You’re going to be fine. I promise.” Maybe it was better if I wrapped this up in a nice bow so he wouldn’t be calling me a hundred times a day to blame me for something I hardly had any decision in.

“You just don’t *get it*. We’ve got— You know what? Never mind, it’s not like you’d care anyway.”

“I’m sorry,” I told him, even though I wasn’t in the slightest.

Max could’ve said no to coming to New York if he really wanted to. I wasn’t going to hold anything over his head, no matter what the circumstances were.

But I earned my bond with my best friend—my brother. His loyalty was unyielding to me as I was to him. We’d fought tooth and nail to come back from shit that would’ve killed any other regular person ten times over.

All Ricard did was be born into a family business that had enough family money to hire two trained killers.

Max didn't owe that family shit.

"Why did you call me, Ricard? To yell at me?"

"I wanted you to understand that you fucked me over doing what you did. We have a deadline. That's why I fucking called you."

Whatever he'd gotten caught up in was obviously not going very well. Because despite his aggressive tone, I could hear the underlying desperation in it. And why does he keep saying "we"?

"Who's this we?"

"Forget it. It's a meeting we can't miss. I needed Max to be there."

"Well, I'm sure you and Senior will figure it out."

Out of the blue, a thought occurred to me.

"How about this? You help me with something and I'll see about getting Max to that meeting. When is it?"

"Two weeks."

Jesus... I hoped to hell this would all be over with by then.

There was a long pause. "What's with the sudden change in tune, Winters? You really got your shit fucked up over there or something?"

If only he knew...

"You in or what?"

He sighed. "Fine. What do you want?"

Maybe this was my ticket to cracking this wide open. If anyone knew dirt on Liam, then it would be the people who claimed to be on his good side in the first place.

"Tell me everything your family knows about Liam Harrington."

CHAPTER 3

Unfortunately, Ricard didn't know much about the Harringtons or Liam, but he was quick to promise me that he'd poke around and see what he could dig up and call me once he was able to secure something good before hanging up.

Whatever information I could get—even if it was through the Machiavellis or whatever other channel Ricard managed to dig up—was better than the current dead ends I was dealing with already.

Even if he managed to pull through with one lead, a single piece of information, a *scrap* to lead me in the right direction, I would be happy.

Keeping my promise to Ricard, as flaky as it was, would hopefully be enough motivation for him to get me something. If he was actually serious about needing Max that much for whatever he was trying to accomplish over there, then it might actually be enough for him to pull through for me.

Though I wouldn't be surprised if I would be receiving a call in about two days with Ricard, Sr. bitching at me for his son getting caught doing my dirty work for me.

I was sure that conversation would go over *real* well...

My phone's screen lit up again in my hand, this time with Max's number flashing across it.

"Yeah?"

"Hey." His voice was pitched up, eager. "Found the van."

My eyes widened. "No shit, where?"

“I’m texting you the location. Meet me there?”

This was it. Hopefully this would lead us to Sam. I couldn’t wait to get my hands on the fuckers who took her and choke the life out of them.

“Be right there.”

I pocketed my phone and headed out the door, my heart racing.

Max met me at a corner store only a few blocks from the penthouse, a bag slung over his shoulder and his face set in a determined frown.

I recognized the bag immediately, one of his shoulder slings that was able to conceal tactical gear and a weapon’s case without it looking like anything but a sports duffel.

How he got that thing on a plane over here full of what I knew was packed tight with whatever he could grab before leaving the estate I’d never know, but I was eternally grateful nonetheless.

I’d been an idiot for leaving the penthouse without at least grabbing a handgun, but my mind had been so frazzled the past, now going on fourteen, hours that I’d walked right out without a spare glance inside of my own room.

I wasn’t worried about Ava snooping through my things. I was sure she’d already done that ten times over when I wasn’t inhabiting our space and too busy running her damn nonprofit for her.

The only incriminating evidence I had was my cache of guns, but that was safely locked behind a false wall I’d carved out before she’d arrived in the States way before any of this shit had started.

Max pulled his phone from his pocket, a map with a blue beacon pulsing on the screen already on it. He tapped it twice, enlarging the picture to show a grid map.

“Malcolm spotted the van on CCTV back this way. It’s at some apartment complex.”

My hands fisted at my sides. “You think they took her there?”

“Don’t know. Footage was real fucking grainy. But hey, least we found the van.”

“Plates match?”

“Yup.”

I nodded. While not the answer I really wanted, it was still something.

We took the alleyway separating the corner store from the complex next to it. It was quieter in between buildings and away from the busyness of the street we’d met on. My ears rang from the sudden change, forcing me to dig my fingers into each one and press against the pressure point.

When the alley opened up, it fed us into another set of streets that were less crowded with pedestrians and traffic.

Up ahead were a few mid-sized buildings that had been squeezed between two large skyscrapers on either side of them, the shadows of which completely encompassed both sidewalk and attached parking lots.

“Look.” Max pointed. “There’s the van.”

True to his word, a white van sat parked in a fenced-in parking lot only a few yards away from us. As weird as it was to see it in the daylight, there was a small bead of anger that rolled around inside of me.

It sat so innocuously that anyone passing by wouldn’t think twice about it. A ballsy move on the kidnapper’s part.

Who the fuck were these people that Liam hired?

Either they were stupid as all hell or they were cocky enough about not getting caught that they were willingly flashing a crime-involved vehicle.

Sam’s kidnapping hadn’t been quiet in the slightest. There had to have been witnesses, even if they were curious

onlookers trying to get a dish of the drama happening right outside of their window.

We quickly crossed the street, ducking under the barrier gate and giving the attendant in the booth a quick wave. He didn't bother stopping us and all but ignored our entry with a slow shake of his head.

A private parking lot meant a private complex. It was a good sign we were headed in the right direction if Liam spending an exorbitant amount of money to extract Sam the way that he had was anything to go off of.

Her kidnapping hadn't been cheap, not with how carefully it'd been planned.

Sure, I could probably save myself the grief a little bit by believing that it was more than likely ordered with haste. But that didn't mean the professionals who'd done it weren't well versed in this shit.

Not when they were tricking me and pulling it off without me taking them all out in the process.

Approaching the van, I kept my eye out for anyone lurking around. I doubted this was some kind of set-up considering Liam believed I was in the middle of "taking a break" to get my head back on straight. There would be no reason for him to order any level of spying to be done on me when he knew I was already in a fragile state as it was.

Liam wasn't stupid.

He knew when he was pushing his luck, and I was sure that whatever his plan was, once he felt like I had enough time to reconcile with my contract and my future with him and his company, had very little to do with babysitting me with a P.I. or any other kind of surveillance.

It would be beneath him to resort to such tactics in the first place. Being forced to track me down would not only show his incompetence at keeping me in line but his lack of control over me in the first place.

He was a prideful man that held himself in high regards. The thought to babysit me in such a way I doubted crossed his

mind to begin with.

The only reason he'd found out about Sam and me had been through Ava's bitching and moaning. And if she'd only kept it together, none of us would be dealing with this shit.

I crushed my teeth together, forced down the angry growl trying to work its way up my throat.

Despite all of this, though, Max and I had combed through everything—all of our tech, Sam's apartment, my personal belongings—the moment he'd arrived at Sam's apartment, making sure that whatever intelligence we stumbled upon during this process wouldn't be found out by someone tracking us through either a barracuda system or through someone tailing us the old-fashioned way.

Even if I was confident in my assessment of him, I wasn't giving Liam any leg over me. The cost of that kind of slip-up was much too high to gamble with the chances of being right.

I wasn't enough of a prick to assume my intelligence over anyone, let alone a sociopath with control issues and a hell of a lot more money and resources than me or Max combined.

Peering into the tinted windows from the front passenger side, there was nothing that looked out of place or too conspicuous. By all accounts, it looked like a regular working van.

I tried the door handle.

Locked.

Figures.

Max slipped his bag off of his shoulder and let it hit the ground before unzipping one of the side pouches and pulling out a long, thin wire with a hook on the end.

“See any alarm system?”

I searched for a blinked red light on the dash, finding nothing.

“No.”

“Sweet.”

He fed the wire into the crack of the door, wedging it hard before it finally broke through and appeared inside of the cab. Max pulled at the wire, moving it along the curve of the window until it was at the tallest peak of it. His hand worked the wire the rest of the way between the window and doorframe, getting a good foot or two down to where the manual lock was.

With a quick flick, the end of the hook caught onto the lock and flipped it open. All in under fifteen seconds.

“You’ve gotten good at that,” I told him, yanking the door open and freeing the wire.

“Yeah, right?”

He stepped back to let me inside of the passenger seat, tucking the wire back into his bag while I crawled in.

The back of the van was empty with only a few sparse tools laid strewn about on the floor. I pulled out my phone, turning the flashlight on to shine it around in the dark space. There was no sign that Sam had been in it at all. No fine blond hairs catching the light from my flash, nor was there any small spatters of blood marking the metal sides.

All of which were a good thing, considering how rough they’d manhandled her getting her out the window. I was expecting there to be a little bit of blood or maybe a tooth, but maybe Liam had actually been telling the truth when he’d said he’d taken her somewhere that wasn’t the basement of a crack house to be tortured.

“Anything?”

I shook my head and fell back into the seat. The ignition was destroyed, a clear indication it was stolen. I turned to open the glove box. Rifling through it yielded nothing other than an insurance card, the registration, and an owner’s manual.

Damn it.

Max plucked the insurance card and registration out of my hand, quickly snapping a picture of them both.

“I’ll send these to Malcolm. We’ll track the owner down and see if he has any information that might help us.”

Leaning forward, I grabbed onto the “oh shit” handle and craned my body to look around Max while his head was bent down to type on his phone. The complex that this parking lot was attached to wasn’t big, maybe only five or six stories. So would it be *that* hard going door to door demanding information about the van’s owner?

Assuming they actually lived there, that was.

But what other leads did we have?

“He should get back to me soon.” Max shoved his phone back into his pants. “You good?”

“No.”

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw him wince. “Sorry, dumb question.”

My eyes ripped away from assessing the building to focus back on my best friend. He looked just as tired as I felt, with clear bags under his eyes and a wild look that I knew was only because this was something important to me. I needed him, and he took that shit seriously, so to him, Sam’s kidnapping was important to him too.

I’d barely told him anything about her, and yet here he was with the same amount of passion as me trying to help locate her.

Fuck, I didn’t deserve him.

I didn’t deserve Sam either, for that matter.

Blowing out a breath, I reached forward and ruffled his hair.

“Thank you for helping me.”

He rolled his eyes, slapping my hand off his head. “Don’t be thanking me just yet, cuz. We still gotta find her first.”

Unfortunately true.

This was a battle not yet won.

But we weren't giving up just yet.

Hopping out of the van, I kicked the door shut, not caring at how loudly it slammed back into the frame, rattling the damn thing.

“Let's go canvass the apartment building. See if anyone knows who owns this piece of shit.”

Max slung his bag back over his shoulder. “Roger that.”

CHAPTER 4

Seventeen hours since Sam had gone missing—had been *taken* from me.

The number was a running tally in my head, driving me insane with each passing second and every “no, never seen it before” response we got from the tenants living in this apartment complex.

My irritation was growing the longer we canvassed each floor.

Max had the hindsight before he’d left the Machiavelli estate to grab our fake IDs that marked us as detectives for the Las Vegas crime’s department. A title that no one in New York was going to bother fact checking before opening up their doors and answering our questions.

We looked intimidating, even in our plain clothes. So it wasn’t a matter of people not taking us seriously that we weren’t getting any definitive answers. It seemed as though everyone was obsessed with minding their own business—a trait I would’ve admired under any other circumstances.

By the time we got up to the fourth floor, I was running out of steam, my adrenaline waning the more “no sorry”s we got.

I hated this.

All I could focus on was what I should’ve done, what I could’ve done before she’d been taken. The preventative measures that had been hammered into my head since I was a kid living in a bad part of town had all but flown out the window any time I was with Sam.

Her carefree and easy nature had bled into me, making me forget myself long enough for something terrible to happen before I could do anything about it.

Had I known this would've resulted in where I was now, I would've long since bought her a piece of jewelry to wear with a tracker nestled inside. *Something* to give me any indication as to where she was.

Max's phone chirped in his pocket, causing us to pause in the middle of the hallway.

"Looks like the van was registered to... Keith Chamberlain. Address is... looks like this building."

"Apartment number?"

"455."

Glancing over at the door next to us, it read 447.

Just down the hall, then.

Moving around Max, I took the lead and headed down the hall until I spotted 455's plaque at the far end. The apartment was nestled next to the window facing out onto the street below with one of those tall dangling tree plants placed next to it.

I rapped my knuckles against the door, stepping back and hoping like hell this fucker was actually home. If not, I was kicking down his door and breaking in anyway.

On the other side of it, there was some movement. A lock being slid back from its jam and the chain fixing itself into place when the door was pulled open.

I could see between the small sliver that an older man in an old-looking robe and pajama pants stared back at me.

"What d'you want?"

My lips thinned. "Keith Chamberlain?"

"Who the fuck're you?"

Pleasant.

Max and I flashed our IDs. "Mind if we come in?"

His brows shot up. “What for?”

“It’s about your van.”

The door was quickly shut, giving me only a second to react before my hand was coming out to rest on the side of the molding surrounding the frame. I pulled my boot up, getting ready to aim it at the spot where the doorjamb and wall met when the door was swung wide open.

“You found my van?”

I blinked, lowering my foot.

Keith’s eyes darted between Max and me, a wide smile on his face confusing me way more than his original question. He looked genuinely happy to see us and not scared out of his mind that two “cops” had showed up at his doorstep to question him about a kidnapping accessory.

Max saved me by offering a quick, “Yeah, may we come in?”

Keith waved us in. “Yes, yes. You want tea? Coffee? I’ve got both.”

The hard hand on the back of my neck shook me out of my daze, forcing me to step into the old man’s apartment. Max dropped his hand and swung around to shut the door behind us, his bag brushing against my arm with the motion.

“Uh...” My eyes darted around Keith’s living space, taking in a quick inventory. Normal. Boring. What the fuck? “We’re good, thanks though.”

He practically deflated. “You want biscuits? I’ve got biscuits.”

Max elbowed me. “Tea would be great.”

At his words, Keith perked up again. “Perfect! Please take a seat in the living room. Don’t mind the cats.”

Before either of us could say anything else, he shuffled off into the kitchen that was connected to what looked like a small living room. It gave us time to scan the room for anything that might look suspicious or out of order. Something was playing

on the TV, an old black-and-white movie from the looks of it, that was turned down to a quiet volume.

The small foyer we were standing in was only as big as Max and I were wide side-by-side, leaving barely any room for either of us to move around. I pushed him forward first, letting my eyes roam the walls that were highly decorated with old paintings, old black-and-white photos, and some small decorations that looked vintage.

“Should we take off our shoes?” he mumbled over his shoulder at me, still refusing to step foot into the living room.

I rolled my eyes, shoving him again. “Who cares?”

This entire place was giving me strange vibes, but not so much in the murder-for-hire kind of way and more in the was-probably-an-innocent-victim/dead-lead department.

Fuck me.

There were about four cats scattered around the living room, all of which immediately turned to us the moment our boots hit carpet.

“Cats...” Max mumbled, his nose wrinkling and hand coming up to cover it.

I patted his shoulders, moving him around to stay closer to the door. It wasn't often that we came into contact with pet fur, but Max was the most allergic person I knew. A trait I'd normally hassle him for if I was in a better mood.

Coming around to the couch, I checked out the small collection of magazines strewn on the coffee table. There was a half-drunk mug of dark coffee sitting on a coaster next to the remote to the TV. The place was a bit cluttered with random-looking vintage pieces that reminded me of the inside of a Victorian dollhouse.

Brocades and velvet lined all of the furniture, looking rather expensive for living in such a... modest-sized apartment.

It all looked hardly criminal.

“Tea's done!”

Keith came around the corner of the kitchen with a tray clutched in his hands and two sets of mugs with saucers under them rattled slightly. He set them down on the coffee table, shooing away two of the cats from the couch before sitting down.

I glanced down at the steaming tea before dragging my gaze back up. “So, we located your van.”

Keith nodded quickly. “Did you find the kids who stole it?”

Kids?

I glanced back at Max, both of us mirroring the same frown.

“Not yet...” Turning back to Keith, I shoved my hands into my pockets. “We were hoping you could give us a rundown of what happened again. Just so we are sure what to prosecute them with once we catch them.”

Keith’s hands splayed along his thighs, the robe parting at his hip to reveal more of the pattern of his pajama pants.

“Those kids. You know I called about them yesterday.”

I nodded. “Right. Can you run me through what you told whoever you spoke to on the phone?”

“Well, I saw them!”

“Where?”

He huffed at me. “They were here! They stole my van a few days ago. I only had the damn thing a month. And then I saw them again yesterday lurking around some other cars right out there in the parking lot! I said to your officer that they better come over before they steal another car. But no one bothered to show up!”

“And your van wasn’t here?”

“No, no.”

Max cleared his throat, sounding nasally as he spoke. “Can you give us a description of the kids? Just so we know that we’ve got the right people when we book them.”

Keith sat up from the couch, coming to his feet. “I’ll do you one better. I got a picture of ’em. I recognized them from when they were hanging around when my van was stolen, and I thought maybe it could be of help.”

He hobbled over to a small desk over in the corner of the apartment, right under one of the windows. Papers were stacked on top of it in tall piles with no seemingly understandable order to any of it.

“Printed it off myself at the library and everything. I knew you boys would be coming around after my phone call. Even if none of your officers showed up yesterday.”

I shifted on my feet. The antsy-ness was coming back to me full force. “We apologize about that.”

He pulled a sheet of paper from under one of the stacks, holding it up. “Here it is!”

Moving across the apartment, narrowly avoiding stepping on a stray cat’s tail, I plucked the picture out of Keith’s hand and held it up to the light.

It was grainy and zoomed in—presumably from a low-quality cell phone camera. The people, or rather shapes, were hard to see any discernible features of, even if I squinted hard to try and make out anything in particular.

I glanced up. “Keith, you got the original photo?”

He nodded to me. “On my phone.”

“Why don’t you go ahead and send that to me? I want to be able to run it through our database.”

“Oh, that’s a good point.”

Holding back a snort, I stepped back far enough to give him space to turn and head back for the couch. He shooed another cat away with his slippered foot while doing so, snatching a flip phone off the coffee table once he was within reach.

“What’s your number? Oh, you know this will be great. I can contact you directly whenever something fishy happens

around here. You know this part of the city, a lot of weird stuff happens. You'd be surprised by what I've seen."

My brain hurt from his rambling. Though one thing did stick out to me.

"What sort of weird things?"

"Oh, all sorts of stuff."

Moving closer to Keith, I gently pulled his phone from his hand and created a new text message to myself. Scrolling through his photos, it wasn't hard to find the original, this one much better quality than the printed-off version.

My phone vibrated against my thigh when the text came in, and with that, I promptly blocked my number in his contacts before closing it and handing it back to him.

"What about recently? Besides your van getting stolen."

"Those damn kids..." he muttered, tossing his phone onto the couch behind him. "You know, you should look into that lady who was talking to them the day before they took my van."

I popped a brow. "What did she look like?"

"Oh, really fancy thing. Dark hair, thin, real pretty. She talked with some accent."

My blood seared in my veins. "British by chance?"

"Yeah, yeah. Real fancy."

Of course. Why was I surprised that Ava was the finger that toppled the first domino?

"You catch anything she was saying?"

Keith shook his head. "It was all a bunch of garbage to me. But she handed them a stack of cash. Thought she was buying drugs from them."

Not surprising, considering leaving a paper trail behind would've tipped someone off eventually. I was sure getting caught by the government for using company funds for aiding

and abetting a kidnapping was more than frowned upon, even in the UK.

“Was anyone with her?”

“Yeah, some man.”

I stilled, hoping like fuck he wasn't talking about Liam.

If he was in the States, Max and I could kiss ourselves goodbye at any chance in finding Sam. So long as Liam had physical control over her, there was really no guarantee that he'd keep his promise to me. Not when he could put a bullet into her head himself.

“What did the man look like?”

“Real tall. Blond. Same accent if I remember right.”

I shut my eyes briefly, trying to calm myself down from having yet another mental breakdown.

Confirming if Liam was in the city was going to have to take precedent over continuing our search for Sam. I hoped like fuck Ava's companion was some kind of bodyguard, but until I had actual proof, we needed to lay low.

Liam catching us was the last thing we needed.

Especially if he made an impromptu visit to the penthouse to check up on me.

Opening my eyes, I pulled my hands out of my pocket and offered one.

“All right. Thanks for the info, Keith. Your van is parked outside. You're going to need to call a mechanic or locksmith. Your ignition is going to need to be replaced.”

He grabbed it and shook it hard. “Damn kids! Well, thanks for getting it back to me. You will let me know when you find those kids, right?”

Pulling my hand away, I flashed him a smile. “You have my number.”

He grinned, wide and toothy at us both. “Thanks, fellas. You enjoy your day now. I know I sure will.”

CHAPTER 5

“You know who he might’ve been talking about?” Max asked the second we were heading down the stairwell to leave.

I sighed, shoving the exit door open the second my foot touched the landing. “Unfortunately.”

Max was tight on my heels, bringing up the rear as we headed through the lobby of the apartment complex and out into the quiet parking lot.

“You gunna share with the class?”

I stopped short at his drawling tone, turning and catching him by the shoulder before he could accidentally body-check me.

I suppose it was high time I clued Max in on everything. Before now, there was no time to stop and give my long-winded explanation on who was who and what the dynamics of everything was that led up to this point.

Max was good about not asking too many questions, instead simply following my direction and trusting that I’d clue him in when it was time he needed to know.

Which was probably now, seeing as the threat of Liam being in the States was enough to make me want to hunker us down in some bomb shelter away from the chaos that was bound to come sooner rather than later.

“Cuz?”

I rubbed my face. “Sorry. Just... a lot went on.”

“Yeah, I can tell. The guy he was talking about. That was probably Liam.”

I nodded, letting my hands drop away from my face and down to my sides. “I hope like fuck it isn’t, but I don’t see who else Ava would be bringing around with her to pay off some kids to kidnap Sam.”

“Ava... your... wife?”

I shot him a look.

He held up his hands. “Hey, I’m only trying to connect the dots here. You never mentioned her name before.”

I held back a huff of annoyance. “Yes, Liam’s daughter. I married her in the UK. We were supposed to keep it under wraps until her career took off. She was the one who started all of this.”

“How so?”

All of this was too nuanced for my brain to handle at the moment. My thoughts were screaming, and so was my entire body. It felt like at any moment I could collapse and take a fucking snooze right here on the goddamn pavement and not give a single shit about people stepping around me to get back inside the building.

I’d been stressed before. With bullets flying at me and the threat of my life on the line, a hair’s trigger away from completely blipping me out of existence with one wrong move.

But this... it was all so goddamn different than what I was used to.

I could handle someone shoving a gun in my face and threatening my life. That was like a regular Tuesday to me. But this emotional turmoil was something else.

Every single second that passed felt like my heart was being ripped from my chest. I couldn’t stand the idea of Sam getting hurt because of me, let alone not even knowing why.

She was an innocent in all of this, and the fact that she’d been the one punished, not me, was the worst of it all.

“She...” The words dried on my tongue.

A hand came down on my shoulder to squeeze in a comforting grip. “That bad?”

For some reason, I felt tears stinging my eyes. Without saying anything else to Max, I strained my head back to glare up at the sun overhead, willing myself to pull it together.

Crying or getting that upset wouldn't change anything. Focusing and putting my head down to figure out where the fuck we were going from here was the only chance I'd get at making all of this right again.

I knew at the end of this, if by some miracle I really did rescue Sam, she'd never want to speak to me again. And who would blame her? We were barely together a few weeks before she'd been snatched away from her apartment window in the middle of the night.

It hurt to realize that my relationship with her, as tentative as it was, would be over once I had her safely back.

Damn...

Now my eyes were really stinging.

“Hey.” The hand on my shoulder tightened. “Cheer up, cuz. We got this. If we can survive falling from the Royal Gorge, we can do anything.”

I snorted, despite my plummeting mood. “God, that fucking bridge...”

He laughed softly. “Remember how loud you screamed when your line snapped?”

“Think you mean *you* screaming.”

“Nah. I was chill as a cucumber.”

I shoved him, lowering my head again. “Funny.”

He flashed an easy grin at me.

My phone vibrated in my pocket again, making me sigh. If that was Keith somehow calling me from beyond his blocked list, I was going to be pissed. Sure, I wasn't exactly giving him

credit for figuring out how to *unblock* me, but he was old enough to own a flip phone. That kind of thinking was inevitable.

I fished it out of my pocket; the number that rolled across wasn't one I recognized.

Most likely Keith but I needed to answer it just in case.

Damn it.

Tapping the screen, I held it up to my ear. "Yeah."

On the other end there was a long pause of silence, a slow and steady breathing that sent a pit of dread into my stomach.

My brows pinched together. "What?"

The voice on the other end cleared their throat, sounding hoarse.

"...Caleb?"

My blood ran cold.

Sam.

CHAPTER 6

I drew in a sharp breath. “Sam...”

She was alive.

Sam was *alive*.

Liam had kept his promise to me.

“Caleb, are you there?”

“Yes.” I tripped over my words. “Yes. I’m here.”

Biting my tongue to keep the words from spilling out of me, my body trying to heave the questions out of my mouth before I could stop them. I listened to the sound of her breathing, played back the inflection in her voice when she spoke.

All of it sounded so normal—too normal.

Where the fuck was she?

Next to me, Max was frantically peeling through his bag, throwing things on the pavement at my feet. It wasn’t until he pulling out a small device attached to a cord that I realized what he was looking for.

A signal tracker.

He was a fucking genius.

“I wanted to call you,” she said, her tone so fucking even that my hand tightened around my phone hard enough to make it creek against my ear.

“Really,” I bit back, lifting the phone just enough away from my face to let Max plug in the tracker in order to record the data.

It wouldn't be much for the time being, but sending it along to Malcolm would hopefully lead us to wherever the call was coming from.

“Mhmm,” she hummed back.

I swallowed back my words, keeping it together as the machine in Max's hand lit up with data points.

Were we playing a game? Was this what Liam demanded from her? Tease me with her safety while knowing how much it would drive me mad not knowing where she was, who she was with, or if she was even being well taken care of?

He was such a fucking bastard. I couldn't wait to put a bullet between his eyes and watch the wound bleed dry.

“How are you?”

There was a slight uptick in her tone at the end there. One that my brain latched onto immediately. I didn't say anything for a long moment, trying to focus on any background noise that would stick out to me and give me any clues as to where she was being held.

It sounded quiet, which actually told me a lot of things. It was away from the busy streets, for one. Even with a good amount of insulation, it was impossible to make a city apartment completely soundproof.

Two, there either were only a few people with her watching her or no one at all. It was hard to remain silent while being a background character, especially if you were in charge of making sure someone didn't spill all of their secrets while on the phone with another person.

I doubted she'd be trusted to be by herself when making her first phone call to me. But the minimal coverage of her meant that they were confident enough to know she wouldn't fight back.

A plus for Max and me. We have two hands and were more than happy to wield guns in both. Taking down an assailant or two would be a piece of cake.

“I’m good, Sam,” I finally answered her. “Vacation treating you well?”

She let out a small sound, confusion maybe? I wasn’t sure. Whatever lie they’d told me about her had clearly not gotten back to her through the grapevine. But maybe that was a good thing. Catching her with an organic reaction would keep me on the phone longer with her.

“Oh, um. Yes. It’s nice. Kind of cold for this time of year, though.”

Cold? Cold. She was telling me something.

It was cold in the city. Did that mean she was still here somewhere?

“That’s a shame. I hear it’s nice this time of year.”

She let out a short laugh. “Really? You heard that? I find that hard to believe.”

I could feel that I was getting closer. She was telling me without *telling* me. Trying to clue me in on something that I only needed to listen to to find the answer for.

“Sorry,” I amended. “I’m new to these parts.”

“Mm. That’s true. You are.”

Bingo.

“Say, why don’t we go someplace tropical once you’re back from your vacation?”

She was quiet for a long while. I didn’t dare to lift my phone away from my face to look at the screen and make sure our call was still connected. Not when there was a possibility that I could miss whatever came tumbling out of her mouth.

There was only the soft sounds of her breathing on the other end, the only indication that she was still even on the other line.

God, I missed her so much it made my chest hurt.

“No. I don’t think I’ll be able to.”

My chest squeezed tighter. “No?”

“No.”

There was a finality to her tone that I didn’t mistake for anything but resolute acceptance that she was sure she wasn’t going to make it out of this alive. Whatever had been done or said to her over there gave her the confidence that the people holding her captive wouldn’t be letting her walk out of that place unless she was in a body bag.

Despite Liam promising me her being kept alive for my sake, that wasn’t a guarantee that she would be able to walk out of there one day, even if I gave him my complete obedience.

Sam wasn’t stupid. She was too observant for her own good, and that was a skill that was both a blessing and a curse. I felt horrible that she was being forced to stare into the eyes of her own mortality, but I would do everything I could to make sure she lived to see another day.

Even if it killed me in the process.

“Sam?”

“Hm?”

“I’ll see you soon.”

The only thing she answered me with was a sigh and then the line went dead.

“Get anything?” Max lifted his head up from the machine.

“Kind of. She seems to still be in the city.”

“That’s good. I’ll send this data over to Malcolm. See what he can extract from it.”

I hoped like fuck it was answers.

CHAPTER 7

When we finally heard back from Malcolm a few hours later, his intel led us to the lower west side of the city.

The call had pinged off of several cell phone towers that he'd been able to pinpoint to a small subsection of residential buildings away from the crowded city streets—much to where I'd been suspecting her to be. There were over a dozen of them, each with at least fifteen to twenty stories and dozens of apartments on each floor.

It would take days to comb through all of them, questioning the residents and showing photos of Sam to whoever we were able to get to answer their doors.

Despite the seemingly daunting task ahead of us, the phone call with Sam had reinvigorated me to feeling less angry and more hopeful that we'd find her.

She was alive, and that's all I needed to keep focusing on.

Max and I started with the building the furthest away on the street, figuring that it was our best bet to work backward. The apartment building we'd chosen first was rather well kept considering this part of the city was known for crime and other illicit activities.

There weren't any blown-out windows or boarded-up doorways. Inside of the lobby was freshly tiled, and there was even a security guard's desk—sitting unoccupied currently—tucked against the far back wall.

“This place is... nice,” Max mumbled to me, pressing the button for the elevator.

“Suspiciously nice.”

He let out a hum of agreement, his eyes darting around the space much in the same way mine had once we’d stepped inside through the double doors.

What were the chances that Liam owned this building?

It was a shot in the dark, but I couldn’t help wondering. I wouldn’t put it past him to start scooping up real estate in order to flip it and turn a profit on it. Rentals were always passive income, and if he’d been planning on funneling money into Ava’s political campaigns, then this was the way to do it.

Swoop in and steal a bunch of lower-income apartment buildings, kick out all the tenants, flip it, and then sell it for higher profit.

It was every hedge fund’s wet dream.

When the elevators opened, we both stepped inside.

“Damn, even the elevator’s nice.” Max scoffed.

“I know.” My finger tapped the top floor’s button, the doors closing silently behind us. “Weird in a neighborhood like this.”

“I’ll say. What are the chances she’s in a high-rise?”

I crossed my arms over my chest. “Hard to say. There wasn’t much in the background when she was talking to me.”

Max nodded, his reflection bubbling in the mirrored reflection of the elevator doors. “Least she got to call.”

That had me scoffing. Like it was some kind of privilege that she was given a phone and given the blessing to ring me up and have a nice little chat about our days.

Honestly, it was more than likely some kind of elaborate way to upset me and keep me in line. Dangling enough bait in front of me so that I stayed in my lane and asked, “How high?” the next time Liam told me to jump.

“Hey.” I felt a nudge at my side. “I’m sorry. I know all of this is frustrating.”

I sighed. “Yeah...”

Pulling my arm out from under my armpit, I rubbed it over my face. Anger wasn't going to get me very far if I kept letting it cloud my head like this. As upsetting as all of this was, my head needed to remain clear enough to actually focus on what the fuck we were doing instead of continuing to go down this dark path over never-ending grief.

That's not what Sam needed. She deserved the ex-OPS soldier that didn't back down from a challenge and knew when the fuck to get a grip and pull it together in order to carry out a mission. Not this whiny cry-baby that felt like his world was ending.

I could do that later when she was safely tucked back into my arms and away from all of this mess.

Hopefully she'd leave the city with me and go somewhere no one would be able to find us. Like a ranch out in the country or something. Anywhere that the Harringtons wouldn't get their hands on her again.

“Sorry for my shitty mood. It isn't helping anything.”

Max patted my shoulder a few times. “I hope that if I ever go missing, you're half this upset about it.”

I rolled my eyes, playfully shoving him. “Don't get me started on that. You're not going anywhere.”

The scar over his eye crinkled as he grinned. “Better promise me that before you and Sammy go running off into the sunset together.”

“I'll try,” I drawled.

Rolling my shoulders back, I let the joints crack and fall back into place, primed and ready to go as the cloud over me lifted. Get in and get out, that was the goal. As long as we got to everyone on this floor within an hour and moved on to the next, we'd be done with this building by the time afternoon hit.

However, the second the doors chimed open, the phone in my pocket vibrated.

God, what now?

Pulling it out, I blinked in surprise to see Junior's name pop up. Next to me, Max leaned over to get a look at my screen before I had the chance to put it to my ear and answer it.

"Why the fuck is he calling you?"

"Dunno."

I hadn't bothered to tell Max about my and Junior's conversation the other day, mostly because I hadn't wanted to jinx it and two, because I'd kind of forgotten about it. I'd been too wrapped up in us finding the damn van and the owner of it that it'd slipped my mind that I'd sent Ricard out on a recon mission.

Tapping on the screen, I answered it. "Yeah?"

"Hey." The kid sounded completely out of breath. "I found some shit."

"What is it?"

"Okay." There was some rustling on the other end of the phone, like he was juggling between holding something while trying to tuck the phone against his shoulder. "So I snuck into my dad's office while he was out with my mom. Don't know what they were doing but whatever. So, when I went in there, my dad had all these documents on his desk that I'd never seen before. Records and shit, which he usually never bothers going through 'cause we have people for that. So I looked through them and I didn't find anything."

My lips pressed together in a tight line.

If this kid was actually calling me to tell me he found nothing, I was going to find a way to reach through the phone and smack him for wasting my goddamn time.

Through my teeth, I gritted out, "Okay..."

"Anyway," he went on. "So I figured he had to have other files like on the Harringtons or something, right?"

A sigh left me. "Ricard, get to the point."

“Fuck off, Winters. You know I’m helping you here, right? Anyways, like I said, I went looking through his files and guess what I found? A list of properties he has under his LLC.”

My lips parted in surprise.

“Any in New York?”

“Yeah, a few. I took a picture of it to send to you.”

I couldn’t believe I had my doubts. This kid was a fucking lifesaver.

“Text it to me.”

“Already sending it over.”

My phone vibrated against my skull.

Pulling it away from my face, I tapped on the notification and went to my text thread. The photo loaded for a moment before popping up right at the top. It was a full letter-sized list of addresses and residency occupancies with Liam’s name stamped right on the dotted line.

Holy shit.

And there it was, right at the top of the list. A property close by to where we were.

“So?” Ricard prompted, his voice soft and muffled coming out of my ear speaker.

“Love it. Thanks, kid. Talk to you later.”

“Hey wait—!”

My finger practically stabbed the “end call.”

My best friend squinted at me. “...You guys have been... talking?”

I peered down at the list, running through the other addresses. None of them were very far from where we were. That was a good sign we were headed in the right direction at least. “Just about the Harringtons. Figured his family would have some good info since they’ve been working with Liam for a while.”

“That’s it?”

“If you want to find out what else we gossip about, I’m sure he’d be more than happy if you called him up and asked.”

He snorted at me. “No thanks. We’ve got other shit to worry about right now.”

I blew out a breath. “He did say he needed you in about two weeks...”

“Yeah?” A wry smile crossed his face. “For what?”

“A meeting.” I searched his face for answers—a hint of anything that would give me a clue as to what the fuck kind of meeting was so important that Ricard called *me* of all people.

But weirdly enough, Max seemed unfazed.

Maybe it really wasn’t all that important.

“Well, kid may have to learn to shoot his own gun for a change.”

I smirked to myself. True.

Against my better judgment, though, Ricard had come through for us. Even if I didn’t want to admit it to myself, the kid was an invaluable resource at this point. He’d taken less than a day in getting back to me with another lead, something that I’d no idea was even on my radar in the first place.

It wasn’t in my nature to pay anyone back, but he’d certainly earned it at this point.

I wasn’t completely sold on the idea of Max going back to work for Ricard’s family, but I could think of ways to throw him a different kind of bone.

Maybe I’d see about reaching out to some of my contacts overseas and offer them our old positions at the estate. Even though Ricard seemed to be married to the idea of retaining Max again, he’d be stupid to pass up an opportunity to have another ex-military buddy of ours on his roster.

And lately, the kid had shown he really wasn’t all that dumb. Not sure his father would agree with that, but he seemed to be growing into his own.

“Hey.” Max’s finger tapped on the side of my phone, his finger hovering over one of the lines toward the bottom. “That’s a warehouse code, right?”

Reading over the line, it was pretty easy to determine the “APT-BLD” codes from the “WH-BLD.” Which gave us a good jumping point in starting with the big ones first.

“We should check this one first.” I pointed to the line four down from the top. “It’s the closest one to us.”

“Roger that.” Max jammed his finger on the ground floor button on the elevator’s panel.

My stomach dropped a little when the elevator started to descend, and I couldn’t figure out if it was from the inertia or the excitement of us finally having a solid plan.

CHAPTER 8

The building wasn't far from the apartment complexes, only half a block down from where we were.

It seemed as though Liam's plan had been to slowly buy up the street, flipping each dilapidated building as he went and then selling them for a steep mark-up.

As we pulled up to the warehouse, it was obvious that it had long since been abandoned. The outside of it was scorched from a fire that looked rather old, while the windows in the front of it were boarded up and taped over with security strips.

It didn't make for a very welcoming sight, but then again, that was the point, wasn't it? Make the hideout seem inconspicuous among all of the nice buildings surrounding it so that way the only vagrants who were stupid enough to chance a break-in wouldn't be missed if they got caught and executed.

I had no doubts that if we weren't able to find Sam here, she'd be somewhere on this list.

Even though she'd been taken in the dead of night, she would've realized that the kidnappers hadn't taken her very far if she was still in the city. The drive wasn't long enough to leave the heavy flows of traffic without her noticing and figuring out a way to tell me that.

As we approached the entrance to the building, I noticed a brand new lock set latched across the doors. It was still shiny and barely worn at all, which was a good sign for us. It meant someone had been here recently.

I held out my hand to Max, tightening my fingers once I felt the familiar weight of a gun resting in it. There was no sense in shooting the lock apart and alerting whoever was inside—if there was anybody—of our presence before we got the jump on them first. We'd need any advantage we could get in a hostage situation.

I tucked the gun to the side of my leg, keeping it low and out of sight as we snuck around to the side of the building. There was a door at the far end of it that wasn't boarded up or padlocked at all. Another good sign.

I tested the handle, feeling it give way with ease.

Glancing back over my shoulder, I nodded at Max, who gave me the all-clear with a quick hand signal.

Damn, just like old times.

Things really never changed, did they?

Pushing the door open slowly and just enough for us both to slip past the door frame, I set it back against the jam without letting it latch back into place. If things went to shit and we were forced into a quick extraction, a jammed door would fuck us both right in the ass.

Especially with bullets flying at us.

The room opened up into some kind of small office. Old papers were stacked everywhere and the musty smell of old dust had me wrinkling my nose, trying not to cough. My footsteps were quiet on the worn carpet as I crossed it to the open doorway opposite of where we'd come from.

A hallway greeted us, empty and silent.

I held my hand up to Max, pulling my gun out in front of my chest while doing so and signaled for him to follow close behind me.

He tapped my shoulder twice with a confirmation.

I took the hallway down on the left, heading deeper into the warehouse and following the slightly scuffed floors carefully. The markings were definitely new, unsettling the long since stagnant soot dust from the fire. Rounding another

corner, I trained the butt of my gun ahead, seeing and hearing nothing.

I felt another tap on the shoulder.

Looking over it, Max gestured behind us down the opposite side from where I was facing to a single beam of light shone against the dirty floor.

Bingo.

Spinning around toward the opposite way, I kept my gun trained ahead of me, hoping that it wasn't just some homeless squatter.

Please... please let it be Sam...

Heading down the hall, there was a distant sound that slowly grew louder the closer we got to it. It was speaking of some kind, the words jumbled sounded and the inflections of the tone off—a radio, maybe? It was hard to tell from the echoing of the empty walls around us.

I stopped right before my foot touched the beam of light and leaned a shoulder to the side of the wall. The doorway was open without a door attached to the broken hinges.

Inside, I could hear subtle movement, but nothing that indicated a struggle of any kind. Just the soft sounds of someone occupying the space.

Lowering my gun in case it was some vagrant taking shelter, I was careful to peer around the corner and look inside.

A large wall of monitors was the first thing to catch my eye, all of which had live feeds going with various angles all around the outside of the building. In front of it was a spinning office chair that sat unoccupied and facing toward the right side of the room.

Odd.

Straightening up from the wall, I pulled my gun up again before stepping inside.

The room was small, really only slightly bigger than a cubicle. On the right was a door that was closed with a light

peeking through the gap under it.

Occupied.

The radio played a familiar tune that instantly grated my nerves but was loud enough to block out whatever sound Max and I made as we entered the room.

The live feeds were what I focused on next.

All of them except the one in the left hand corner.

It looked like it was in some kind of room, the footage grainy and hard to see other than a few small seconds of clarity before it looped back into a gray blob again. I stared at it for a long moment, willing the picture to get crisp again.

Behind me, I heard a toilet flush.

Shit.

The door on the other side of the room popped open, a man with his pants half pulled up greeting us. He was dressed in some kind of uniform that I didn't recognize but looked vaguely familiar to me.

Enough that it had me pausing to assess it.

The man's eyes widened at the same time that his mouth dropped open to yell out at us.

Before he could, though, Max hit him dead in the center of his forehead with a single bullet, dropping him backward to crumble onto the floor next to the toilet.

He lay there motionless, not even twitching from the after-effects of his life slipping away.

Gone in an instant.

"Nice shot," I mumbled.

Turning back to the cameras, I studied the one at the bottom corner again, willing it to shift back into clarity. The grainy feed was so hard to see anything through that I might as well have been closing my eyes and spinning in circles ten times.

"Find something?"

Finally, it shifted again.

There. A room with what looked like someone on a bed.

That had to be her.

I nodded, spinning on my heel and heading right out the door. "Let's go."

CHAPTER 9

Extractions usually went one of two ways: seamlessly or they were a complete shitshow.

There was no in between.

Even the most thought-out plans could go awry with the smallest of things setting them off their course and careening every single person in the party to a surefire death.

While most of my time spent in the military were reconnaissance missions, that didn't mean I hadn't had my fair share of extractions, nor needed one myself.

Hell, combined, Max and I might hold some kind of record.

We made our way down the hall to round off another corner that led us to the end where a door sat closed and latched from the outside.

The closer I got to it, the more my heart pounded.

There was a chance that it wasn't Sam on the other side of it, but some other poor soul who had made the unfortunate mistake of trusting the wrong set of people and we'd just so happened to have crossed paths because of it.

And while that would severely set me off my original course, it didn't mean that we couldn't get this person out of whatever they'd gotten themselves into.

The latch was easy to remove, but the door was another story.

It was heavy as fuck and screeched loudly when I managed to get my hand wedged in between the frame and it in order to shove my shoulder against it a few times to nudge it open.

Max whirled around to face the opposite way of me, keeping his gun trained on the mouth of the hallway just in case we were collecting curious ears with the noise I was making.

After a few good shoves, I was finally able to get the door open far enough to get my body through it and into the room on the other side. Much like the cubicle-sized security room, this one wasn't much bigger. The only difference was the bed and the person lying on top of it.

"Sam?" I whispered, moving closer.

It was hard to see in the darkness that was only broken up by the single lightbulb overhead. They didn't stir, the covers pulled over top of them as they remained still and unmoving.

Dead? Drugged? Both thoughts raced through my head.

I hoped neither if it was really her.

I lowered my gun to my hip, grabbing the person by the shoulder and rolling them over onto the back.

A wave of blond hair greeted me, covering a face I knew far too well.

I practically shook with relief. Oh, thank fuck.

With gentle fingers, I flicked her hair away from her face, grimacing at the bruises that littered her chin and cheek. I was sure there were more hidden under her clothing. Sam was a fighter, even if she didn't have the strength for it.

Her expression remained serene despite the ugliness marring her skin. Her chest rose slowly as she slept, but she barely moved otherwise. They must've drugged her to keep her from raising hell like I knew she was capable of.

I breathed out slowly, my knees practically buckling from under me.

Thank fuck. Thank fuck. *Thank. Fuck.*

“Shit. *Caleb!*”

My head snapped up at Max’s voice at the same time as the sound of a bullet flying by and hitting the half closed door with a sharp *ping*.

Max fired off a few rounds, drowning out the sounds of whoever was on the other side of the door yelling at him to back away from it. Their voices were distorted, echoing off the walls in an odd way with the sound of more bullets ricocheting around the small space just outside.

Leaving Sam on the bed, I raced over and yanked the door open wider with a few sharp pulls and my adrenaline racing through my veins. Using the noise as a cover, my gun was trained around Max’s other side farthest from the wall, two bullets flying out of my gun’s chamber in rapid fire.

They hit one of the men coming down the hallway, slamming him square in the chest and dropping him down to the ground with quick efficiency. Two others remained motionless on the ground in a similar state, both bleeding profusely onto the scuffed-up floor under their bodies.

“I hear more coming. She in there?”

“Yeah. We need another way to get out the door. Fighting through a hall this narrow again is going to kill us.”

“Grab her. I’ll keep you covered.”

Without wasting any more time discussing things, I headed back into the room and scooped Sam’s limp body into my arms. Hefting her over my shoulder was easy to do with her body being completely malleable and light to carry.

This was the only silver lining to all of this: at least she wouldn’t have to witness us mowing down a bunch of people with military precision.

While one day I’d like to talk to her about my past, it wouldn’t be me trying to do so covered in someone else’s blood.

By the time I got back out of the door, Max was already halfway down the hallway, keeping his gun trained up and his

shoulders locked forward.

Up ahead, I could already hear yelling accompanied with sets of heavy footfalls.

“Check on the—oh shit!”

Max fired off two rounds while coming around the corner.

Keeping an arm clutched tight around Sam’s body, I hurried after him. Rounding the corner, I could see another man’s body lying there with blood pooling from him. His eyes were staring up at the ceiling, glazing over slowly while the life leaked from him.

I felt a sharp breeze fly past me as the sound of a bullet hitting the wall behind me caught my attention. Autopilot took over, raising my arm and aiming it for one of the guys to Max’s right hand side. Putting two rounds in his head and dropping him was easy, like I’d done hundreds of other times in my life.

Ahead of me, Max flattened himself against the wall and slammed the butt of his gun against another guy’s head. The resounded crack of it had me wincing.

“Damn.”

He kicked at the body dropping, giving me enough time to aim and fire at his chest twice.

Around us, silence reigned once more.

With a small huff of breath, Max wiped at his chin before looking back at me. “Think that was all of them?”

I shook my head. “Maybe for now, but we better get moving. I’m not in the mood to fight off an entire squadron.”

CHAPTER 10

Once we'd gotten out of the warehouse and hotwired ourselves a ride back into the busier parts of the city, I'd made the executive decision to not go back to Sam's apartment.

While I doubted anyone other than the men stationed there to watch over that warehouse were any the wiser at our sudden little escapade, I wasn't taking any chances by putting us all in danger again.

Leaving us as sitting ducks in the same place that this had all happened in the first place would've been astronomically stupid on my part, anyway.

We ended up driving around for an hour trying to find a building to squat in but had ultimately settled on heading to a motel just outside of Jersey.

Since we were in a unique position of having the upper hand for the moment, it was high time to take advantage of it.

I had no idea where to go from here, other than to somehow get out of the country, but it was hard to say how far Liam's reach really went. He had money, which meant that he could essentially get anyone in his pocket for the right price. But how far he was willing to go in order to leash me again was the real question.

If I were in his shoes, I'd just deem myself as a lost cause and move on with my life. It was the easiest and more cost-effective decision anyway, but it seemed like his pride and ego

were both a source for his driving need to constantly control things even if they made no sense in holding onto.

I was a liability even if he got a hold of me again. What's to say I wouldn't run again? And again and again—whenever I got the chance.

To me, none of that was worth it.

Then again, what did I know? I was just some grunt that happened to catch the eye of a billionaire.

By the time the sun was just starting to peek over the horizon outside of the thin curtains covering our windows, I headed out to find Max and me both something to eat. Neither of us could remember the last time we actually ate something, so that meant it was high time to refuel.

I'd been running off pure adrenaline and no sleep, and I was sure he was doing much the same.

There was a vending machine just outside of the rental office that had a few candy bars and bags of chips inside of it that looked fairly fresh. Considering that the motel itself was in rough condition was a bit of an understatement, but it was cheap and I didn't need any sort of ID to check in with.

Not to mention no one would be giving us the side-eye with Max and I dragging a woman's limp body over our shoulders.

I grabbed a few snacks and an arm full of water bottles that we could keep in the car we'd stolen while we drove. These would hold us over for now until we could find some kind of highway diner.

I didn't exactly have a plan after this.

Once Sam woke up, we were kind of left to figure out where the fuck we were going from here. I was sure she'd have questions about why she'd been taken, and for that, I'd need to tiptoe around some answers.

There was a fine line in what I wanted her to know now once she woke up from whatever drugs they fed her versus

what I was willing to tell her later as soon as we were in a less hectic environment and not running for our lives.

Scaring her anymore than she already had been was the last thing I wanted to do.

Arriving back at our motel room, my hand hovered over the door handle when I heard a set of voices speaking on the other side of it. There was a tense tone to them that had me pausing to listen.

“Don’t. You don’t want to—”

“Shut up! Back the fuck off!”

Shit.

Using my shoulder to blow the door open, I held the handle in a tight grip, not letting it bounce off the wall and scare either of them into doing something stupid.

Max was over by the doorway leading out of the bathroom with his hands up. His eyes bounced over to me the moment the door opened, his shoulders relaxing slightly.

In front of me and with her back to me stood Sam. She had a gun—one of ours, I was guessing—trained on Max’s chest. Her hands shook as she held it up at him. Her head whipped around to look at me over her shoulder, a small gasp leaving her.

“*Caleb?*”

Well... this was certainly a sight.

I nodded to her. “Why don’t you put that thing down?”

Her grip on it tightened. “Who the hell is this guy? Where are we? What the fuck is going *on?*”

She was getting a little hysterical with each follow-up question. Couldn’t say I blamed her. The situation, coupled with the drugs that she was finally coming down from, was a lethal combination in paranoia. Not to mention a strange man like Max hovering over her the moment she opened her eyes.

I could only imagine how the fuck *that* went down.

“He’s a friend of mine, Sam. He helped me get you out of there.”

Her eyes narrowed. “Out of *where*, Caleb? What the *fuck* is going on?”

“Put the gun down and I’ll explain it to you, I promise.”

I could tell she didn’t want to, trying to give herself some mode of self-preservation by keeping a weapon on her just in case. It was a smart move, and in any other instance I would’ve commended her for it. But having someone untrained like her and pointing it at my best friend was making me *real* antsy.

“I promise I’ll explain everything, Sam. Give me back the gun and I will.”

There was a long pause of silence as she assessed me, her hands wavering. On the other side of the room, Max stayed perfectly still with his hands still raised in the air. I took my hand off the door handle and offered it forward, curling my fingers twice.

With a small sigh, she turned and lowered the gun, placing it in my palm. I snagged it from her fingers easily and flicked the safety back on before tucking it into the back of my jeans.

“Hungry?”

She frowned at me. I’d take that as a no.

“Well,” I kicked the door closed behind me, “I got us all water and snacks if anyone’s hungry.”

I tossed a water bottle across the room, watching Max catch it with expert hands. Throwing the rest of the things in my arm on the bed closest to the door, I turned to pull the chain back over it and lock the deadbolt back into place.

If someone really wanted to come in here, they could. The door was flimsy at best and the locks weren’t in any better shape. But the sound of it would give us enough time to get up and ready before anyone could truly tear their way through.

Gesturing over to the other bed, I said, “Why don’t you sit? We’ll talk.”

She gave Max another wary look.

“He’s harmless,” I offered.

Across the way, he gave me a loud snort, downing half of his water bottle in one go.

I glared at him but didn’t bother giving him a chastising lecture over it. He shrugged at me before pulling the bottle away from his mouth. He took the chair away from the small desk that had the room’s TV resting on top of it and turned it around. He sat in it backward and rested his arms over the back of it, eyes flitting between both of us.

I guided Sam over to the bed, sitting her down on it and offering her a cracked water bottle. She needed to drink, even if she wasn’t thirsty. Flushing those drugs out of her system was going to be the only way she was going to start feeling better and less like she was in some sort of alternate reality.

I sat opposite of her on the other bed, facing her with my hands on my thighs.

“What the fuck happened?”

“It’s complicated.”

She rolled her eyes. “Really?”

Shit, this was going nowhere.

“What do you remember?”

Her shoulders visibly tensed. “Nothing much. After they made me call you, they gave me something to knock me out.”

“Before that, I mean.”

Her hands flexed around her water bottle. “They... shoved me in some van and put a bag over my head. We didn’t drive for very long, so I knew we were still in the city... How did you find me? I didn’t have my phone on me.”

“We traced that call you made.”

Sam blinked. “How? You working with the police?”

Max’s chair creaked slightly when he shifted.

“No.” I leaned forward onto my elbows. “Not exactly.”

Her eyes darted between us, a crease forming in the middle of her brows. “You just have that kind of tech lying around, then?”

My teeth gnawed at the inside of my cheek.

Well, this certainly wasn't going according to plan. Or rather... what would? Sam was too sharp, her mind worked too quickly to be fooled into small explanations or little hints and teases of information that she could fill the blanks in with her own explanations.

She wasn't like the regular civilians that I came into contact with daily. She wanted actual answers, even if I was afraid of giving them to her. Breaking her mind with the truth that I used to be a for-hire killer was the last thing I wanted to do.

How scared would she be then, to find herself in the room with two people who killed for a price-tag?

“Look.” I sighed. “There's a lot that's been going on. I'm sorry that you got caught up in all of this. I really am.”

Using the heel of her hand, she pressed it against her forehead. “This was not in my contract with Ava.”

“I know.”

She massaged her heel along her forehead slowly. “When she told me to watch you, this is not at all what she mentioned would happen.”

I stilled. “... Watch me?”

“Yeah.” Sam dropped her hand into her lap again. “When I got hired.”

I didn't have to look over to Max to know that he was watching Sam very, *very* carefully.

My eyes narrowed. “What exactly did you get hired for?”

She shrugged, snapped the cap off of her water bottle before downing some of it. She sighed when she pulled it from her lips, a small smattering of moisture collecting on her lower lip.

“All she said was to watch you and report back to her about what you were doing. They were suspicious of you when they told me they were hiring you.”

“They?” I repeated. “Who’s ‘they’?”

“Ava and Liam. That’s her dad.”

My mind was suddenly not working, stalled on the fact that both Harringtons’ names were coming out of her mouth. How the fuck did she know about Liam?

They’d hired her to *watch* me?

“You know Liam?” Max asked for me.

She nodded at him. “He was there when I got hired.”

Holy fuck.

I stood and walked away from her.

This couldn’t be happening. A spy? That’s what they’d hired her for?

I was such a fucking idiot. Of course they’d hire someone to keep an eye on me. Where did I get off in thinking that they’d trust me so easily? That had been one of my first red flags when I’d sat down at that table back in the UK with them both to discuss my contract.

I was stupid to think that they were that naive in trusting a man like me, let alone welcoming him into their business like it was nothing. But the fact that they’d hired Sam and had her preying on me was something entirely else.

My hands fisted at my sides. “They told you to do all of this?”

She blinked at me. “Do all of *what*?”

I couldn’t help baring my teeth at her. “*Getting* with me, Sam. Was that the master plan? Seduce me and then... what? Report back to them?”

“What the hell are you talking about?”

“You know what I’m talking about!”

She flinched, shrinking herself away from me.

Behind me, I could hear Max getting up from his chair. He clapped both of his hands on my shoulders and guided me over to the door, shoving me toward it.

“Take a breather.”

“Whoa, hey!” Sam jumped up from her spot. “I’m not getting stuck alone again with some stranger!”

Max scoffed. “Chill. I’m not interested in doing anything to you.”

“How do I know that?”

My head was fucking spinning. All of this was an entire lie. I’d just gone out of my way to put myself in danger for a fucking spy who was hired out by Ava and Liam. I’d gone and risked my best friend’s life for that shit too. We could’ve been shot dead and for what?

For Sam to go reporting back to the Harringtons about all of this?

Why the fuck did they kidnap her if she was on their payroll?

God fucking damn it.

I shoved Max off of me. “Tell me what the fuck they hired you for *exactly*. I want every detail, Sam. And don’t lie to me.”

She huffed. “How about we start with why they decided to kidnap me and not you? Why did you get to walk around a free man while they locked me in some room with no lights?”

None of this made any sense. “I don’t know why they took you.”

“What did I even do?” She threw her water bottle onto the bed. She was starting to get hysterical. “I didn’t do anything! All I did was report back to Ava about you coming and going from work and what you did! I wasn’t hired to sleep with you, Caleb! I’m not a hooker!”

The desperation in her tone was starting to make me believe her, but how could I really? This all could be some

massive ploy to get me to come back to them under duress. And now that Max was in the mix, I was royally fucking screwed. They had me wrapped around their fingers in either direction they pulled me toward—Sam or Max.

Fuck.

Fuck all of this.

“You spied on me, Sam. How can I trust anything that comes out of your mouth?”

Her eyes watered. “How can I trust you when you were the one that was suspicious in the first place?”

“I’m not the one who got paid to do something like this. I rescued you from that warehouse. That’s what I did. Meanwhile, you were reporting back to the Harringtons for god knows what reason.”

“I needed the money,” she choked out.

My heart shattered in my chest. That’s all this was about? Money?

None of it was real. All of this was one massive ploy that Liam had expertly crafted. The perfect web to keep me compliant if Ava hadn’t gone and fucked it all up by getting jealous.

Holy fuck, they had gotten me so good that I hadn’t realized just how entangled I was until right this very moment. I was in love with Sam, I truly was, even though it was all a goddamn illusion.

It was sick and twisted.

“Caleb...”

I shook my head and turned away from her, practically ripping the door off its hinges when I tried to open it and it got caught on the locks. My fingers were quick to work them apart, swinging the door open and letting in the cool breeze from outside.

Fuck all of this.

“Caleb, wait.” I could hear the fear in her voice. “Don’t leave me with—”

I cut her off by slamming the door shut. She could go cry in the bathroom for all I cared.

I was done.

CHAPTER 11

I spent the rest of the early morning, fading into lunch time, surveying the area we were in and tracking down old school maps that were made in the last two years.

Even with our accessibility to tech, I was wary to use it. My paranoia of being tracked down in the same way we'd tracked Sam down was wearing on me and making my already muddled brain a fucking mess.

My thoughts were scrambled and even forced them back in order to focus on the task at hand—not getting caught by the Harringtons—was becoming harder to focus on.

Sam's words were a constant, swimming around my head loudly each time I was reminded of the fact that all of this, all of us, was a complete fabrication.

It hurt more than I thought it would. And once I was out of her reach, it had begun to set in. The shock over the situation had been short lived and now it was hard to breathe through the ache in my chest.

If anyone was the fool, it was me. For believing that someone like Sam could ever truly see past the damage and care for the person deep down. I'd thought that I'd been too lucky in finding someone like her, someone that hadn't minded the scars or the shady past.

And yet, here I was sitting in the middle of fucking Jersey with nothing but a bunch of fucking lies following me.

God, I was such a fucking idiot.

Though, despite all of that, there was still a part of me that wanted to protect Sam. She was clearly in danger, even if she had at one point been working directly with the Harringtons.

Even though they were hell-bent on getting me back, that didn't mean that they were above taking out whoever was in their way, and clearly Sam was an easy target.

I was pissed at her for betraying me, but that didn't mean I was willingly going to throw her to the wolves and let them do whatever it was they wanted in order to hurt me.

She deserved better, even if she couldn't be trusted.

She had a family that cared about her, and thinking about someone going to their residence and breaking the news to them that she was either missing or found dead tugged at the shattered pieces of my broken heart.

I was a heartless piece of shit, but I wasn't cruel. Not in that way, that was for sure.

This was the last thing I'd do for her, but I'd at least be able to get her back to her parents and give her some time to say goodbye to them before I gave her the advice to go into hiding somewhere.

If she was smart—and she was—she'd follow my advice and get herself into some kind of witness protection program. If not... well, that was her choice.

The second that her feet hit the ground of her parents' place, Max and I were off to go wherever. I wasn't risking him in favor of her, not when our relationship had turned out like this—a fucking lie.

Though, even if I thought all of this now, who was to say I'd feel the same once we got to where we needed to go?

Heading back to the motel, I knocked on the door and waited for Max to come over and let me in. His face was drawn into a deep frown when he finally pulled the door open.

“She locked herself in the bathroom the second you left.”

I snorted. After all of her arguing with me, I was surprised she actually listened for once.

Couldn't say I blamed her, though. Max was a softie on the inside but he was quite intimidating when you first looked at him. Even if the scar over his eye didn't turn you off, his large build would.

Stepping inside, I tossed the maps onto the bed and rubbed a hand over my face. "We're going to drop her off at her parents. After that, we can go wherever. I'm thinking Aruba."

He shut the door behind me, turning around to grin at me. "Hey, I wouldn't hate a tropical vacation."

Despite my sour mood, that had me rolling my eyes with a snort. "Yeah, I thought as much."

"You want me to go and bust down the door and drag her out?"

I shook my head. "No need. She isn't stupid. She'll come with us if I tell her to."

Max put both hands on his hips. "Hey... I'm sorry about... well."

This was the last thing I wanted to talk about, especially with said subject a few yards away from us and with her ear probably pressed against the door trying to hear us.

"It's fine. We need to go now, though. I don't want anyone sniffing around and getting suspicious."

"I think we can take on a few cops, cuz."

I shoved him. "The cops are not what I was worried about."

On the other side of the room, the door to the bathroom opened. The light from it bathed Sam in an ugly orangey-yellow glow that did nothing for her complexion. In fact, it made her skin look sallow and pale.

I could tell from even across the way how puffy her eyes were from crying. It made a part of me want to reach out and hold her, but I forced myself to keep my hands at my sides.

"We need to go."

She swallowed, her voice hoarse as she spoke. "Where?"

“To your parents. I’m dropping you off there.”

Her eyes widened. “Why? Did something happen?”

I shrugged. “I don’t know, but we can’t stay here. And I’m not taking you with us. I can’t trust you.”

She wavered at my words, her body leaning into the doorframe as she lost the strength to stand up fully. The knuckles on her hands turned white as she clutched the side of the doorframe, her head down tilted as she spoke.

“I’m sorry…”

I didn’t say anything back to her. What could I say, anyway? I wasn’t going to forgive her for doing this to me, nor was I going to excuse her behavior. She’d royally fucked me over for probably less than a hundred grand, and that’s what was the worse offense to all of this.

“We’ve got a car outside ready. So do whatever it is you need to do before we head out. We’re leaving in five.”

With that, I turned and grabbed the snacks, maps, and water off of the bed and gathered them all into my arms. Max was already moving across the room and grabbed his bag to heft over his shoulder.

Sam continued to stand in the doorway, watching us both move with a piece of her hair shielding one of her eyes.

I sighed at her. “If you’re not outside, we’re leaving without you.”

And with that, I walked right out the door.

I wasn’t giving any energy into making her feel welcome. Even if I did, Max wasn’t the type to sit back and let that shit happen. He’d be the first to whap me on the back of the head and tell me to get my shit together.

If Sam wanted to stay here and fend for herself, that was her own prerogative.

When I got to the car, I hooked one of my hands around the handle and pulled it open. The door screeched with the motion, old and worn from its years sitting vacant at that

warehouse. We'd need to steal another ride once we were out of Jersey, but that could wait until the engine was starting to smoke.

Tossing everything into the back aside from the maps, I shut the door and leaned through the driver's side window to put the map on top of the center console.

Max was already settling himself shotgun with his bag down on the floor at his feet. I lifted away from the door and craned my neck to look into the motel room, where the door was still wide open.

Was she actually not coming?

My chest ached.

For all my bravado talk, I was actually still hoping for her to come out of her own accord and come with us. Even though we were at differing crossroads, there was still a part of me that yearned for Sam's acceptance. It was stupid and childish but still there nonetheless.

"Fuck," I mumbled and stormed over to the door.

"You're actually going to drag her?"

The excitement in Max's voice did not go unnoticed.

Bastard.

"Make sure you get a good grip of her hair!" he called out after me.

I rolled my eyes. I knew he wasn't serious, but I was surprised nonetheless that he wasn't offering to do this for me. She'd hurt me, quite obviously, and that was grounds for some drastic measures.

Maybe it was because he knew I'd chew him a new one if he so much as went within five feet of her.

"Sam."

She jumped when I entered the room again, still hanging out over by the door.

"Let's go."

Her brows knitted together. “But—”

“I don’t care. Get in the fucking car.”

That had her raising her hackles, coming to the challenge at the tone of my voice. Her body straightened up fully, her shoulders bowing back.

“And what if I don’t want to?”

I raised a single brow. “You want to find out?”

“Thought you were fine with leaving me here.”

“Yeah. Well, I changed my mind.”

“For what? Why would you want to be around me now?”

I shrugged. “You’d make a good bargaining chip.”

It was a complete lie, but my conviction had her eyes going wide. She believed me, and maybe that was the worst part. She truly did see me as some kind of monster.

I couldn’t believe I fell for all of this. How was I so fucking oblivious?

“Let’s go.” I stepped back and nodded toward the door.

She crossed the room slowly, her entire form shaking slightly.

None of this made me feel good. It all made me feel like a complete piece of shit that wasn’t good enough for her, even if she’d lied to me about everything.

Sam was still Sam and was still the person I cared for that she was deep down. At her core, she was the kind of person that I never thought existed but made me want to be better. Made me want to actually leave my old life in the past and find a new one—with her.

She scooted out the door and hurried over to the car Max was hanging out of. He gave her a hard look that she missed as she pulled open the back driver’s side door and ducked inside.

As I shut the door to the motel, Max and I caught eyes.

He sighed at me before shaking his head and crunching himself back inside of the cab. His silent displeasure wasn’t

lost on me.

This... was going to be one interesting road trip.

CHAPTER 12

The drive out to the Midwest to Montana was smooth and surprisingly quiet to say the least.

None of us were too keen on starting up a conversation, and the tension between Sam and me was thick in the air, which had Max squirming uncomfortably for the first fifteen minutes on the road.

It wasn't till around hour six into our road trip that we'd decided to take a short pit-stop at a rest area just off of the highway and snag ourselves another car.

I wasn't particularly afraid of our inspection sticker being flagged by some bored cop looking for someone to hassle but taking any kind of chance that could land us even an hour behind schedule wasn't worth the risk.

And neither was trying to figure out how to sweet-talk an officer into letting us go.

We'd staked out the parking lot for about ten minutes, watching until a car with a couple of college kids came rolling in. They were driving a beater that they'd thankfully filled right up before heading inside to grab snacks—leaving the door conveniently unlocked when Max, Sam, and I tried the handles.

It'd taken Max all of fifteen seconds to hot-wire the engine and get it going and me around three and a half to swap around our license plates before we were pulling back onto the highway and off to our destination once again.

I felt only slightly bad when Sam mentioned the one small bag we'd managed to not see when ditching the others next to the pump, tucked under the back of the passenger seat. Fake IDs, passports and some tickets to a festival down somewhere in Mexico that I vaguely recognized were placed carefully inside.

"Guess they're not going drinking anytime soon." Max, ever the smart-ass, snickered while tossing the bag back onto the floor behind my chair.

I snorted softly to myself, my hands flexing on the steering wheel. While half of me felt bad, at least this would teach them not to leave their doors unlocked at a damn rest area between two states.

"Might be good for their livers to take a break," I quipped back.

In the backseat, Sam remained quiet. I glanced at her in the rearview mirror, making sure she wasn't trying to—

I stopped the thought in its tracks, reminding myself that it was stupid to be worried about her somehow escaping and running off somewhere going eighty down an interstate.

The most she could do was lean over and fall asleep against the window, or better yet, lay down along the backseat and take a nap while Max and I kept each other awake for the next twenty-two and a half hours.

A part of me felt bad for forcing her to come with us, but that was quickly overshadowed by the need to protect her that was still a fierce blaze in my chest. I never thought, in my life, that I'd even feel the need to take care of someone who'd essentially sold me out. Yet here I was, doing just that.

But I couldn't live with myself if something actually did happen to her. She didn't deserve to be trapped in some warehouse like she had been, drugged up and left vulnerable to any vagrant wandering around those halls unchecked.

Just thinking back to seeing her lying there, alone on that bed with not even a lock on the door protecting her from harm, had me gripping the steering wheel tight in my hands.

This entire situation had been taken entirely too far. It was one thing to nag me into compliance but another to completely take away someone's agency.

What a fucking mess...

For the next few hours, Max and I traded off on conversations that were a dull focus in the back of my head. It wasn't until we passed the border into Ohio that we eventually lapsed into a comfortable silence.

I flicked the radio on, tuning it to an oldies station and turning the volume down to a low hum that I could ignore in the background.

In the backseat, I watched Sam eventually drift off and fall asleep with her head resting on the bridge of her seatbelt, balancing her upright while she slept. It was an adorable sight to see and something I wished I hadn't because all it did was tug at my heartstrings, leaving me with a weird sense of dysphoria between being charmed and put-off.

I supposed it was a good sign that she was comfortable enough in my—and Max's, by extension—presence to be able to fall asleep soundly enough despite the music playing on the radio and the occasional huff from my companion whose eyes were currently glued to his phone.

Least we weren't being chased down yet.

A shot of adrenaline raced through me the moment my phone went off inside my pocket.

“Shit...”

I just had to jinx myself.

Max looked up from his lap to glance over at me. “What?”

I shook my head at him and readjusted my legs around the steering wheel, already crowded as it was, before shoving my hand into my pocket and pulling my phone out.

A name that I wasn't expecting flashed across the screen, making me practically sag into my seat.

Ricard...

Thank fuck.

Glancing back at the road, I debated whether or not I actually wanted to answer. I was sure whatever the kid was calling me about was probably important, but the thought of having to actually have a conversation with anyone right at this moment made me want to toss my phone out the window.

The only thing I was interested in was getting us the fuck out of this state.

Right as I was about to toss my phone down into the center console, Max reached over and plucked it out of my hand.

I raised a brow at him as he winked at me before focusing back on the road.

Whatever. Maybe hearing from his fav would actually be a nice reward for Ricard, seeing as he'd helped us out big time.

And since I still hadn't talked to Max about asking him to go back to the Machiavellis for that meeting other than briefly mentioning it to him in passing, I guessed it was fine.

Though at this point, I was ready to simply forget that whole conversation entirely. It wasn't like I made Ricard a promise or anything to get my best friend back there.

Max was better off not working for them anyways. He should be out doing his own thing, not living under the thumb of a future Don for the rest of his good years.

Something that I knew Max understood quite clearly, even if I didn't say anything.

“Y’ello?... Hey, kid, what’s up?”

My eyes drifted to the rearview as Max yakked it up.

There was a small line forming between Sam's brows. Her lips tugged down into a grimace as whatever she was dreaming about upset her. I hated that I had to force myself not to pull the car over and shake her awake, chasing off whatever bad dream she was having.

Even if I was pissed at her, she didn't deserve to be haunted by whatever happened after she'd been taken from

me. I doubted they went past more than roughing her up and tying her limbs together so she didn't end up beating on them as they sped away, but that was still traumatic to someone who'd never been in that situation. Let alone someone who never signed up for it in the first place.

I was sure whatever it was that Liam and Ava promised her money wise was hefty enough to help her family in some way. It was the only logical piece of the puzzle I could explain away that didn't peg Sam as a money-hungry bitch.

Maybe it was for self-preservation reasons that my mind simply refused to see her as someone that vile, or maybe it was because within the small amount of time that I'd actually been allowed to get to know her that not *once* had she ever come across as someone even remotely close to Ava's materialism.

Either way, it tugged me in two separate directions and was making it hard not to fall into the trap that would soon land me in a fucking grave.

"You know what?" Max leaned back in his chair, propping his feet up onto the dash. "That sounds like a plan. You figure it out and I'll help you once I get back there."

My eyes darted away from the rearview and over to my best friend, a weird sense of *deja vu* coming over me.

He laughed. "Kay, I'll talk to you later, then."

The second he tossed my phone onto the console, I shook my head at him and said, "You really know how to play him, huh?"

Max stretched his arms over his head, both of his shoulders cracking softly from the motion. "Nah, not playing at all."

"You're actually going to go back?"

He shrugged, letting his hands drop back down onto his lap. "It's good money."

"Max, you've got plenty in your bank account. Forgive me if I don't believe that excuse."

"It's not an excuse," he countered.

“Then what’s the real reason?” I scoffed. “You can’t *actually* like working for them.”

“They’re not bad, Caleb. We’ve worked for worse before.”

I couldn’t believe I was hearing this. “Okay, and? They sold me out.”

“I thought blondie in the backseat sold you out.”

I shot him a look, ignoring the ironic tone that grated right on my nerves. “That’s not the point.”

“Okay, then what is?”

My hands flexed on the steering wheel. “My point is that you don’t even like working for them. So why bother promising to go back?”

“I seem to remember saying that I didn’t *mind* working for them. You’re the one who hated it.”

“Junior’s a brat.”

“He actually matured quite a bit after you left.”

What the fuck *was* this?

Did we, or did we not, have some kind of silent understanding? We could do better than the Machiavellis. Once we had Sam settled, we were home free—both of us could choose to do whatever we wanted.

What was the point in Max going back to work underneath someone like a fucking lap dog?

He should be trying to enjoy the early retirement like a normal human being.

“You know?” I was over arguing my point. No amount of me hammering it into his thick skull was going to work, so why bother? “Forget it.”

He laughed softly. “Aw, c’mon.”

I ignored his hand when it came down to grab my shoulder, squeezing the sore muscles underneath my skin.

“I’m not abandoning you.”

I didn't bother answering that and instead kept my eyes focused on the road.

"Look." His thumb dragged a small circle against my shoulder blade, digging right into the knot I had there. "I figured once you and your... uh, girlfriend? Got yourselves figured out that I'd hit the road. It's not like I'm jonesing to be a third wheel, y'know?"

Skipping over the fact that he just called Sam my "girlfriend," I shook my head. "We're dropping her off at her parents'. Then you and I are going to fly out of the country just like we always wanted to as soon as we retired. Did you somehow forget those plans?"

Sure, I hadn't exactly discussed things with him about what we were going to be doing once Sam was out of the picture, but I figured it was obvious when I told Sam in front of him that we were dropping her off in Montana.

Why would I suddenly think about ditching him?

He huffed out a laugh. "You can't honestly expect me to believe you're going to leave her behind when I can clearly see the way you look at her still, cuz."

What "way"?

I shrugged his hand off me. "The hell are you talking about?"

He settled back against the door, his legs coming down off the dash in order to cross at the knee. "Don't play with me."

"I'm *not*."

My jaw ached from how hard I was gritting my teeth. I didn't look at Sam in any particular way—if anything, it was out of anger for her fucking me over.

"Sure, sure," came his even tone.

My eyes met the rearview again, relaxing when I saw Sam still slumped over with her head resting against the seatbelt. A part of me wasn't too worried about her overhearing this out-of-nowhere conversation that Max was pulling out of his ass, but then again, I wasn't exactly keen on her thinking I was

ready to slump to my knees the moment her feet hit the doorstep of her parents' house.

There would be no begging for her to come with me again. Once we were in Montana, I was severing our ties. I never should've let them form to begin with, anyway.

"Jesus," Max huffed out another laugh. "You've got it *bad*."

"I'm not doing this with you."

He shrugged at me, turning around in his seat once again to lean back into the chair and propping his feet up on the dash.

"Suit yourself. But you can't expect me to believe that all of your feelings got wiped away that easily. We searched day-and-night for her for days with you practically folding at the waist and hyperventilating from the thought of finding her dead. But now all of a sudden you're telling me you're good? Yeah, okay."

I dug my fingers along my left-side temple, feeling the headache pounding there.

I had no words left to defend myself.

The truth of the matter was that he had absolutely pegged me. Right down to the final nail in my goddamn coffin for calling me out about my frantic behavior surrounding Sam's safety. What more was there to say, really?

It hurt too deeply to think about, which was why my first instinct was to shut down and let her go before the grieving really took a hold of me and rocked my world. I was hoping that I'd be halfway across the Atlantic before that happened. Preferably on some beach with a drink in my hand and maybe a woman to wander back to my villa with once the sun set.

That was how I was planning on handling my heartbreak. Not doing this psychoanalyzing bullshit with my best friend as a kingpin breathed down my neck.

I set my elbow against the curve of the window, the glass cool as I pressed my skin into it.

“You’re not going back to the Machiavellis,” I told him finally, my tone firm.

I didn’t care if I was going to be forced to drag him by the back of his t-shirt and strap him into a first-class seat. We were in this together, and like fuck he was going to ditch me for a crime family that couldn’t seem to get their shit together.

Not after I was going to have to give up Sam.

I couldn’t do this alone.

He faced the window as he replied with a short, “We’ll see.”

CHAPTER 13

We finally reached Montana just as the sun was setting the next day.

Switching between driving off and on over the course of a long thirty-one hour journey had been a killer for my mood, but at least we were finally crossing over state borders. With a few quick directions from Sam, we headed deep into ranching territory.

The mountains in the distance were incredible to see. White and snow-capped with clouds concealing the very tips of them contrasted greatly to the deep greens and browns of the fertile lands we passed through.

I'd traveled to many places in my lifetime, but there was nothing truly quite like the wilderness of the west.

Sam's family ranch—Hayes Ranch, as the sign above the wood-carved gates stated—wasn't far off the beaten path.

There was a long fence that encased the property, stretching on for miles in either direction for as far as my eye could see. The dirt road leading down to the actual house was bumpy and slightly rough on the beater car's shot suspension.

As we parked, I shut off the ignition and leaned back into my seat. I could give this place an appreciation, though. The house was rustic looking on the outside but large enough that it seemed that it could fit two full-sized families comfortably.

There was a barn just a few hundred feet away from it that was just as big as the house itself, maybe slightly larger. Out in the pasture beyond, I could see the silhouette of a horse and

some goats that wandered together with their heads down as they ripped apart the grass, a beautiful sight against the fading sun's backdrop.

The light over the porch flicked on.

“Oh boy,” Sam mumbled.

Turning in my chair, I craned my neck enough to see her staring out the windshield. She gnawed at her bottom lip, working it between her teeth while her brows pulled together in worry.

“What?”

“Uh.” Max nudged me, bringing me back around to look at where he was nodding to.

The silhouettes of two people were standing at the entrance of the house's doorway, already parted from the frame. The shadows coming off of the light overhead gave both people a bit of a larger-than-life look to them, and even as one of them stepped out onto the wraparound porch, I couldn't particularly make out their features.

Sam didn't bother saying anything to either of us before she was popping open her door and stepping out into the cool Montana air. It was slightly breezy and the smell of the ranch swept into the car for a brief moment before she had the door shut again.

She walked around the car with her arms wrapped around her midsection, her head bowed slightly in a manner that I wasn't used to seeing her in—submissive maybe? Scared?

Whatever it was, it had me also popping open my door and getting out of the car.

“Hey...” came Sam's weary voice.

“Pumpkin?” a man greeted her, coming closer to her with his hands outstretched. “What are you doing here?”

“Um...”

“Sammy?” the voice of a woman carried over from the porch. A woman stood just over the edge of the stairs, her

hand gripping the post that was attached to the roof.

I glanced at the man in front of her and then to the woman—Sam’s parents—while they both regarded their daughter cautiously.

Sam’s father wrapped his arms around her, pulling her into a tight hug. “Why didn’t you tell us you were coming to visit?”

“Uh...”

I sighed. Despite Sam hiding the truth from me, it seemed that she couldn’t lend her parents the same energy. Which in normal circumstances I would find funny if not for the subtle jab of double standards working against my favor.

“I wanted to surprise her,” I told them both.

Sam’s father let her go and turned to look me over. He was a tall man that was stockily built. With a pair of overalls on that were stained with dark marks, a flannel button-up shirt underneath, and a pair of wire-framed glasses adorning his face, he looked the part of a ranch-hand through and through.

“Dad,” Sam gestured to me. “This is Caleb. My... friend.”

I held back a snort.

She was so unconvincing that it was a little painful.

Trying to wave off the awkwardness, I stuck my hand out to the man for him to shake, a gesture he seemed to appreciate because he quickly took my hand and squeezed it.

“Dallas,” he introduced himself. “And my wife, Ruby. Did you all travel from New York?”

“Yes,” I dropped my hand from his and came to rest it on Sam’s shoulder instead. “Like I said, Sam was feeling pretty down lately with the cold weather, so I figured I’d surprise her on a little road trip.”

I ignored the way she glowered at me and turned my attention to Sam’s mother, who came around the other side. While she was thin, she had built shoulders that made her look tougher than her soft features gave her credit for.

“That was nice of you.” Her mother smiled at me. “We missed our Sammy.”

The nickname had Sam ducking her head. “Sorry for, uh, not calling.”

“That’s all right. You’re all staying for a while, right?” Ruby’s eyes darted between us. “Dinner’s cooking but I’ll run up and make the beds real quick.”

I shoved my hands into my pants pockets. “Actually, we were just dropping her off and then hitting the road.”

Sam lifted her head, lips parting slightly. It was obvious she wanted to ask me where Max and I were planning on going, but the less she knew, the better. Even if for some reason Liam sent someone out here to track Sam down, there would be nothing they could get out of her that would be worth the trouble and no damning evidence that lead them in any direction that Max and I were headed, anyway.

It would be a dead end and a tied-up loose end all in one.

Sam’s mother spoke again. “Well, you at least need to stay for dinner.”

Dallas tacked on a quick, “You can’t stay the night? How long have you all been driving?”

My lips thinned. I wasn’t used to overbearing parents, especially ones that were doing so from a caring mindset. Sam was giving me a slight smirk, knowing that any way I pushed this issue, I was going to end up looking suspicious or getting entrapped with dinner plans.

Though I supposed a meal before we snuck out and hit the road wouldn’t hurt...

And a home-cooked one at that.

I sighed and pulled my hand out of my pocket, waving my hand back at the car where Max was standing leaned up against the inside of the open driver’s side door. His brow quirked when he saw me waving, a wary expression crossing over his face.

I felt much the same way, unfortunately.

Even though Sam's parents seemed genuine, there was a healthy amount of skepticism there that I couldn't shake, even if I wanted to.

Kind and loving parents were a foreign concept to me. In my experience, no matter what someone did for you, there was always an IOU attached to it hidden within the fine print.

Which meant the quicker we got this over with, the sooner we could be off heading out of the country.

As Max slammed the door shut and marched over, I turned back to Sam's parents. "Thanks for having us."

Her mother beamed at me. "Of course. Friends of our daughters are always welcome around here."

A bland smile crossed my lips.

Oh, if only she knew.

CHAPTER 14

“So, tell me, Caleb. How did you and my daughter meet?”

My fork sunk into a steamed carrot, sweet juice dripping down onto the plate under it as I raised it up to my mouth.

I hadn't exactly come up with a convincing lie as to how Sam and I met or the circumstances surrounding our “friendship.” I'd been a little out of it once I'd gotten inside the warm house and the smells of freshly cooked food entered my nose, the thirty-hour trip having finally caught up with me.

It'd been so long since I'd felt at home in a place, let alone one that wasn't of my own making.

Moving around and jumping from job to job had left a shaky foundation in the way I viewed a dwelling as “homey,” but for some reason, this ranch was exactly what I would've pictured as a kid.

It had all of the right energy that made me feel strangely safe and comfortable, despite the ever-looming presence of doom and gloom outside.

“We worked together,” Sam answered for me.

I popped the carrot into my mouth, catching her eyes over the table.

There was a permanent crease between her brows that hadn't left since we'd all agreed to spend the night. I was sure she wasn't stupid enough to think that Max and I were actually

going to be doing that, not with Liam presumably hot on our trails.

The moment her parents were asleep in their own bed, we'd be sneaking out and heading off before anyone was the wiser.

Whether she thought that was bad manners or rude wasn't something I particularly cared about. She'd be fine here as long as she kept her head down and didn't make any waves with the Harringtons. They'd soon forget all about her once she was no longer in their foresight.

Least, that's what I had to keep telling myself.

"Oh! You both work for the nonprofit too?" Ruby's eyes darted from mine to Max's.

He snorted, choking on his water.

I reached over and slapped him on the back a few times. Though the thought of my best friend sitting behind a desk pushing papers all day was hilarious, he didn't need to make it so goddamn obvious how ridiculous the notion was.

"Yeah. We all became fast friends."

"That's wonderful. Our Sammy's been working so hard in New York that I was worried she wasn't ever leaving that office."

A part of me found Sam's cheeks reddening rather cute while she picked at the food on her plate. I squashed it down quickly and cleared my throat.

"She was actually kind enough to show us around the city."

Her father glanced up, a napkin patting at his lips. "You two are not from New York?"

I shook my head.

"You're not—?" Sam cut herself off, her eyes darting back to her parents before she cleared her throat. "You should tell them where you're from. They've traveled a lot."

My eyes narrowed. Clever.

She was as shrewd as ever.

“Oh yes.” Her mother smiled at me. “We’ve been to almost every state in the U.S. Though that was before we settled here and had Sammy.”

I loved when the perfect segway presented itself to me on a silver platter. “What made you pick Montana?”

I didn’t miss the way Sam frowned as Ruby fell into a long-winded explanation as to why they decided to start a dude-ranch on the flatlands in Montana. Nor did I hide the slight smile as Max’s phone rang and, instead of sending it to voicemail, he got up and excused himself to take it.

A part of me was flattered that Sam seemed interested in finding out my history, even if I was entirely sure it was due to her wanting the assurance of having some kind of dirt to feed back to the Harringtons god forbid they ever come around to harass her or her family again.

As upset about our situation as I still was, that didn’t mean I wasn’t going to make painstaking moves in order to assure Sam—and by extension, her parents—safety. I’d make it obvious to the Harringtons that I was no longer interested in her and that any further blackmail material they wanted to gather in order to use against me would need to be in the form of either Max or something of equal value.

Because at least I knew Max could hold his own if something were to happen.

“Caleb, I have to say,” Dallas placed his cutlery down onto the table, “you don’t strike me as the office type.”

I forked a piece of meat off of my plate. “What makes you say that?”

He shook his head. “I think it’s the way you carry yourself. You remind me a lot of someone.”

Ruby laughed. “He reminds me of Mitchell. Very brooding and keeps to himself.”

“Am I that obvious?” I let a wry smile cross my face.

Across from me, Sam shifted in her seat. “Mitchell is our neighbor. Owns the ranch down the road.”

Dallas nodded. “Kind man, but as Ruby said, keeps to himself mostly. But more than that, you remind me of my brother.”

I shrugged. “Oh, he own a ranch too?”

“Not at all. Bit of a free-spirit, that one. You ever been a ranch-hand, Caleb?”

“Can’t say I have.”

“You must have some kind of heavy-lifting background.” He chuckled. “You’re certainly built like it. Manual labor?”

I shook my head. What was interesting to me was that Dallas seemed to have me pegged but was, for some reason, dancing around the subject.

Like he’d said, I was certainly built but not for manual labor. More in the vein of carrying one hundred-plus pounds on my back while running through the desert.

“If I didn’t know any better,” Dallas lifted his fork at me, “I’d say you were in the military.”

“Army, actually.”

Both of her parents brightened up at that. “Wow, that’s amazing. Thank you for your service.”

I ducked my head into a nod, my leg shaking under the table.

It wasn’t that I hated talking about my time spent in the military per se, but it was hard subject to tiptoe around. Most people, when they thought of an Army vet, attributed them as someone going overseas and being put into active combat situations.

And while that was true for part of my career, I’d only been on the frontlines for a short amount of time before I’d gotten shuffled off into a deep and more secretive sector.

I caught Sam’s stare when I lifted my head again. “I didn’t know you were in the Army.”

“Yeah.” I cleared my throat. “That’s actually where I met Max.”

Her lips pressed together in a thin line, something darkening her eyes—an emotion that I couldn’t quite figure out. She clutched her cutlery tight in her hands, her knuckles going white.

Did she think I was lying? I mean, it was kind of obvious that I wasn’t a paper-pusher.

“What made you want to join the military, Caleb?” Dallas asked.

I grabbed a hold of my water glass and downed some of it before answering. “There was nothing back home that was keeping me there. Figured it was either that or be out on the streets selling drugs, so.”

There was a somber silence that settled over the table after the words were spoken. Sometimes I liked to forget that not everyone grew up on the streets like I did and that talking about it so casually was usually reserved for drunken confessions around a fire pit.

But it was my life and the reality that I lived with for eighteen years before I smartened up enough to head down to the recruiters and sign myself up for a different sort of life that didn’t involve peddling drugs or petty theft.

Jail time had been staring me right in the face, and it was only by a slim chance of luck that I’d managed to avoid it and turn my life around before I could do something irreversibly stupid.

I cleared my throat. “Anyway. I spent a decade doing that and then was in Las Vegas for a while doing security before I moved to New York.”

Ruby smiled at me, clearly thankful for the conversation change. “What made you want to move to New York?”

“Wanted a fresh start, I suppose.”

Which wasn’t entirely a lie.

I'd been looking for something different and Liam had happened to spin me a fairytale that I should've known was too good to be true.

Hell, I did at the time and yet I still ignored all of the red flags being waved in my face.

And now we were here.

“Well, we're glad to have you, Caleb. And Max. It's nice that Sam's brought people back home for once.”

I flashed her parents a smile that I hoped seemed genuine. “Thanks for having us.”

After dinner and a bit of hassling for dessert, we all retired for the night.

Much to Max's delight, he had a room all to himself that he was more than happy to claim the moment Sam's mother opened the door and showed it to him with a bit of flourish.

I took the room across the way, only briefly noting that Sam had taken the room next to mine, her eyes watching me closely when I finally headed inside and shut the door behind me. With us sharing a wall, I'd need to be quiet when I snuck out tonight.

Setting my bag down onto the bed, I took a look around the room and sighed to myself. The sun had long since set over the horizon, leaving only the bleak darkness behind in its wake.

Outside of the window, I could see nothing. There were no lights outside, no stars in the sky, and no moon to help light our way back to the car once we were successfully out of the house.

Hopefully Max had a flashlight in that pack of his or else I'd be forcing him to stumble around outside to find the car while I waited on the porch for the headlights to flick on.

Turning and settling onto the bed, I let my body fall back onto the mattress and let out another deep sigh. What I wouldn't give to let myself drift off and fall asleep for a few hours...

A soft knock on my door had me sitting up on my elbows, my eyes fixating onto the door as it opened slowly. To my surprise, Sam's head poked inside.

"Yes?"

She slipped inside, shutting the door softly behind her.

Pushing myself all the way up until I was sitting properly back on the bed, I folded my hands into my lap and leaned over.

"You all right?"

She frowned at the carpet, her arms tucking around her midsection. "You're leaving me here, aren't you?"

"It's what you want, isn't it? Not to be wrapped up in my shit."

"I don't even know what 'shit' you're wrapped up in to begin with, Caleb."

"It's complicated."

Lifting her head up, she fixed me with a hard look. "I really hate when you say that."

What else was I supposed to say? The truth?

Absolutely not.

"Look, that's as much as I can give you without making you an accomplice."

She surprised me again by taking a few steps toward me, her hands coming out to slap against her thighs in exasperation.

"I already *am*. Or did you forget who was the one that got kidnapped?"

My jaw clenched. "They're not going to bother you, Sam. I'll make sure of that."

“How?” Her tone challenged me.

I could barely see her in the dim lighting from where it spilled in under the crack beneath the door. Her features were highlighted in a soft orange that complimented her light-colored hair. She had it tied back again, away from her face, showing off her soft features.

“Look, this isn’t my first rodeo. I’ve got a plan to lure them away from you. All you need to do is keep your head down and *don’t* go contacting them.”

“Really. Was that what you learned in the military?” Her hands fisted at her sides. “To lure people to places?”

I shrugged. “Among other things.”

Silence hung over us uncomfortably. I wasn’t stupid, I knew she wanted to rapid-fire question me about my past, and even if I *wanted* to tell her about it, I wouldn’t.

There was no sense in me scaring the shit out of her by her knowing she was sleeping in the same house as two trained killers. What would be the point in that? It was already speculated enough as it was, that I had skills high above a government pay-grade.

Not to mention people were after me.

That was grounds for a look of suspiciousness that I wasn’t going to let her put energy toward. All I wanted was to keep Sam safe and out of the Harringtons’ way.

“What does that even mean?”

“It doesn’t matter, Sam. Leave it and go back to your room.”

She took another step forward. “Why won’t you tell me anything? You did before I was taken.”

I scoffed, not being able to help it. “Yeah, and look where that landed us.”

Her eyes glittered slightly, hard to see from here, but there were definitely unshed tears collecting around her eyelashes. “So you’re blaming me for that?”

“What? No. Of course not.”

“That’s exactly what it feels like.”

God, what the hell was happening?

“Sam. You...” I rubbed my face with my hand. “You were spying on me.”

She choked out a small noise. “Yeah, because they told me you were dangerous. Like you were some giant criminal they were trying to keep tabs on.”

“What?” I let my hand drop. “Tell me exactly what they told you.”

She pulled in a shuddering breath. “All they said to me was that after they hired you, they needed me to watch you and report back to them about any suspicious activities going on. They made it seem like you were some big bad evil guy and that if I needed to, I should make sure to insert myself into your life wherever possible.”

A pit formed in my stomach, anger rising in me again.

“But,” she went on, “once I met you, I was so confused. Because you were nothing like how they described you or made you seem.”

I remained silent, watching her shift uncomfortably on her feet.

None of this was news to me and yet hearing it again from her mouth made the knife in my back twist and shoot pain through my entire body.

All of it was a lie and I was so fucking stupid to fall for it.

It was a brilliant plan that Ava had come up with, because there was no way Liam was this antagonistically evil.

“They made you seem like a criminal.”

“I am a criminal, Sam.”

Her eyes shot up to me.

Finally turning to look away from her, I instead focused my attention out the window to the Montana wilderness that

lay just beyond the chipped windowpane. I was a fool for thinking that I could be tied down somewhere, that my karma would even allow for that in the first place with how much debt I'd wracked up throughout my life.

At the time, I'd thought Sam to be too good to be true, and here she was proving that exact theory right.

It would take a hell of a lot of self-control to force myself not to come running back here.

In such a short amount of time, she'd become my safe space and ultimately would lead to my downfall if I let her.

"Caleb..."

I folded my hands together, lacing the fingers. "I'm telling you the truth."

"You're past, what you told my parents about... that doesn't make you a criminal. You were young, weren't you? Kids make mistakes. You couldn't help how you grew up. It doesn't define you."

A bitter smile stretched over my lips.

There have always been points in my life where time has come to a slow standstill. Moments where just a fraction of a second stretched to blend together with the ever-moving flow and shifts of reality. Decades and eons passing by before my next breath came and went from my own lungs.

The first time was when I was only nine. Finding my mother passed out and unresponsive on the floor of our old and dilapidated kitchen, a needle stuck in her arm and her lips turning blue. My frantic calls to her as I tried to shake her awake, realizing that for the first time in my life, life felt so very fragile.

Everything had come to a slow and steady halt while I held her. Each passing second longer than the next while I screamed for our neighbors to hear me, only to be drowned out by the loud bass of a radio system blaring against the walls to drown out my crying.

The second had been the solid fist connecting with my jaw—a graduation gift from my father when he'd cornered me for money mere hours after I'd walked across the stage alone with my diploma in hand and no one to congratulate me for it afterward. No waiting gaggle of family members with a cheesy bouquet in their hands or an old-school digital camera taking grainy photos with me in my cap and gown, later to be printed out and collected inside of a scrapbook.

It had been my first taste in actual combat—fighting my father. Something that I would consider low-level looking back on it now with how unstable he'd been and the erratic ways he'd bounced around while I'd tried to sink my fist into the side of his head.

The moment he'd pulled the knife on me was the same moment that I knew I was no longer the son of an addict, but an orphan who had been put into the most unfortunate position.

I'd never once laid a hand on anyone else in my life before that, something that would soon change the moment I signed my life away and was soon shipped off to bootcamp down in the Texas heat.

But in that split second of a time frame, I'd let everything else go. All of my attachments to the man standing in front of me were severed at the same moment my fist connected with the side of his head and he crumbled to the ground at my feet.

With time resetting itself and my life thrown onto a different trajectory than before, I was finally free of the shackles that bound me to the place I'd once called home.

Yet now looking back on all of it, I couldn't help seeing the patterns that I'd never been able to truly escape. Bouncing from one set of shackles to the other with only a shaky semblance that it was different and convincing myself of that lie all of these years.

I was in much the same predicament as I was ten years ago, staring at my life down the barrel of a loaded shotgun, except this time it wasn't just me who had the chance at catching the ricocheted bullet in the chest.

“I’m not going to argue with you, Sam. Tell yourself whatever you need to believe if that helps you. But I need you to go back to your room and not open your door until the sun comes up.”

She dropped to her knees in front of me, startling me. Her hands came up to clasp around my wrists, holding them in a tight grip when I tried to pull back from her. Her soft features were set in hard lines that made her look tired and more worn than I’d ever seen her before.

“Listen to me. Whatever you did to piss off the Harringtons... let me help you. I know it wasn’t your fault.”

My eyes widened. “I think we both know what will happen if you stick around me, Sam.”

She shook her head at me. “It was something that caught us both off-guard. I should’ve known better. Ava was treating me differently for a few days leading up to those people taking me. I should’ve seen it coming.”

Seen it coming? “No offense, but how? You aren’t trained for anything like that.”

She smiled slightly. “I am, actually.”

CHAPTER 15

Her words took a full minute to register.

“What?”

A sigh left her lips. “Well... sort of. My uncle, my dad’s brother, was in the SOF back in the day. You ever heard of it?”

I blinked. Heard of it? That was the unit I was in.

What the fuck?

“Who’s your uncle?”

“Samuel Joe Hayes. He went by Joe, but he’s who I was named after.”

It wasn’t a name I was familiar with, which meant he was well before my time serving.

But still.

“You were trained by him?”

She nodded. “To be observant. Before I got hired, the Harringtons had me take this weird test that they said I passed with flying colors. It was one of those old school police academy tests that they train detectives on.”

Suddenly, all of this was making sense to me.

No wonder she was so good at seeing right through me.

“Where’s your uncle now?”

She shrugged. “Retired down in the Keys. He comes up every so often to the ranch to visit, but he doesn’t like the cold much, so it keeps him away. Hurts his joints.”

I could only imagine, especially if he was in the OPS like I was. The kind of shit the government put you through was hell on your body. The only reason I wasn't feeling it was probably due to me constantly needing to move unless my brain exploded.

“What did he train you on?”

“Caleb, it doesn't matter. What I'm telling you is that I can help you. I'm sorry for what they had me do. You have to know it was never my intention to hurt you.”

Fuck, I wanted to believe her so desperately. It would be so easy to fall into whatever lie she was spinning in order to get me back into her good graces.

“I can't...”

Her hands tightened. “Please. Please believe me.”

The pain in my chest burned. “I can't, Sam. I can't trust you.”

She lifted herself up off of the floor and leaned up to press her lips against mine. The gesture was tender and innocent, enough to strike cracks through my resolve. My hands shook from forcing myself not to reach up and grab her face and pull her into a real kiss—sink into it just as badly as I wanted to.

“Please,” she whispered against my lips, kissing me again. “Please, Caleb.”

“Fuck,” I mumbled, grabbing her and pulling her back onto the bed with me.

She settled herself against my chest as I rolled us onto our sides, wrapping her one leg around my hip to lock herself against me. Her arms came around me, fingers threading through my hair while her lips crashed down onto mine into a bruising kiss.

The energy was building around us, nagging at me to strip her clothes off so that we could press our naked bodies together and feel the heat radiating off of our skin.

I was all but putty in her hands.

“Take me with you,” she whispered against my lips. “Please.”

“I can’t, Sam...”

She kissed me again, silencing my protests.

Using the force of her hip and a hand on my chest to push me, she rolled me over onto my back, settling herself onto my waist. Both of her thighs tightened around me, holding me in place as she rocked against me.

I groaned into her mouth, my tongue darting inside of hers to taste her, my hands gravitating down to where her hips were and digging my fingers into them.

It wasn’t long before Sam’s hands were moving down my body, coming to rest at the waistband of my jeans where she was quick to pop the button and pull them apart. My cock was already hard and starved for attention by the time she had her hips lifted up enough to slide a hand down into my pants and wrap her hand around it.

She stroked it in long glides that had me bucking up into her hand like a beast in heat. I panted into her mouth, my fingers already working at her pants and sliding them down over her hips to get her as naked as I could.

She pulled back from our kiss briefly, a hand coming down to rest on my chest while she propped her hips up and helped me get the pants off of her.

When she sunk down onto me, her wet heat encasing my cock in a deliriously slick grip, I choked out another groan, not caring if sound traveled at all in this household.

I slid in and out of her with ease, my cock straining as she rotated her hips and got comfortable. It felt like it’d been eons since I’d been inside of Sam, feeling her core clench around me in that incredible way of hers. She rocked into me, riding my cock with her eyes half-lidded and her lips parted as she panted out my name.

God, she was so fucking sexy.

Everything was wiped in that moment—my worries, my protesting, all of it. Nothing mattered but our joined hips and the pleasure rocketing through my system.

I closed my eyes, letting her take over as she fucked herself on my cock. Her hips slapped wetly against mine, the mattress underneath us bowing from the motion of her steady pace.

I held onto her hips for dear life, letting her take whatever she wanted from me—because honestly, I'd give her anything she wanted. I couldn't stop myself from doing it any longer. What was the point when it made us both miserable?

Her body shook as she came, taking me right along with her as I emptied myself into her wet heat.

“Fuck, Caleb,” she gasped, collapsing on top of me when she was finally done.

My arms came around her automatically, pulling her tight into my chest so that I could bury my face into her hair and breathe her in for the last time.

As shitty as it was to leave her after something like this, I had to.

I had to for her own good.

CHAPTER 16

I slept until morning.

I hadn't meant to, but with my body being so tired and Sam wearing me out the night before, I'd fallen into an easy sleep that had left me well rested and completely at ease.

It was weird waking up and feeling like all in the world was right, even though in the back of my mind, there was that nagging feeling that it wasn't. Max and I would absolutely need to be heading out today without any more delays, even if Sam's parents thought of us as rude.

Waking up, I realized that Sam was no longer curled up in bed with me, and for that I felt some semblance of sadness that I was quick to bury away or else I was going to lapse into some kind of depressive episode.

I'd been covered by a spare blanket, something that I found rather ironic. Sam taking the time to do something that caring while also leaving me to wake up alone was a weird juxtaposition to feel.

Then again, if her parents had caught her sneaking out of my room so early in the morning, I was sure they'd grill her with questions.

Perhaps this was the smarter move on her part.

Sighing and sitting up, I stretched my arms over my head and let my joints crack.

Outside of the room, there was a waft of cooked food coming in that had my stomach grumbling before I even had

the chance to pull the blanket off of me and stand. My bag was still on the end of my bed, zipped and packed and ready to go.

I lifted it over my shoulder and swung the strap around and carried it across the room with me.

There was a soft knock at my door that had me ripping it open and startling the person on the other side.

“Oh!” Ruby put a hand over her chest. “Well, good morning!”

I bit back an apology. “Morning.”

She smiled. “Breakfast is on the table. Everyone else is downstairs eating already.”

I narrowed my eyes and glanced around her and over to Max’s room, his door pulled open and the room dark.

I held back from rolling my eyes in order to flash Ruby a smile. “Thanks.”

Carrying my bag, I headed downstairs to where the scent of food grew stronger.

I guessed it wouldn’t be a bad thing to grab food before we left. Now that we were both well rested, we should be able to reach the Canadian border without stopping. From there, we’d book a flight to some place tropical, but at least being out of the States gave us an upper hand in avoiding the Harringtons.

I set my bag down at the foot of the stairs and off to the side where it was out of the way before heading into the dining room.

Max sat across from Sam with Dallas already at the head of the table, a newspaper clutched in his hands as he bent his head to read it.

To my surprise, both Max and Sam were already engaged in a conversation, their voices soft as they both took turns speaking between bites.

I took my seat next to Sam, giving Max a suspicious eye when he grinned at me over his mug of coffee.

“Sleep okay?” He gave me a once-over. “Seems it.”

This time, I did roll my eyes. Of course he was going to poke fun at me this early in the morning.

Because why wouldn't he?

Instead of answering him, I poured myself my own mug of coffee and took a few careful sips, relishing in the taste of the dark liquid. In front of me was an entire spread of food that looked like it could feed at least seven people. Complete with meat, eggs, pancakes, and some baked goods that looked suspiciously like croissants.

Damn, was this the kind of breakfast that Sam grew up with as a kid?

She nudged me. "Eat up. Once you're done, you can use the shower before we leave."

Actually, a shower did sound nice. Especially in a place that was well taken care of like this home and not some seedy motel that had bed bugs crawling in its—

Wait.

I whipped around to look at her.

"We?"

She blinked up at me innocently, peeling apart her croissant. "Yes. We're heading out this morning, right? Up north?"

My neck snapped around to look at Max, glaring at him when he not-so-subtly faced his plate of food.

That conspiring asshole.

Sam's hand found the place between my shoulder blades that was sore from being stuck in a car for so long over the past few days. She rubbed at it tenderly, making me wince.

"I told my parents that we needed to head out, so they packed us food for the road."

"Are you sure you can't stay longer, pumpkin?" Dallas lowered his paper. "We don't mind letting your friends stay."

“I would love to, Dad, but we’ve got that project to finish. I promise I’ll be back soon, don’t worry.”

Would it be fucked up of me to drug her and leave her upstairs in her bed?

Then again, I wasn’t about to give her any flashbacks to when she was taken.

Damn it.

I needed another way to leave her here before we got on the road.

“Sam.” I cleared my throat, pushing away from the table. “Can I show you something outside?”

She smiled at me and patted my empty plate. “After you eat.”

I stared her down, forcing her to look away from me and give in to my demands. Though I should know by now that these kinds of tricks didn’t work on her the way they worked on most people.

She smiled at me, patting my plate again.

Across the way, Max snickered.

Both of them were going to be the death of me.

After I was stuffed full and showered, I was finally ready to hit the road.

It was only a little after ten in the morning, so we still had plenty of sunlight ahead of us to carry us up north to the Canadian border. I still hadn’t figured out a way that I was going to ditch Sam and keep her here without raising the suspicions of her or her parents.

Even though her parents weren’t nearly as observant as Sam herself, that wasn’t to say that they didn’t have a wary eye when it came to Max or me moving about their home.

We were still strangers nonetheless that they were entrusting the care of their daughter with. Something that I would be nervous about too, especially with all three of us being vague and cagey with our answers.

I'd finally gotten my and Max's stuff packed into the car once again—along with food given to us by Ruby—when Sam came out with her own bag.

I sighed at her, shutting the door before she could stuff it inside.

“You're not coming.”

She nudged me out of the way. “Don't be ridiculous.”

I frowned at her, holding the door shut when she jerked on the handle. “Sam.”

She let her bag drop to her feet and turned to me. I caged her against the car with my body, my other hand coming up to rest next to her head.

“You're not coming.”

She smiled. “Yes, I am. We talked about it last night.”

“The hell we did.”

“Look.” She poked my chest. “You can't leave me here. I'll be a sitting duck. Max said so himself when I asked this morning.”

Oh my fucking god, I was going to kill him.

“Listen to me.” I pressed my hips into hers. “You're not coming with us. You're staying here and keeping your head down like I told you to. I'm going to lure Ava and Liam away from you. They're interested in me, not you anyway, so there's no sense in dragging you along.”

She opened her mouth to argue with me, but my hand was quick to come up and cup a hand over it.

“I'm not listening to whatever it is you have to say. Stay here and be with your parents. I can tell they've missed you.”

She sighed softly, pulling my hand away. “What about you? What’s going to happen to you, Caleb? You can’t run forever.”

I shrugged. Realistically I could; I had the money for it. And it wasn’t like there was anything that tied me down to one specific place. As long as Liam wanted to keep this up, I’d give him the chase of a lifetime.

So long as he left Sam and her family alone.

“I’ll just stow away in your car.”

I blinked at her. “Excuse me?”

She shrugged. “Look, you either take me with you or you find me tailing you all the way to wherever it is you’re going.”

Jesus Christ... I really was going to have to drug her.

“Hey!” Max’s voice caught my attention, forcing me to look away from Sam. “You guys ready to... What’s going on here?”

I lifted away from the car and stormed over to him. His eyes widened slightly when I grabbed him by the front of the shirt and yanked him nose-to-nose with me.

“Are you insane?”

“Is... this a trick question?”

I gritted my teeth. “You told her about where we were going.”

“Oh. Well, no. But she’s really good at guessing.”

I groaned, shoving him away from me.

This was all too much of a mess.

Why was it that the moment I finally had a solid plan together, a wrench was thrown into it, forcing it to all go to shit before it was even a possibility?

There was some semblance in me that had half a mind to deck Max and drag Sam back inside, regardless if that made me shitty or not.

What was with the two of them conspiring against me?

“Are you actually going to leave her here?”

“Yes,” I hissed at him. “I told you that.”

He pursed his lips. “I just thought... y’know... after last night.”

I clocked my fist back, ready to actually catch him right in the jaw.

“Knock it off, you two.”

I felt a hand yank back on my shirt, off-kiltering me just slightly enough that I wasn’t able to fully commit to hitting my best friend. He stood there with a dumb look on his face, blinking at the both of us.

“So... is she coming or not?”

“Max, I swear to fuck—”

The door to the house pushed open. “Sammy?”

She peeked out from behind me. “Yeah?”

“Mitchell’s on the phone. Says some people in town are looking for you.”

Both Max and I stiffened.

“Really?” She came around me and stood next to me. “Who?”

“Some guys? He said they were acting rather suspicious.”

“Shit,” I mumbled, bumping my hip into hers.

Too late. They’d found us.

Fuck.

“Did they say what they wanted?”

“No.”

I nudged Sam again and spoke in a low voice. “We need to go.”

She glanced over at me, finally getting the message. “Okay, thanks, Mom!”

“Mitchell said they were headed up this way.”

Max was already moving around to the car, popping the driver's side door open. My hand came up to press against Sam's shoulder blades, shoving her toward the porch where her mother stood.

“Say goodbye. Quickly.”

Her eyes widened at me, but she didn't take more than a second of pause before she ran over to the house and climbed the stairs.

With someone obviously looking for Sam, I couldn't leave her here unguarded. We'd need to take care of the threat before I was comfortable leaving her that vulnerable.

If it turned out to be a couple of solicitors, then at least we'd know Liam was no longer interested in taking her again.

But if not, this was the perfect opportunity to get rid of a threat on our tail.

Heading over to the passenger's side, I opened the door and leaned in.

“Take the car into the barn. We're going to hide it and make sure whoever's coming isn't someone we need to take out.”

He nodded to me, revving the engine. “Got it.”

CHAPTER 17

I closed the doors to the barn the second Max cut the engine.

To my surprise, all of the animals were already in their stalls. The interior of the barn was well-kept and clean, smelling slightly of wood shavings. They looked at us curiously as we drove the car into the walkway and parked it.

I remembered Sam saying her family's ranch had been suffering for a few years now and that the money she'd been making from the Harringtons was going directly to keeping them afloat.

A pang in my chest had me wincing. As much of a shitty thing as it was to sell me out, I couldn't blame her for feeling that desperate. I'd certainly been in those kinds of situations where everything felt hopeless and there was nowhere else to turn to but the most obviously deviant hand offering help.

Maybe I'd been wrong in completely writing Sam off as a bad person.

She huddled next to me and peered out the small window that faced her parents' house.

"You think they'll be okay in there?"

I leaned over her to look out to, but toward the road instead. "They'll be fine. They don't know anything and it'll be obvious if someone were to ask."

Though as I said it, I was afraid that it wouldn't matter what her parents did or didn't know. Was Liam and the people that he hired above gunning down civilians?

It was hard to say with such little evidence.

A few days ago, I would've answered that question with a resounding "yes" considering that they'd taken Sam with no warning.

But now that I knew the truth, I wasn't so sure anymore.

"Mitchell said they were sketchy. He's got a good eye for that kind of thing, so you think it's someone Liam or Ava sent?"

I shrugged, hearing Max move around behind us. "Hard to say. I wouldn't be shocked, though."

"Right..." she mumbled.

Without meaning to, I reached up and brushed a hand over her back in a slow circle. Was it stupid of me to get involved with Sam again? Absolutely.

But listening to the fear in her voice was making me feel horrible for her being involved in this situation to begin with. If I'd only refused Liam's offer like my gut had been telling me, none of us would be in this mess right now.

I'd be sitting on my ass at some stupid dinner party, bored out of my mind. However instead, I was trying to make sure that the potential grifters sent to hunt me and Sam down were hopefully nothing more than a couple of missionaries.

A car pulled down the drive to Sam's parents' house, kicking up a cloud of dust in their wake. She shook slightly under my hand, leaning back into me.

"They aren't going to hurt my parents, right, Caleb? You're not going to let that happen?"

I pulled her away from the window. "Absolutely not."

The fear in her eyes was enough for me to gently move her toward the car. "Get in and lock the doors, okay? Max and I will be right back."

She swallowed thickly. "What are you going to do?"

I shook my head. "Don't worry about it. I'm just going to make sure they don't do anything to hurt them."

Max popped the door open for her and shut it behind her once she was safely tucked away inside. She turned in the seat and stared out at us from the back windshield, her eyes wide.

Max's shoulder bumped mine when he came up next to me, facing forward while he took the gun he had concealed under the band of his pants.

"Here."

"Thanks." I pulled it from him and tucked it under my own, making sure to keep it all out of sight from Sam.

Trusting me to keep her parents safe was one thing, but watching me exchange armed weapons with my friend would no doubt send her into a panic that would likely get her caught in the crosshairs thinking she could prevent whatever it was that she thought was coming.

I knew what it was like to want to protect those that were innocent. The care and love that she shared with her parents was palpable, even before I saw them together in person. From the way Sam spoke of them and all that they did to help her accomplish her dreams, it wasn't news to me that she'd go this far to return the favor.

If I had parents like hers, I would've too.

We waited until the car was parked and two men got out and headed to the front door. Through the window, we could see them knocking on it and waiting with their backs turned and facing the pasture.

They were both built and had a mean look to their faces as they scowled in the sunlight. Definitely not a couple of missionaries coming around to spread the good word.

It was hard to say if either of them were packing any heat, but it would be stupid to think that a couple of bounty hunters had come along without something to defend themselves with, given who Max and I were.

The second Sam's father answered the door, one of the men turned and pushed his way into the house.

"Oh fuck," I mumbled to Max.

He propped the door to the barn open just far enough for us both to slip out and close it behind us without making much movement that could catch the eye.

The other man followed his partner into the house, slamming the door shut behind them.

“Think they’re going to kill ’em?”

I sighed. “Let’s hope not.”

I headed to the back door, knowing that if these guys were smart, they’d drag both hostages upstairs and rough them up there. It was a tactic that was recommended on a stretch of land this big. The longer it took for the victim to free themselves and get downstairs and out the door, the easier it was to catch up to them and stop them before they were halfway down the road screaming for help.

I held the door for Max while stepping into the kitchen.

Above us, there was screaming and the sound of things flying as—presumably—Sam’s father was fighting back.

He was old enough to have a semblance of a chance at it, but given that he’d been worn down with his years working on a farm, I’d say it wasn’t likely that he was going to be overpowering those bounty hunters any time soon.

A loud thump had me crossing over to where the living room was. I pulled my gun out and aimed it forward, hovering just out of the doorway leading into the other side of the house.

As soon as the man turned toward me, I shot him twice in the chest, bringing him right down onto the hardwood floor.

“Damn, no questions first?”

I snorted. “Doubt they’d tell us anything.”

“True.”

“See if there’s anything on him.”

“Got it.”

Moving to the stairs, I took them slowly with my gun trained in front of me.

“Don’t! Leave my wife alone!”

I winced when I heard another thump against the floor.

“Oh, god. Dallas!”

“Tell me where your daughter went!”

Getting up to the top stop, I flattened my shoulder against the wall and lowered my gun. Shadows were moving around in the hallway, coming from one of the bedrooms on the left side of the hall. I could hear crying from where I was, along with the soft sounds of someone moaning in pain.

Shit, Sam was going to kill me.

“I know you know where they went! I just talked to your neighbor.”

“I don’t know anything! And even if I did, I wouldn’t tell you!”

“Stupid bitch.” There was a hard slap that echoed into the hallway.

Least I wouldn’t be feeling bad about putting these scumbags six feet under.

Coming up to the door, I peered inside of it.

The man who’d pushed into the house first was looming over Ruby with something in his hand that looked like a book or some flat object that was slightly bent on the side. Across the room, Dallas was laying on his side with a pretty bad gash on his head that was bleeding steadily.

When he spotted me, he breathed in steadily.

There was a subtle nod that I would’ve missed if I wasn’t looking directly at him. One that had me smiling slightly before raising my gun again.

“Hey, asshole.”

The man turned around, a fierce scowl on his face. “Who ___”

I shot him dead in the chest, collapsing him back onto the bed behind him.

Ruby let out a shrill scream, scrambling back from the man's now prone body.

Dallas lifted himself up from the floor at the same moment that I lowered my gun. He clutched a hand to his head and held out his other to his wife. "Come here. Quickly."

"Oh my god!! He-he's...!"

I tucked the gun back into my belt and moved over to Dallas to help him to his feet.

Ruby's breath was punching out of her, her eyes wide and frantically bouncing between me and the dead man lying on the bed. "Where's Sam?"

"She's safe, I promise."

Dallas swayed on his feet slightly before catching himself. He winced as more blood dribbled down his face. "Don't worry about us. You all need to go before more of them catch up."

I frowned, looking down at the body bleeding out at our feet. "I need to—"

He cut me off, clapping me on the shoulder. "I've got it handled. I'm close with the sheriff in town. We're no strangers to poachers coming on our lands and trying to steal whatever they can get their hands on."

My eyes went a little wide. Was he actually suggesting that he was going to get the sheriff to help him cover up a double murder? I knew cattle ranchers out here were tough as nails, but not to the point where they were comfortable figuring out how to get rid of a body or two.

Just who the hell was this man?

I looked him over with a sharp eye, taking in the way he stood calm and collected. I was sure the shock of being caught in a home invasion was already starting to wear off from him, at least judging by the way he seemed to already be formulating a plan in his head.

Looking back down at the body, I let a long breath escape me.

“All right. I’ll leave you to it then.”

“Don’t worry about us.” Dallas’s hand tightened on my shoulder. “You take good care of my girl.”

I blew out a breath, blinking back the unexpected tears. There was just something about the way that Dallas looked at me that reminded me of the small, miniscule memories I had of my own father when he was sober.

A kind of trust showing in his eyes that wasn’t easy to come by.

“I will. I promise. I won’t let anything bad happen to her.”

He smiled at me.

“You sure you’re both going to be all right?”

Ruby reached over and grabbed my hand. “Just take care of our baby. Please.”

“I will. I promise you I won’t let anything happen to her.”

“Good.” Dallas let go of my shoulder. “We’ve got it all handled here. Fortunately, I learned a thing or two from my brother back in the day.”

The subtle wink wasn’t lost on me.

CHAPTER 18

By the time I got back to the barn and opened it, Sam was anxiously watching for us outside of the back window.

I was proud of her for following my orders and listening to me for once. I was sure she'd been biting at her nails to figure out what the hell had been going on for so long and why both Max and I were covered in sweat and a vague smattering of blood.

She opened the door to the backseat and stepped out, looking us over with tears in her eyes.

“Are they...?”

I held my hands up. “They’re good. They’re going to be staying at your neighbor’s house.”

I didn’t have the heart to tell her that they were currently inside trying to figure out how to get rid of two bodies. And that they were probably going to involve the local sheriff. And that Sam’s uncle was probably doing much the same as I had overseas.

Her eyes darted down to the gun tucked visibly into the waistband of my pants. “You...”

Before she could ask me anything further, I shoved her back into the car and shut the door behind her. She could interrogate me on the way to Canada, as long as we were on the road doing it.

I got into the driver’s side and backed the car out with Max’s directions before taking off once he was safely clipped

into the passenger's side.

“Did you kill them?”

I flexed my hands on the steering wheel, deciding to play dumb. “Who?”

“Stop it, Caleb. Just answer me.”

I glanced at her in the mirror, feeling bad suddenly.

There was no part of me that was actually going to admit to any of that, because what would follow would be another slew of questions that would eventually lead back to two things—one: that I was a killer for hire, and two: that her parents had been left back at home to deal with the mess of it all.

Sam was absolutely the type to demand we turn back around. And stopping long enough to calm her down was going to eat into what little window of escape we had.

I sighed and focused back on the road.

Though perhaps I was being heartless. All in the same breath, it was wrong of me to convict her of something so normal and human. Of course, if I were in her shoes, I'd feel the same way. I'd want to know the details and make sure that my parents were going to be okay.

“Look. Your parents are safe. That's all that matters.”

“Did. You. Kill. Them.”

Max shifted uncomfortably in his chair, looking studiously out his own window, clearly not wanting to be a part of this conversation at all. If he had the ability, he would've walked right out that door and freeballed it right onto the highway.

He'd never been the best with confrontation, especially when it came to our job.

“Sam.”

“Answer me. I deserve to know the truth.”

I glanced back at her in the mirror, catching her eyes.
“Yes.”

She slumped in her seat, folding over under her arms were resting on her knees and her head was between them. She breathed shallowly in and out until that was all we could hear over the sounds of the other cars passing us by.

“Oh my god...” she whimpered.

“Sam—”

“Shut up! I don’t want to hear it...”

Max glanced over at me, a frown tugging down his lips.

“Holy fuck... *holy fuck*,” she mumbled to herself.

I could feel my entire body stiffening.

“Did you *leave* them there with a body to clean up?!”

I glanced over at Max, exchanging a look with him.

The truth was... such a hard line to walk. On the one hand, if I told her everything, she’d probably have an actual mental breakdown. Though the longer I stayed silent, the deeper into her meltdown she went.

Fuck, this was not what I signed up for.

When Sam finally lifted her head, her shoulders were shaking. “How many times have you done this?”

My brow pulled up. Did she *actually* want me to answer that? I couldn’t tell if this was all the babblings of someone in a high-distressed situation.

“Oh my fucking god.” Her hands slid down her face when I kept quiet. “That many?!”

“What do you want me to say to you? Anything I say is going to freak you out.”

“I’m already freaked out! You left my parents with a dead body!”

Max slumped down into his seat, his hand coming up to grab onto his seatbelt in order to choke himself with it. I reached over and shoved him.

“Knock it off.”

“Is this some kind of joke to both of you?! No wonder there are people trying to come after you and hunt you down! You’re both psychopaths!”

My best friend snorted. “That’s why Caleb was hired.”

“*What!*”

I groaned. “Max.”

“What?” He sat back up in his seat, a light smile on his face—teasing in a way. “She deserves to know how fucked up her bosses were. And that her parents offered to cover up for us.”

Sam let out a choked sound.

He turned around in his chair, looking back to where Sam was cowered back into her own seat.

“They hired him *because* of his skill set. Did you really think they didn’t know? Come on, you’ve got a brain, don’t you? And your parents literally pushed us out the door, telling us to go. You really think we’d leave them there with a couple of dead people and giggle about how fucked they were? Come on, Sam. Use your head.”

Her mouth dropped open.

“Max.” I glared at him and grabbed onto his sleeve to pull him back around. “Stop.”

“Why? She shouldn’t be shaming you for something that you were literally *trained* to do. This was our job for practically a decade, and it’s obviously paid off because neither of her parents is lying dead as a doornail. That’s like blaming someone for having no arm. We deal with the cards we were dealt and made the most of it. It’s not that hard to understand.”

I rolled my eyes. “That’s not the same thing at all.”

He shrugged. “It’s close enough.”

“Oh my god,” Sam mumbled. “I’m in the car with a couple of killers.”

Max turned around again. “Honestly, it’s just better if you call us contractors. ’Cause that’s our government title and all.”

“*Government?* Did you... you guys learned all of this in the military?!”

“Yeah? Obviously?”

I groaned into my hand. And here I thought the two of them were getting along so well before this.

“Enough. Both of you.”

“I want to get out.”

I sighed. “I can bring you back—”

“No. On the highway. I need to throw up.”

I blinked and quickly flicked on my turn signal, cutting a few cars off as I careened over to the side of the road. The second I had the car in park, Sam was flinging the door open and had the upper half of her body bent outside of the car.

She coughed and upheaved her entire breakfast, the sound of which had both Max and I wincing.

“Damn, who’d a thought you’d bag someone with a weak stomach?”

“Stop it.” I glared at him before opening my own door and slamming it shut behind me. Thankfully, we had plenty of food for Sam to snack on once her stomach settled, but for now, she needed water if she was going to be throwing up *that* much.

I grabbed a bottle from behind my chair and shut the door to the car again and came around the front side to where Sam’s door was blocking my view of her.

I tapped the window with the water bottle, catching her attention. She leaned up, coughing and wiping her mouth with the back of her hand. I offered the water bottle over the top of the door, and she quickly snatched it out of my hands and uncapped it before downing half of it.

“I can bring you back, Sam.”

She glared at me as she swished the water around in her mouth, spitting it back onto the pavement.

“No.” Her hoarse voice was almost drowned out by the traffic whizzing by us at high speed, shaking the car slightly from the inertia. “They wanted me to come with you... so that’s what I’m going to do.”

I quirked a brow, crossing my arms over my chest. “You’d rather travel with two killers, then?”

Her cheeks had no color in them and the rest of her skin was pale beyond what was normal for her. She eyed me for the first time with fear, something that hurt my heart to see.

I couldn’t blame her for that, though.

If I were in her shoes, I’d demand to be brought home with no strings attached and no questions asked.

It was the right thing to do, after all, for being dragged into this mess unwillingly.

I doubted either Ava or Liam had warned her of any of this. No matter how desperate Sam was at the time for the money they’d promised her, nothing was worth all of this.

I’d chosen my lifestyle because I had nothing else to live for, same with Max.

That’s why the government loved kids like us. We were exploitable and easily moldable. We could become whatever they wanted so long as we were good at following orders.

“When does any of this end?”

I shook my head at her. That, I had no answer to. Because the fact of the matter was that I’m not sure it ever would be. Not as long as Liam or I were walking around this earth alive and well.

In the back of my mind, I always knew it’d more than likely come down to a bullet between either of our eyes. That would be the only way for either of us to be free from the other.

But how far was anyone else willing to go for that?

Sam had the option to walk away from this at any time. Neither me nor Max were going to hold her to some pretentious bargain that endangered her any further than she already was. I'd made it a mission to find her and rescue her from her captors and had done just that.

After that, she was under no obligation to pay me back.

Even if deep down in her chest, she felt like she needed to.

"I don't have an answer for you. All I can say is that the road from here on out will be filled with more of this."

She blinked her eyes a few times. "Killing?"

I nodded. "If you can't handle that, I'll take you home right now."

She swallowed thickly. "Can I think about it?"

"No."

Her bottom lip trembled. "Please?"

I sighed. "How? We have no time to sit here on the side of the highway while you debate with yourself over it. I either take you with us or you go back to the ranch. Those are your two options."

"If I go back, they'll come after my family again."

"I don't know about that, but like I told you last night, I'm going to make it very obvious that we're no longer together so that hopefully the interest in you dies off and they continue to come after me instead."

"But what about you, Caleb? You're just going to run from them forever?"

I shrugged. "Till one of us gives up."

She frowned. "And when's that going to be? When you're dead?"

As sharp as ever.

I had to give her credit: even when she was stressed out of her mind, she could read my thoughts like the back of her hand.

It really was such a special talent that I wished I could help fertilize and grow into something that could get her in with some fancy agency making a cool million a year.

Maybe one day I'd get to see her do just that. But in order for that to happen, she needed to be alive in order to do so.

"I'm taking you back." I grabbed the edge of her door, pushing it toward her.

She caught it, the fear in her eyes quickly replaced with determination. "No. I'm coming with you."

"You're not anyone's hero doing that."

"Shut up. You're not leaving me behind. My parents obviously wanted me to come with you for a reason. I don't care what you say to me, but like fuck I'm going to sit around twiddling my thumbs while you're caught in some gun fight with a mobster."

I could help myself; I laughed. "Mobster?"

"That's what he is, isn't he? Fancy things and people at his beck and call ready to shoot someone if he waves his hand?"

"Yeah, true."

Actually, speaking of which...

Turning to the passenger side, I knocked on the window.

Max gave me a flat look, lowering the window. "Are you two done arguing yet? I have to pee."

"You think the Machiavellis would house us for a while?"

His brows pulled together. "Thought we were leaving the country."

"Yeah, we are. But Sam doesn't even have a passport."

He groaned. "You guys are seriously the worst travel companions. Why the fuck doesn't she have a passport?"

"I never needed one." Sam kicked the back of his seat.

He scoffed at being jolted forward. "So you want us to hide out at the Machiavellis' until we can forge her a passport?"

“No, I want to get a list of their safe houses and hide in one of those. Like fuck I’m going to let you sneak back in there and ditch me.”

He grinned. “Aw, cuz. I would never. Not when you’ve got some gangsters trying to find you.”

I rolled my eyes. “Thanks... So? You think you can call Junior and ask?”

“I doubt he’d tell me no, if that’s what you’re asking.”

I nodded, turning back to Sam. “Listen to me, whatever happens after this, I need you to be prepared. You’re going to see a lot of shit that you don’t want to, along with death that will probably make your head split open. You need to stay cool under pressure because if shit goes sideways and I need you to do something, I’m going need you to just do it and not back-talk me.”

She scowled. “Back-talk? Come on, Caleb. What are we, ten?”

“Sam. I’m serious. Did you listen to anything I just said?”

She sighed and leaned back into her chair, playing with the cap on top of her water bottle.

“Yes, I heard you.”

“Good, and?”

“And I’ll stop freaking out.”

“I’m not expecting you *not* to freak out. I need you to listen to me when I tell you to do something. I’m trying to keep you alive, contrary to what you may think.”

She lifted her eyes, a small twinkle of amusement in them. “Oh really?”

Desire kicked up in my belly, causing me to cough into my fist. “Yes.”

“Okay, guys, get a *room*.” Max rolled up his window, sealing himself away from our flirting.

... *Was* this flirting?

God, I didn't even know anymore.

"I get what you're saying, Caleb. I'll behave, I promise. Please don't bring me back to the ranch. I can't let my parents be attacked like that again."

Her voice choked up at the end of her words, something that she was only able to swallow back at the last moment. She breathed out a few times to steady herself, wiping at the excess moisture collecting at the corners of her eyes.

"We're not going to let that happen, Sam."

She sniffled softly. "You promise?"

I nodded. "I promise."

That was the most sure I'd ever been able something in my entire life.

No matter what road we went down from here, I'd keep that one small sentence true.

Even if it killed me in the process.

CHAPTER 19

The safehouse was in a small town in Wyoming just off the freeway and directly next to a dingy-looking motel. It didn't look like much from the outside—sandwiched between two sets of townhouses—but that was kind of the point.

Not sticking out was the name of the game, anyway. Especially if you were looking to hide in plain sight.

Parking in the rundown-looking driveway, I breathed out a sigh and cut the ignition, stretching my arms over my head as my shoulders creaked in protest.

I didn't mind driving for long and extensive periods of time; however after being stuck inside of a car for so long, my body was worn out. Not to mention the lack of sleep on top of it already weighing me down and fogging up my brain.

Next to me, Max groaned as he threw open his door and stepped outside. "Freedom..."

I snorted softly, silently agreeing before turning in my chair to see Sam still stretched across the backseat asleep. She'd managed to wrangle a coat out of my bag and drape it over herself while I'd been too focused on the road to say otherwise and seemed content to curl up under it.

Not that I would've said anything even if she asked me because the sight of her curled up with a piece of my clothing pulled close to her face and clutched tightly in her hands was enough to drive me wild.

Leaning through the spot between the front two seats, I lightly tapped her exposed knee. "Sam."

She grunted at me, causing me to smile.

“We’re here.”

Her eyes blinked open slowly, a hand coming up from under my jacket to rub at them. “W’time ‘s it...”

“Almost dinner time.”

She slowly sat up, letting my jacket fall into her lap. “Mmm... We here...?”

“At the safehouse, yeah.”

“Oh...” Blinking her eyes open again, she squinted out the window. “That’s...”

“I know. But it’ll help us blend in.”

Turning back around in my seat, I pushed my door open and let my limbs stretch. The air in Wyoming was a little warmer than Montana, but not by much, though still a welcomed change from how bitter the atmosphere had been.

I shut my door and looked out to where the sun was setting, the clouds a pretty shade of pinks and reds that reminded me of those expensive paintings the Machiavellis liked to hang in their guest rooms with the gold frames.

There was something about a tranquil-looking sky that gave me a sense of peace among all of the shit piling onto my shoulders lately.

When Sam opened the door, she yawned softly and slid herself out with my coat still wrapped around her. I bit the inside of my cheek to keep myself from smiling.

“So, how long we staying here?”

“Not sure yet. We need to come up with a plan on how we’re going to get you a passport.”

She squinted at me, leaning into the door. “Thought you were going to ask your... uh, what, mob friends? About that.”

I pulled her away from the door and leaned in to grab our bags. “They’re not my ‘mob friends.’”

“Okay, sorry. Mob acquaintances.”

I shook my head at her. “Really?”

She shrugged. “What do you want me to call them, then? Didn’t know you guys all had special titles.”

“We don’t.” I moved around the car over to her, grabbing her by the shoulders to move her out of the way while I ducked inside and grabbed our bags. “Well, not really.”

“You know, you don’t need to go making it all complicated with the labels.”

I shut the door, handing her bag over to her and throwing mine and Max’s over my shoulder. “You’re the one labeling things.”

“Okay, again. New to all of this.”

I held up my hands. “Just call them the Machiavellis. That’s their family name.”

“Right.”

I rolled my eyes again. “What?”

She bit her bottom lip, trying to keep herself from smiling. “It’s just... that’s *such* a mobster name.”

I grabbed her shoulders and turned her around to face the house, slapping her right on the ass cheek. “Get.”

She laughed at me but didn’t say anything about me touching her like we were still in a friendly spot. Then again, everything felt so weird that it was hard to imagine Sam and me as anything *but* friendly.

Even when we were fighting, I could still feel that passionate heat underneath all of her words, breaking to the surface whenever we were in the midst of an argument.

I had a feeling that our conversation from earlier—the one about me being a contracted killer—was being shoved to the back of Sam’s mind along with what I told her about what her father had said to me before I’d left.

Even to those that were familiar with war and other horrible atrocities that showed the other sides of humanity that

one should never hope to see in their lifetime, this subject could still make them queasy.

You had to be a special breed of person to kill people for money, and those sorts of people were never stable and/or fun to be around. And that was speaking from experience.

Both Max and I—well, there was something wrong with us, absolutely. Why wouldn't there be with us so casual about gunning a person down as long as we were given a few grand for it?

Sam was a good person, someone that was loved and cared for as a child and had seemingly nothing horrible happen to her. Something that I was glad for because it didn't make you suddenly into a better or stronger person to have to go through those kinds of hardships.

She was a kind and strong individual without the trauma attached to her weighing her down like a concrete shoe dragging her down to the bottom of a cold, dark lake.

I wanted her to be able to come out of this with as few scars as possible. Though even that thought was probably pushing it on the expectations level.

Some stuff was better to lock away and compartmentalize for the time being. Especially since we were kind of running for our lives and all.

Knowing that your father had attachments to the government was not only going to be an eye-opening conversation for her to have once all of this was said and done, but a part of her childhood that she was going to have to come to terms with at some point.

I'd had those kinds of realizations plenty growing up. There was always a time when it became exponentially clear that the people you associated as god-like figures in your life would be reduced down to mere mortal status at some point.

Whether that be when a situation arose and they finally appeared human and broken just like the rest of us, or they did some fucked-up shit and that reality slapped you hard in the face.

It was never easy to accept, and even speaking from experience, I never quite got over the initial shock of it.

To this day, I still remembered the horror in my gut the first time I realized that my parents were two broken people that had come together out of mere convenience rather than anything that the love stories told me about.

Drug addicts always gravitated to each other, and sticking it out with one person was better than riding the rollercoaster alone by yourself until death finally claimed what had been borrowed from the beginning.

Add an accidental pregnancy into the mix and it was all downhill from there.

Heading up into the house, I didn't bother with locking the car. If someone wanted to steal the piece of shit, then they could have it. I wasn't a stranger to roaming the streets in search of a new one, anyway.

Inside of the doorway, the house opened up into a narrow hallway that spanned down a few feet until suddenly veering left. I kicked off my shoes at the door and pushed it shut behind me, locking an impressive number of deadbolts that were screwed into the frame.

Max was already wandering back down the hall and reaching out for his bag as I let it shift off of my shoulder.

"Can't say this place is totally shit. Least they have running water and the electricity still on."

"Always a good sign," I told him, hefting the bag over. "How many bedrooms we got?"

"So... about that."

I rolled my eyes. "Let me guess. Two."

He smirked. "I'll let you bunk with me but only if I get to put my cold feet against your back in the middle of the night."

I swatted at him. "I'll fucking kill you."

"Don't blame me. I've got poor circulation from when you threw me out of that building."

“It was either that or we got blown up by that shrapnel bomb. Forgive me for not giving you more options in the two seconds it took me to push you out the window.”

“Threw, not pushed,” he corrected. “You tossed me like a sack of potatoes.”

“Blame the adrenaline.”

“I’d like to blame more than just that for my crooked hip.”

I swatted at him again. “Ass.”

He grinned at me, dodging me yet again.

It was all in good fun, and at least one of us was in higher spirits. Max wasn’t one to let stress get him down, even in situations where it meant a gun grinding into your forehead and the knock of a trigger rattling the inside of your skull. I’d never met a soldier as down to get shit fucked up as the man standing in front of me.

Discussing our home lives with each other wasn’t ever something we did, even when we had nothing better to do while waiting on a mission update. Of course, I’d told him bits and pieces of my childhood and vice versa, but reliving the memories in order to get closer to him wasn’t my idea of fun.

We didn’t need to bond over how fucked up our families made us in order to be fine with splattering some guy’s head against a brick wall. There was a fine line between sane and psycho, and we straddled it pretty hard most days.

Until the day came where either of us became a danger to society and were in need of being put down.

But that wouldn’t be for a long time hopefully.

“Um...” Sam’s voice had us both turning to look over at her awkwardly standing in the hallway. “So... about the bedroom situation.”

Her eyes darted between us, a pensive tightness to her face that I couldn’t tell was from her overhearing our conversation or from the possibility of having to share a bed.

I knew eventually the silent pact between us to re-ignite our conversation from earlier would be cashed in, but until that happened, I was ready to simply let the tension in the air be ignored.

“You can have a room to yourself.” I nudged Max with my elbow. “We’ll bunk together. It’s fine.”

“Oh.” She frowned. “I was hoping we were sharing a room.”

I blinked at her in surprise.

She wanted to room with me... why? To finish our conversation?

Or...

Max whistled in a low tone. “O... kay. I’m so glad I brought those earbuds with me.”

I shoved him. “Get.”

“Yeah, don’t need to tell me twice.” As he passed by Sam, he winked at her. “Careful when you tie him up. He’s got sensitive skin on his wrists.”

Oh my god...

He disappeared down the hallway, the sound of a door opening and shutting the only other indication that he was out of earshot and leaving us to our own devices.

I sighed, rubbing my face with my hand. “Sam...”

“Why does he know that?”

I peeked through my fingers at her. “Know what?”

She crossed her arms. “That you get rope burn.”

I groaned and dropped my hand, moving closer to her to pull her arms apart so I could grab her wrist. “He doesn’t. Plus, what would you even tie me up with, a hair tie?”

I ignored the thrill that raced up my spine at the idea of Sam having that much control over me while at my most vulnerable. There were never times in my life that I let a

person put me into that kind of role before, but for some reason with Sam it felt different.

I was so used to controlling everything, down to the smallest of details, that it got exhausting after a while to constantly have my brain running. Sam made it easy to give into my carnal desires, to fall into the pleasure of pleasing someone while they responded in kind.

She was an enthusiastic lover and someone that didn't mind pinning me down and taking what was hers. It was the sexiest thing I'd ever witnessed and not for nothing but the best fucking orgasm I'd had in my life.

Tugging her down the hallway, I brought her into the other room that still had a door open and tossed my bag onto the bed next to hers. Her wrist was still trapped in my grip, and she had yet to pull it away from me, surprisingly.

I would've thought she'd do anything to get away from a dirty killer like me.

"You really don't need to share a room with me," I told her while turning to face her. "I don't mind shoving Max over and stealing a few blankets before he falls asleep and hogs them all."

She smiled slightly and leaned over just enough to tap her finger against the door to close it.

"It seems you have experience with that."

I rolled my eyes. "You have no idea. He's such a bed hog."

"You guys have known each other for a while?"

I nodded. "Since we were twenty. He... I..."

I stopped myself, not exactly knowing where to start or finish this story. Was she fishing for me to talk about my time in the military? I supposed it was an easy subject, but Max and I didn't exactly meet at boot camp.

It was hard to tell what parts I needed to edit in order to not make her uncomfortable with the idea that I was a contract-for-hire because all of it was like reading a newspaper to me: bland and factual. I had a hard time seeing the dark and

oftentimes shocking parts of my past in a way that was normal for a civilian. I'd been so desensitized over the years that barely anything shocked me anymore.

Sam smiled down at my hand when it flexed around her wrist unconsciously. "You met in the military, I'm assuming."

I nodded.

"Bootcamp or...?"

I sighed. "I don't know what kind of answer you want, Sam."

I felt my heart rate kick up when she placed a hand over it to lean into me.

"The truth, Caleb. That's what I want."

CHAPTER 20

“That’s...” I squeezed her wrist again. “I don’t think you want that.”

Using her hand, she pressed it hard against my chest, walking me back until the backs of my knees hit the mattress. I folded, tumbling down onto it and catching her when she followed me.

Her body was warm against mine as she laid over me, her legs coming up to straddle me as she sat upright and found her balance again. She stared down at me, running her arms along my chest and leaving a trail of heat in its wake.

“I want to know, Caleb. I don’t like that you’re keeping me in the dark. I want to trust you.”

My brows knitted together. “Why? You know what the stories involve. What’s it matter what the details are?”

“Because I don’t even know you,” she argued back. “When you told my dad you were in the military, that was the first time I even considered that. It’d been so obvious this whole time and a piece of you that’s been bugging me for a while. I always thought there was something off about you, but once you said it, everything clicked.”

I let out a soft snort. “Was that what you were feeding to the Harringtons?”

She shook her head, her long blond hair falling over her shoulders to brush against my chest. “No. I only told them about your day to day and how you interacted with people. They were more interested in making sure you showed up

every day and did your job like you were some kind of soldier. I don't know, the whole thing was really weird from the start."

"How so?"

She smiled a little. "You're changing the subject."

"Forgive me for wanting to know what personal details of my life you gave over to the enemy."

She laughed slightly. "How would I know that's who they were to you? If I knew this was going to be the outcome, I would never have taken them up on their offer."

My hands found her hips, squeezing them as I tilted my head slightly. "Even if it meant saving your parents' ranch?"

Her face fell, and I knew immediately that I had her.

Did I blame her for the position she had been forced into? No, not at all. It was a tough burden to bear knowing that the only thing keeping your family from homelessness and losing everything they worked thirty years to build was a measly few grand. In the grand scheme of things, I could see why she would think it was a good deal.

Spy on a person she's never met and would probably never care to know given the background that was more than likely provided beforehand? Hell yes, even I would sign up for that shit.

It was horrible that we had been pitted against each other in the first place, and even if I was still holding onto a slight grudge, it was hard to stay mad at her after spending some time at the same ranch and with the same family she was trying to save.

"I'm sorry," she whispered.

I reached up to cup her face, dragging my thumb along her jaw. "I know you are."

She smiled sadly. "If it's any constellation, I never thought I'd fall for you."

My heart pounded in my chest, my throat bobbing as I swallowed thickly. "Really?"

I hated how rough my voice sounded, how choked up I seemed at the mere mention of someone having feelings for me. But Sam was the kind of woman that you only met once in your lifetime and was *always* the one that got away.

She was too good to be tied down to someone like me.

“Caleb.” Her hand rose to wrap around my wrist.

But fuck if I wasn’t going to enjoy her while I could.

As selfish as that was.

I kissed her, groaning when her hips rolled against mine in a slow and sensual way. She was already pulling at my shirt, trying to get it off of me with a desperation that I soon felt myself meeting.

Rolling us over, I pressed her into the mattress and trailed my lips down her jaw to where her neck met her shoulder, sucking on the soft skin there hard enough to leave a mark.

A primal part of me wanted to leave marks all over her, to show that she was mine and that if anyone were to dare touch her, they’d soon find the muzzle of a gun pressed against the back of their skull.

Sam groaned and moved her head back to give me better access to her neck, a hand sliding its way down my abs and pulling at the front button of my jeans.

I hissed when she parted the fly and shoved her hand down to grab at my cock, fisting it in a tight grip that had me bucking into her hand like a damn horny teenager.

She laughed softly, pulling me out to stroke me in long pulls that had my toes curling in my boots.

Goddamn, how she was able to set my entire body on fire like this was something I’d never know. And never question either because like fuck I was going to look a gift horse in the mouth.

Pulling away from her neck, I leaned back far enough to tug my shirt off of me and toss it away.

“Mmmm.” Her free hand traced along my abs, and the small pock-marked scars littering my skin. “These make much more sense now.”

I smiled a little. “What did you think they were from?”

“Teenaged rough-housing?”

I laughed. “With knives?”

She shrugged, giving me a coy look. “Maybe.”

I shook my head at her, groaning when her thumb slid around the head of my cock.

“You’ll tell me about them one day?”

My head was too fuzzy to really grasp what she meant. “For what?”

“Your scars. You’ll tell me the stories about them?”

Fuck, I’d tell her the answer to life if it meant she kept doing that shit with her finger.

Nodding, I moved closer to her again and kissed her. We both made quick work of stripping each other from everything covering us, tossing it into a heap on the floor next to the bed somewhere.

Sam’s legs curled around my hips, her wet pussy grinding into me as she rolled her hips and arched her back to get as much contact with me as she possibly could. I watched in awe with how she worked my body against hers, letting her take whatever it was that she wanted from me.

I’d honestly give her anything she demanded, letting myself go to be swept up in the hurricane that was Samantha Hayes.

Grabbing her by the wrists, I brought them up over her head and trapped her there. Her eyes opened, glazed over with pleasure.

“Take me.”

Even under me, she was taking what she wanted. Demanding me to bring her over the edge.

Lining our hips up, I pressed the head of my cock against her pussy, sliding into her until we were both groaning again. Fuck, she was actually perfect—squeezing me in the best way.

Her legs hooked around my waist, squeezing around me when I pulled back and slammed into her again.

“Oh god.” Her lips parted with a gasp. “Yes...!”

Over and over again I pumped inside her, rubbing against those silky walls until all she could do was chant my name in a soft chorus of breathy moans.

“Fuck, you feel so good,” I whispered against her lips, kissing her hard.

Our hips moved together, filling the room with a steady rhythm that accompanied the bed squeaking underneath us. I didn't care how much noise we were making; all I needed was Sam under me, moaning my name.

Her gasp had me pulling back to look down at her, her legs squeezing around me as she let her orgasm hit her, rutting into me. My hips followed her lead, slamming into her to draw out her orgasm until she was practically shaking from it.

As I came inside her, I caught her in another kiss.

I wished I didn't have to be anywhere else but here for the rest of my life.

I brushed her hair away from her face, tracing down her shoulder and along the dip of her back, her skin silky smooth and warm to the touch.

She smiled at me, eyes blinking slowly. “So, you met Max in the military.”

I groaned. “You really aren't letting this go, are you?”

“Nope.”

Leaning over, I kissed along her shoulder and up her neck, turning her just enough in my arms to give me room to bury

my face in her neck.

“Yes... but not at bootcamp.”

“So, somewhere else? On a tour?”

A shiver rolled down my spine when her fingers gently glided through my hair. “It was after I was taken out and put into the special forces program. He’d been there for a few weeks already by the time I was acclimated.”

“Were you always partners on missions?”

I shrugged. “Not initially. He was such a pain in the ass that I kept having to rescue him from certain death.”

She laughed softly, her shoulders shaking from it. “Wow.”

“I know, a shocker to know when you meet him.”

“I would’ve never guessed.”

I smiled against her skin. “Anyway, we were moved to more overseas missions, and that’s when we were exclusively put together. He’s always had my back, even when I was a complete bitch to him most of the time.”

“That’s a true friend right there.”

“I know.” Shifting back from her, I kissed along her jaw until I was facing her again. “Since then we’ve been kind of roaming around looking for something to do.”

“You didn’t stick with the military? How come? Did you get kicked out?”

I shook my head. “No, nothing like that. I guess I... felt restless. There are only so many diplomats you can shoot before you get kind of tired of it.”

Her eyes widened immediately.

Shit... Why was it that I was always putting my foot in my mouth around her? It was a fucking disease at this point.

“Sorry... I didn’t... Sorry.”

Sam blinked a few times before clearing her throat. “It’s okay. I was just surprised with how casually you said it.”

I winced at her words. Of course, why wouldn't she be? Who in their right mind went around just admitting to something like that? I absolutely sounded like some kind of psychopath.

I hoped she didn't think that. Contrary to what people may think, I did have feelings.

Even if they were kind of buried...

"You... did that a lot? Uh... shooting diplomats?"

"... You really want that answer?"

I could tell she was trying to not let her eyes widen again by the way her mouth set in a hard line. Her jaw worked as she chewed the inside of her cheek, probably thinking about how stupid she was for sleeping with someone like me.

"Wow, that many diplomats pissed off the U.S. government, huh?"

That startled a laugh out of me. "Jesus."

Her lips quirked up. "Am I wrong?"

"Unfortunately, no. The government likes to remove the threat rather than talk it out."

"You know, that makes a lot of sense considering the state of the world..."

I shifted us again, rolling on top of her and pecking her lips in a chaste kiss. "Let's not talk politics."

She raised a brow. "You can talk about guns to people's heads but politics is where you draw the line?"

I lifted a shoulder. "What can I say? I'm a simple man."

Sam laughed. "You're something, all right, Caleb. Least you and my dad have things to talk about, I guess."

"You doing okay with that? With..."

I let my voice trail off, giving her room to change the subject if she needed to.

"Yeah." A long sigh left her. "I know it's weird but... I always kind of knew. Even if I didn't *know* know. My uncle

was always teaching me how to read people and assess all kinds of situations since I was really young.”

“Really?”

“Yeah. It was our thing we used to do together.” She smiled softly. “Every Sunday he’d take me to the diner in town and we’d sit around all morning watching and reading people. He’d test me on my skills and correct me whenever I got something wrong or lead me in a better direction. It was a lot of fun and it helped me see the world as it is and not how everyone tries to make it seem.”

“So, you always knew he wasn’t some run-of-the-mill recruit.”

She nodded. “Yeah, I never knew what that entailed exactly. But I knew he had a special skill set, that’s for sure.”

“Delta Force was the branch I was in.”

That quieted her for a moment. “It’s strange to think that he might’ve been overseas shooting diplomats too...”

My lips came down to brush over her brow. “He might not have been. He could’ve been in the control room, coordinating things. There were a lot of jobs in that unit. Max and I just happened to be on the ground most of the time.”

I didn’t want her thinking poorly of her family. She seemed so close with them and me coming into the picture and coloring her opinion of them, even if by accident, felt horrible to do. It was never my intention to bring the skeletons in the Hayes family closet out into the light of day—especially since they seemed keen on keeping it away from Sam for the most part.

Scaring her was only going to drive an unnecessary wedge between her and her family.

“I’m sorry, Sam. I wish you never had to get involved in any of this.”

She huffed out a laugh. “I got myself involved. What are you talking about? I’m the one who decided to spy on you.”

“Yeah, but if I never took the job in the first place, you would’ve never had to.”

“Caleb, listen to me.” She sat up a bit and reached around to grab the back of my head, pulling me forward until our foreheads touched. “I needed that money and I would’ve done anything to help my parents. It’s shitty that both of us were put into this predicament, but you know what? I got the money and gave it to my parents and you saved me from being left in that room. It’s not either of our faults that Ava and Liam are fucking twats.”

I couldn’t help but laugh softly. “I’ve never heard anyone call Liam a twat before.”

“Well, it’s true. He’s slimy and I should’ve known something was up with him the second I sat down in that conference room with him and Ava. They both were all too happy to sign you up for some weird voyeur shit.”

“Creepy.”

“You’re telling me.”

A sigh left me. “I get what you’re saying bu—”

She pecked my lips. “No ‘buts.’ We’re in this together, okay? I don’t blame you for anything.”

My throat constricted at her words, an overwhelming feeling of complete relief rushing over me. I never knew I needed to hear her say that, but here I was practically getting choked up at the reassurance.

God, what the fuck was wrong with me? Was I that damn starved for affection?

She kissed me softly, pulling me down into her arms while her legs wrapped around my waist. I rocked into her gently, loving the groan that she pressed against my lips.

I’d never get enough of this woman.

Until my dying breath, I was going to keep her safe.

No matter what.

CHAPTER 21

Waking up in the early morning as soon as the sun rose, I felt a sense of peace that I hadn't felt in a long time.

Watching Sam sleep in my arms was a comfort that had been missing from me for longer than I cared to admit, even if before this I hadn't had it for very long.

She grounded me, in the simplest of terms. Even when I felt like the entire world was going to shit, she gave me that steady hand that kept me anchored in reality.

Kissing her softly on the forehead, I snuck my arm out from under her and sat up slowly. The sheets fell away from my body, the cool air from the room hitting me as a draft rolled through our small room. This place, while kept inconspicuous, didn't have the best of insulation to keep the frigid cold air from creeping in.

As I stood, I made sure to tuck the covers around Sam's small form, curled up with her legs drawn close to her body. She was beautiful, sleeping so peacefully like this. I hoped that after all of this was finally said and done, I'd get to do this every morning.

That was, if she wanted me afterward.

Chances were, it wouldn't happen. But hey, I could dream, right?

Grabbing my pants and slipping my shirt back on, I treaded over to the doorway and opened it quietly. I didn't hear any sounds coming from down the hall and Max's door was still closed, which meant I was probably the first one up.

It was still fairly early, so that wasn't a surprise. The nice thing about that though was that I could run to the convenience store I saw when pulling in and getting us all breakfast before we had to start figuring out where the hell we were going to go from here.

Sure, we could stay hidden and hunkered down here for a while, but eventually we'd be forced to move—either from Ricard warning us of another set of people coming to stay at the safehouse or from Liam's tails finally catching up.

Whatever the case was, we'd need an exit plan. And sooner was better than later.

I shut the door to my and Sam's room quietly before shuffling down the hallway. It made me a little apprehensive about leaving them both here sleeping and potentially vulnerable, but I had to trust that anyone stupid enough to break in would be noticed by either Sam or Max and dealt with before it became an actual issue.

Plus, I wouldn't be gone long. I could see the store's gas pumps from the stoop. Even if in the ten minutes I was gone, someone came around, I'd be back before things got out of hand.

I stalled as my hand hovered over the deadbolts.

Trust that they'll be fine.

I breathed out and quickly flipped them all open.

The cold air burned my lungs but felt nice at the same time. The sun overhead was just starting to peek through the clouds, golden rays bathing the street outside of the safe house in a soft glow.

I made sure to pull the door shut tightly behind me, hearing the latch click back into place before finally letting the handle go and stepping down onto the driveway.

No damage had been done to the car overnight, which was a good sign. I preferred the uneventful.

A shiver rolled over me as I stuffed my hands into my coat pockets and headed down to the sidewalk leading up to the

main part of the street.

No one was out at this time of day, aside from the early morning commuters that were few and far between as I walked down the sidewalk. Which was a nice bonus, not having to run into people before I had any kind of caffeine in me.

Crossing through the parking lot of the motel, I had a vague awareness of someone's eyes on me. A part of me was deluded into thinking that whoever was watching me had simply fixated on my passing figure since I was really the only one out at this time of day, but having already been stalked once before, I craned my neck over my shoulder to double check.

Sure enough, there were two guys leaning against an expensive-looking car facing toward the road and watching me.

Christ... if I had to deal with muggers on top of everything else, I was going to lose it.

Shaking my head, I stopped walking and assessed both men. They weren't scrawny, but I definitely had a few pounds on them. If they were stupid enough to come over here looking for some change, I doubted it'd take me long to knock them both down to the ground.

But did I need that kind of attention on me was the real question.

I gave them both a hard stare and rolled my shoulders back. Aside from my lack of planning for bringing a gun with me on my trip down to the convenience store, I still had my fists that would be more than capable of doing the job.

Unless they had a knife, then things would get dicey.

One of them lifted himself away from the trunk of the car and sauntered over toward me. "Hey."

"Not looking for a fight," I told him, glancing back to his friend for a second. "Got it?"

He grinned at me. "Yeah, no problem, man. Hey listen, just have a question for you."

“If you’re looking for drugs, the answer’s ‘no.’”

He laughed. “What do I look like, a pill popper?”

As he spread his arms out, his coat parted, revealing the butt of a gun.

Great. Gang members? Just my luck.

“Whatever. I’m not here to cause trouble. Just passing through.”

“Yeah, see, I get that. But we also got a job to do.”

I raised a brow. “And that is...?”

“Boss wants you back home.”

I blinked.

Boss?

What b—?

My eyes darted down to the lapel of his coat, catching the intricate lines of a tattoo on his neck peeking out. The symbols were of a familiar-looking eagle, wings outstretched and a snake caught in its beak.

I groaned out loud. The Machiavellis.

Of course.

Of fucking course. It would be my luck.

“Look, Winters. We can do this the easy way or the hard way. Where’s your partner at?”

I sighed. Well, at least there was some silver lining to this: these dumbasses didn’t know I wasn’t traveling alone.

“He ditched me somewhere crossing over the border from Montana.”

“Shit.” The guy had his hands already digging into his pocket to pull out a phone. “Boss isn’t going to like that.”

Yeah, I was sure he fucking wouldn’t.

What a goddamn prick. He couldn’t wait a fucking day before sending out some head-hunters in order to locate Max

and drag him back to the estate? The second I got my sights on that kid, it was fucking game on.

I didn't care if it landed me in a cold, dark cell down in the cellar. I was going to punch him square in the face for disrupting us. And maybe even in front of his parents too, for that matter.

"I'm not going anywhere with you." I glared at the second guy who leaned away from the car and started over toward us. "You can tell Junior to fuck off."

The first guy lifted his head, giving me a strange look. "Junior? No, no. This is coming from the top."

What?

"Senior wants me back...? Why?"

He shrugged at me. "Hell if I know. I'm out here doing a job. So you either come with me willingly or I shoot you and you come with a bullet hole in your leg."

Jesus fuck.

Why the hell was Ricard, Sr. wanting me back all of a sudden? While, sure, he gave me shit when I told him that I was cutting my contract short, he hadn't bothered me since then. And the only reason he'd been so up in arms about it was probably due to him thinking Max would dip the second I did.

Which... now that I thought about it, he kind of did.

Was this about Ricard? Fuck.

I held out my hand. "Give me your phone. Let me call him and talk to him."

"You're coming back to Vegas whether you give me attitude or not, Winters. Now get in the car."

"There's really no convincing you to give me that phone, is there?"

"Not a chance." He pulled back the flap of his coat, his hand fisting around the gun.

I sighed again. Just when I thought things were finally falling into place, of course it had to be turned upside down.

Before the other guy could reach us, I leaned back and threw my leg out to catch the first guy in the chest with a solid kick. A strained grunt left him as he crumpled backward, his body hitting the pavement with a hard *thud*.

“Shit!” The other guy came running.

I turned and sprinted across the parking lot, dodging and weaving in between cars in the off-chance that the other guy was able to pull out a gun and aim it right at me.

Leading them away from the safehouse was my first priority. I couldn't let them head back toward the safehouse until I could call Max and warn him to get Sam out of there.

Heading down the street that separated the motel from the main part of the strip, another empty alleyway opened up in back of a bakery, giving me enough cover to duck down behind a dumpster and fish out my phone.

I pressed it to my ear, and the dial tone on the other end rang and rang, instantly annoying the fuck out of me.

Of all times for Max to be dead asleep—

His groggy voice answered me. “What...”

Thank fuck.

“Got a problem. Machiavellis are here.”

“*What?*” That had him waking up instantly. There was rustling on the other end and the sound of a bed squeaking as he got up. “Where?”

“Motel next door. I'm down the road. You need to get out of there.”

“Let me call—”

“Don't bother.” Arguing with that family was only going to clue them in on us traveling together, making escaping much more annoying to pull off than if they didn't. “Just get out of there.”

“Caleb—”

On the other side of the dumpster, I could hear two sets of footsteps echoing on the walls around me.

“I saw him go down this way.”

Shit.

Pulling the phone from my ear, I dropped the call and pocketed it before slowly moving myself along the wall away from the dumpster. The mouth of the alleyway opened up, giving me enough room to dart down it and run back toward the main part of the street and away from the less sparse spaces.

Putting myself out in the open would force them to back off. The worst thing anyone could do with an unregistered weapon was to wave it around where regular people could see and call it in. And I doubted the Wyoming police were going to take too kindly to two out-of-state mafia grunts canvassing their streets threatening people.

“Fuck! Get him before he gets onto the main road!”

A bullet whizzed past me.

Were they fucking *insane*?

Just missing me, I heard it slam into the side of the wall next to me as I passed by, small pieces of brick splintering around in the air and kicking up enough particles of dust to irritate my eyes.

I waved my hand in the air, my eyes watering enough to blur my vision as I stepped out onto the sidewalk once again. By now, the street had more traffic coming and going, giving me good enough cover to cross it and head toward the convenience store.

What I hadn't expected was for the split second between my foot hitting the pavement and the time it took for my eyes to finally clear up from all of the dust, that a car would come from out of nowhere and slam into my side.

The skin on my hand peeled away with a flare of pain when I held it out to catch me, skidding along the sidewalk

until the rest of my body fell back and caught the lasting brunt of the assault. I kept my head up, making sure that it was my shoulder blades that knocked against the ground and not the back of my head.

The door to the car popped open, another car on the opposite side of the street coming to a screeching halt.

Groaning and sitting up, I could feel the blood running down my hand, pebbled embedded into the folds of where my skin had peeled back.

“Shit, did you hit him?”

“I didn’t know what else to do!”

Of course they had a getaway driver. Why the fuck didn’t I think of that?

Rolling onto my side, I lifted myself onto my knees. The world wobbled around me, the impact making me dizzy. I doubted the car had been going over thirty, but having something hit you that unexpectedly was guaranteed to knock the sense out of you for a few seconds.

Rough hands grabbed at me, hauling me to my feet.

“Oh my god!” someone yelled. “Does he need 911 called?”

“No!” one of the men grabbing onto me yelled. “We’ll take him over there.”

“You shouldn’t be moving him like that!”

“We got it, ma’am. Don’t worry.”

My feet dragged along the sidewalk, reorienting myself making me suddenly nauseous now that I was back upright. Before I could shout back to the woman who’d stopped to tell her, “Yeah, call the fucking cops,” I was shoved into the back of the car.

“Shut up.” The car door slammed behind me, barely missing my feet.

Across the way, the other side opened and one of the men climbed inside.

“Night, night, Winters.”

With the seat belt wrapped around my neck and a tight tug effectively cutting off my oxygen, the world went dark.

CHAPTER 22

By the time I finally came to, I felt a strain in my neck and my entire body constricted in a tight hold.

Opening my eyes, I squinted into the darkness, seeing nothing but vague shapes that I couldn't make out, even if I knew where I was. I had no recollection of being moved from the car to wherever this was and could guess from the pounding headache at the back of my head that I'd been drugged.

Which meant one of two things: either the trip had been that long and I had needed to stay unconscious for the entire thing, or they didn't want me to know where they'd moved me to in the off-chance that Max came barreling after me, guns blazing and trying to take down the entire commune.

Either way, I was fucked until I figured out where I'd been taken to.

I tested my limbs, feeling something rough dig into my skin. So they'd tied me up on top of it.

A snort left me. Wise on their part. Once I was finally free, I wasn't going to be lenient when I got a hold of them and snapped their necks.

Across the way, there was a soft shifting that sounded like a doorknob turning. My body tensed as light poured in from the hallway, the shadows obscuring whoever it was that stood in the doorway.

"Oh, they have you here in the dark?" That voice... A light overhead flicked on. "That's unprofessional."

I winced, squeezing my eyes shut at the sudden shift in light that practically blinded me. Spots of color danced behind my eyelids while the sounds of the door closing had me tensing in the chair I was strapped on.

“*And* they tied you up? My, Caleb. What did you do to frighten them so badly?”

I forced my eyes open, blinking away the dots littering my vision and focused on the man standing in front of me.

Liam.

Here in the flesh.

I should’ve known.

“Where the fuck am I?”

He smiled. “It’s nice to see you, too.”

I bit the inside of my cheek, breathing out slowly.

Getting worked up wasn’t going to get me any closer to getting out of here. Wherever we were, the people Liam had hired to take me had obviously gone to great lengths to keep me from waking up before they could strap me to this chair in this random room.

Craning my neck, I looked around.

The room was well furnished, each piece of fabric that covered the couch across the way, the two chairs seated on either side as well as the lounge tucked back in the corner the furthest from the door, all made with expensive brocade fabric.

The colors looked oddly familiar, making me do a double take.

“...Are we in Vegas?”

Liam clapped. “So quick.”

My head snapped back to look at him. Why the... fuck were we at the Machiavellis’ estate?

I tried to calculate how long the trip from Wyoming to here had been—well over ten hours at least. Given that I’d been

drugged probably the second I slumped over after being choked out, no wonder I was feeling groggy and lightheaded.

“Why?”

Liam tilted his head. “Why what?”

“Why did you take me here?”

What was the point? was what I really wanted to say. He’d been so hell-bent on taking me away from this family that it felt weirdly full-circle to be back here when everything was going to shit. If he expected to trade over my contract to this family and have me sit there with a smile on my face as I was sold over again, he had another thing coming.

Like fuck I was working with anyone else after this.

“Well, they’re good friends of mine.” He shrugged. “And they owe me. So I figured this would be a good spot for us to talk.”

Talk? That’s what he wanted to do? After all that?

“You sent people to kill me. Forgive me for not exactly being in the mood to talk to you.”

Liam stepped away from me and moved across the room, the long jacket he was wearing over his suit trailing just above the carpet. He dragged one of the chairs over to me, setting it a few feet away before gently placing himself on it.

There was a part of me that was suddenly envious of the position he was in. He had all the power here and nothing to lose if this conversation were to go sideways. I wasn’t going to be ignorant in the fact that I was almost positive he knew that I’d been with Sam and Max.

There was a slim chance that they’d been lost on his radar after finally grabbing me and taking me off the streets, but I doubted it.

It wouldn’t surprise me if they were tied up in the room next door.

Burning worry settled in my stomach.

Wherever Max had taken Sam, I hoped like fuck it was far away from here.

He could be impulsive but he wasn't stupid. Not when it came to protecting the person I cared about that rivaled him.

"Listen, I think all of this has gotten way out of hand."

I scoffed. "You think?"

He sighed at me, crossing a leg over the other. "Caleb, please. Enough of the attitude. I'm trying to reason with you."

"That option left the station the second you sent two head hunters after me with trigger-happy fingers."

"Yes... well. A bit of an oversight on my part, I apologize."

I rolled my eyes. "Really? That's all I get?"

"Is there something else you wanted? If it's compensation ___"

"I don't want your damn money," I snapped. "I don't want anything from you. I want to be left alone."

He frowned, lacing his fingers over his knee. "I'm afraid that's not possible. We had a deal and I intend for us to stick through it."

"No."

For the first time since I'd met Liam, his face dropped into a blank expression while his eyes lit up with a fierce fire behind them. "No?"

I straightened back in my chair, rolling my shoulders as best as I could. My entire body was cramped and sore, probably from sitting in this chair for god knew how long.

If he were to get up and smack me around a few times, there was nothing I could do but sit here and take it.

He reached up a hand slowly, but instead of leaning over between the small space separating us, he dug his fingers into his forehead, running them down to his temple.

“Caleb. We don’t need to be at odds like this. I’d like for you to come back to New York with me. But in order to do that, we need to bury the hatchet and start fresh.”

He dropped his hand back into his lap and leaned back into his chair with a surprisingly tired expression that had me feeling strangely. As much of a tyrant as this man was, not once had I ever considered him human.

He always had that air about him that stunk of an unchecked god complex. Yet here he was, sitting here and practically pleading for me to come back to the East Coast with him.

“I can’t do that.”

He sighed again. “Why not?”

“I’m not dealing with you or your daughter. If you want anyone to blame for this, it’s her. She didn’t need to go that far in making my and Sam’s relationship that big of a deal. If she left us alone, none of this would’ve devolved into the shitshow that it has.”

“And if that were the case, how would this relationship between you and Samantha progressed? Surely you know that keeping it a secret would’ve only upset her and therefore would’ve forced you to expose your marriage to my daughter.”

“Kind of hard to speculate when you sent Sam to spy on me in the first place. So there’s not really any room for me to wonder if that would’ve lasted or not.”

He smiled slightly. “I see you two have grown close since running around the States together.”

“No thanks to you.”

He laughed softly. “She was only meant to keep you in check. Nothing more.”

I leaned forward, not being able to help it. The ropes cut into my chest uncomfortably. “You gave her the okay to sleep with me if she had to.”

He shrugged. “Sure, but it was never forced. If anything, that part of your relationship was entirely organic.”

“I highly doubt that.”

“I know it’s hard for you to believe, but it’s the truth.”

My back hit the chair once more. No matter what Liam said to me, all of it sounded like a lie piled on top of another lie. Where was I supposed to believe that he was actually being forthcoming when before this it was all a complete facade?

The entire situation had been spun as a web to entrap me into whatever fucked-up political agenda he had—if that was even the real goal to begin with.

“Why do you care so much about her getting in with the government? Don’t you have enough influence behind the scenes?”

Liam shrugged. “I supposed, but tapping into the world markets from a business perspective and a political one are two opposite sides of the spectrum. Eventually, I’d like to have a hold on the U.S. government altogether.”

I raised a brow. “For... what?”

He grinned. “For whatever I want. The possibilities are endless at that point.”

“Are you not interested in the UK’s government?”

“That’s already been dealt with.”

I blew out a small breath.

Fucking hell. So world domination was the name of the game.

If I had any doubts about Liam being an actual psychopath beforehand, it was being blown out of the water with him admitting to that.

I was no stranger to men in high positions seeking ultimate power and control of those around them. The only difference was that they weren’t also billionaires with the capabilities that Liam clearly had. The amount of perfect timing and sheer magnitude of being twelve steps ahead was an unfathomable thought.

“Liam, I can’t work for you. Or with you, whatever it is you have in mind.”

He flexed his hands, splaying his fingers apart. “What would it take for you to change your mind?”

“You can’t buy me.”

“I can. I just need to know your price. What would you like for me to do or help *you* do that would make it easier to come back to New York with me?”

I stayed quiet for a few moments.

The persistence in his tone was telling, Sam’s words coming back to me suddenly. What would it really take for all of this to end? Because no matter how many times I refused him or tried to run, he would always find me and drag me back.

He liked having that control over me. He thrived on it, really. I was sure he could find a million suckers to partake in the scheme he’d cooked up with Ava, but for some reason he’d become fixated on me and only me.

Changing his opinion or steering him in a different direction was pointless because so far, all it had done was wind up getting me or someone I cared about kidnapped and hurt.

I couldn’t let that happen anymore. Not if I could stop it altogether.

Not if it meant keeping those people safe and out of harm’s way.

I sighed. “I need you to leave Sam and Max alone.”

“Done.”

I glared at him. “I mean it, Liam. No more trying to use them or hanging their lives over my head. If I go back to New York with you, all of that ends and they get to live freely without you breathing down their necks.”

“Like I said, Caleb, done. But that also means no more fighting me. No more running away. And no more disobeying

me. I need you to fulfill your contract and stop looking for ways out of it.”

I swallowed and nodded. Isolated was where he wanted me. Confined to that godforsaken penthouse with my expensive toys and my fake wife living on the other side.

I’d be giving up my own freedom in exchange for Sam and Max’s.

“Do you understand what I’m saying?” he prompted when I didn’t answer.

I nodded. “Yes.”

“Yes what?”

“Yes.” I cleared my throat, my voice raw. “Yes, I’ll go back to New York with you.”

He smiled at me. “Excellent.”

CHAPTER 23

He left shortly after, untying me and letting me stay in the room as he locked the door behind himself.

I didn't bother trying to pick it, knowing that it would only lead to him going back on his word and perhaps doubling down on trying to hurt Sam or Max, if he hadn't already found them and kept them in some room close by.

I found myself standing in front of the window, staring out at the massive sprawling gardens of the Machiavelli estate that I knew cost a fortune to upkeep. It really was of some sick irony that I was going to be locked inside of a cage much like this one until either I or Liam was dead—ultimately relieving one of us from this contract.

I tried to be upset about it but found myself numb instead.

There wasn't really any point, anyway. I was resigned to my fate, and I doubted I was going to get any opportunity to say goodbye before I was whisked away to New York without another trace.

Maybe I could convince Liam to let me send either of them a letter, just to reassure them—Sam especially—that I was alive.

The thought of her mourning my death or disappearance without any other trace of me hurt my heart and made me let out a soft sigh.

What I wouldn't give to have one last day with her...

My back stiffened when the lock to my door was slowly turned. I turned around to see the handle moving very slowly, keeping the springs inside of it from making too much noise.

When the door finally swung open, revealing who'd come to visit, I relaxed.

“Junior?”

He scowled at me instantly. “I really hate when you call me that.”

He looked around the room before shutting the door behind him, fixing the tailored leather jacket that hung over his small frame.

I snorted. Well, this was a surprise. “What do you want me to call you?”

“My name, for starters.”

I crossed my arms. “You and your father have the same name. How are people supposed to tell the difference when I'm talking about both of you?”

“Who the fuck cares about that, Winters?” Ricard headed further into the room, bee-lining directly for the small sitting area where the lounge was. “What the fuck is going on?”

I blinked in surprise. “Is that what you broke in here for, to interrogate me?”

“Obviously. I want to know why my family is currently being forced to entertain Liam Harrington out of the blue and why the fuck you're here locked in a room by yourself.”

He had a good point. It was rather sketchy, and I'd be asking the same questions if I wasn't currently in the middle of it all.

“I was obviously kidnapped, Ricard.”

He squinted at me, speaking slowly. “How the fuck does a trained assassin get kidnapped?”

I couldn't help it; I laughed. “An assas—? Kid. Come on, be real for a second. You didn't actually think we were both assassins, right?”

I guessed he wasn't that far off. But it did make me cringe at the thought of now having Sam in my life as a liability, that was exactly how I got kidnapped.

His cheeks colored immediately. "Fuck you, Winters. That's exactly what you fucking are. You just like to dress it up under a fancy title to make yourself feel better."

As if on cue, his phone vibrated.

"What?" he snapped. "I told you fine. It's set. Stop calling me... We will be there, Jesus."

He rolled his eyes before ending the call, shoving his phone back in his pocket. Ricard let out a long sigh, kind of tired sounding, while he rubbed a hand over his face.

"Fucking hell," he mumbled to himself.

Wow, this kid seemed... so different. His voice was commanding, and he didn't seem to fall apart under the slightest bit of stress like the Ricard I left a while ago. It made me wonder what thoughts were bouncing around that little mafia prince head of his.

"Meeting thing again?"

He gritted his teeth. "Can you give me five fucking minutes to think without you rattling on about something?"

Shaking his head again, he dropped his hand from his face, the bags under his eyes much more prominent all of a sudden. "So, it's just you here?"

"Far as I know. You're the one able to walk around the halls out there, so you tell me."

"There's no other rooms up here that are occupied besides this one. That's why I thought he put you two together."

"Liam?"

He nodded. "We had no warning you guys were arriving today."

What was interesting was that Liam had *that* much hold over the Machiavellis that he could simply come and go as he pleased and they weren't able to say dogshit about it.

Then again, this man apparently had the British parliament in his back pocket, so who fucking knew what else he owned?

“Just me. Sorry to disappoint you.”

Ricard ran his fingers through his hair, trying to smooth down the tangled lengths. “I tried calling Max when I found out you were here.”

“And?”

“No answer.”

“Shit...”

“What the hell happened? Did you just leave him behind?”

“Not because I wanted to. But wherever he’s going, I hope it’s out of the country.”

Ricard narrowed his eyes. “Why? What’s the plan there?”

“None of your business.”

He visibly gritted his teeth. “It is my business when I have a deal with him.”

“What *deal*?”

“None of your business,” he mimicked.

“Touche.”

“Besides, it’s not like you’d help me anyway, even if I got you out of here.”

“I doubt you could without anyone noticing. Apparently we’re supposed to be leaving sometime tonight or early tomorrow morning.”

In his lap, he wrung his fingers together, bending them into odd shapes that looked like he was seconds away from breaking the bones. “Look, I’m going to tell you something, but I don’t want any questions about it. I have a safehouse that no one knows about. If I can get you out of here, can you get me into contact with Max? Clearly I can’t get through.”

I looked at him in disbelief. “You have a safehouse no one knows about... How is that possible?”

“That sounds like a question.” His eyes narrowed at me.

I ignored him and pressed further. “Not even your dad knows?”

“Just tell me, do you want my help or not?”

“Look, Ricard—”

“Caleb.” He gritted through his teeth. “Do you. Want. My help. Or not?”

I stared at him for a long moment, weighing my options. The worst thing that could happen if we got caught was... well, I’d get sent back here or drugged and put on a damn plane. But the possibility of Liam taking out his frustrations on Sam or Max after I’d—not even an hour ago—agreed to behave was a giant possibility.

Still... there was a part of me that wanted to see what exactly Ricard was capable of.

“You really think you can get me out of here without anyone noticing?”

He straightened up, brushing his hands down his leather jacket to smooth it against his chest. “Yes.”

“How?”

“Why don’t you leave that to me?”

“Well, several reasons, really.” The negging really was becoming so easy at this point. I couldn’t help but goad him just a little bit.

He glared. “There’s a dinner party going on tonight. As far as I know, my parents are inviting a bunch of people since Liam’s here. Tonight’s casual, no business, so there shouldn’t be too many guards to deal with. Only around the dining hall. We can head out once it starts. That way we’ll be long gone before anyone comes up to check to see if you’re still breathing.”

I held up a hand. “Where’s this ‘us’ coming from?”

“I’m obviously coming with you to wherever you’re going.”

I opened my mouth, ready to argue with him. It wasn't the fact that I thought he'd slow me down or anything—contrary, he'd really been proving himself to be a formidable player in this game—but taking Machiavelli's only heir would lead to more than just a little bit of trouble.

If I thought having Liam and his people after me was bad enough, adding on top of that a very pissed-off mafia family was going to be a whole other can of worms that I really didn't want to be popping open any time soon.

“Ricard...”

“Caleb, I *swear*. I got this. Trust me.”

I really wanted to, believe me.

Silently, he headed for the door, keeping his head facing straight to the ground with his shoulders bunched up to his ears.

I let out a small sigh. “Ricard...”

When he yanked the door open, he fixed me with a firm look. “I'll be back in three hours.”

And with that, the door clicked behind him, and he was gone.

CHAPTER 24

Three hours passed by at an agonizingly slow pace.

There was no clock inside of this room to tell me if fifteen minutes had passed since Ricard had left or if he'd completely ditched me and it'd been fifteen hours. And other than the fading sunset outside of the window giving me some indication as to what time of day it was, I had no clue.

Honestly at this point, I wouldn't blame Ricard if he decided to let me fend for myself. He had no reason to be loyal to me, and other than the promise I'd given him before with talking to Max about coming back here, there was no other reason for us to be in any sort of mutual agreement.

I had no phone—it was conveniently confiscated at some point over the Utah border on our way back to Nevada—so even if I had a chance to contact Sam or Max, that wasn't going to happen. If he was going to answer, he would've answered Ricard's call hoping he'd have more intel.

I rubbed my face with my hands and sunk down onto the long couch. My only regret was not being able to say goodbye to Sam. Max would understand—as he always did—but Sam... She'd be completely lost as to what happened to me.

Hopefully in a few weeks, she'd be returned back to her family and would get to go on living a normal life away from crime and people trying to exploit her for the gains of others.

A small part of me wished that I'd gotten one last phone call with her. To tell her not to worry about me. It was stupid to think that she'd ever want to be with someone like me, but

she'd put too much energy into caring whether I lived or died, so giving her the peace of mind to that burning question was the least I could do for her.

It wasn't any type of "good" closure, but it would be enough to let her move on.

I jumped up when the door popped open, my heart beating wildly in my chest when Ricard's familiar face peeked inside.

I raised a brow. "What's up?"

He walked in quickly. "I told you, I'm coming with you."

It was then that I noticed the backpack hanging off of his shoulder looking rather overstuffed.

I groaned. *I take back everything that I said about his sudden growth in maturity.*

"No."

"Caleb—"

"I said no, Ricard. Now get the fuck out of here before you get caught."

"I told you, they're all down at the party. Probably getting drunk off their asses as we speak. If we head out now, no one's going to notice us gone."

Gritting my teeth, I spat out, "You're not coming with me."

He shrugged. "Fine, then rot in New York. Just know I tried to help you, but you're too fucking stubborn to see it."

Holy fuck...

"I can't take you with me. Your father's going to rain hellfire down on us if he figures out you're missing. You think I can handle both Liam and your family coming after me? No, absolutely not."

He scoffed. "That's what you're worried about?"

I stared at him for a long second. "Are you out of your goddamn mind? Yes! That's what I'm worried about!"

He rolled his eyes at me, pulling his phone out of his pocket. “Well, you should’ve said that. I already have a plan put together so that doesn’t happen.”

“What fucking plan?”

He ignored me in favor of texting someone, typing out a rather long message before hitting send and looking back up. “Done.”

“What’s the fucking plan, Ricard?”

He smirked at me. “My alibi, obviously. I’m going to be doing some business with my cousin, so I will be gone for a little while. Honestly, it’s really not that hard to convince my parents. They barely notice I’m around as it is.”

I opened my mouth to argue with him, ready to tell him what a stupid fucking plan that was, when he pulled another burner phone out of his backpack and tossed it at me. I swiped it out of the air, tightening my hold of it the moment it touched my palm.

“See if you can call Max again.”

Demanding little shit.

Like this was all so easy.

Didn’t he understand that that wasn’t a fucking game and that we were more likely to get shot between the eyes before there were questions asked? This wasn’t the kind of deal that could cost a few cool million. This was actual snakes in the grass waiting for the chance to strike and go for the jugular.

Messing with people’s—especially Ricard’s—family was just asking for a Glock to the forehead.

“Can you stop overthinking and just call him?” Ricard snapped his fingers a few times. “We need to go. Like now.”

I weighed the options in my head of how badly I wanted to smack him upside the head versus the amount I was willing to listen to him whine about it afterward.

In the end, he was lucky that my threshold for bullshit was so low at the moment.

Dialing the number and pressing the phone to my ear, the other end rang twice before it clicked and an automated voice message came up.

“We’re sorry, the number you have reached—”

Damn it.

Not surprising, though. After my warning to Max before I’d gotten picked up, it was protocol to ditch anything that could be tracked. Especially with having Sam with him and trying to keep her safe.

“Did you get through?”

I shook my head, pulling the phone away from my ear. “Dead end.”

The only solace to all of this was that he was keeping Sam safe in the meantime. With my deal with Liam still intact for now, at least they wouldn’t be targeted by head hunters.

Lifting my head, I patted the phone against my hand. “Where was this safehouse you were talking about? How long is it going to take until we get there and where are we going to get a car?”

Ricard blew out a breath. “Damn, what is this, twenty questions?”

My eyes narrowed. “Listen, you need to convince me that you actually have a plan here. I get you want to get out and explore the world and all that, but if we get caught we’re both fucked. I’m not sure what your parents are going to do to you, but I sure as hell know what’s going to happen to me. And I’m not the biggest fan of torture.”

His face soured. “Torture...”

“Yeah, Ricard.”

“That’s a little dramatic, don’t you think?”

“There are real-life consequences on the line here. So again, where’s this safehouse and how are we going to get to it?”

“Well... it’s in Nevada.”

“Where?”

“Outside of the city. It’s like a forty-minute drive from here.”

“What’s the address?”

“Nice try. I’m still coming with you.”

“And whose car are we taking?” I challenged.

He shifted on his feet, hooking a thumb around the strap of his backpack. “Well, if we can’t get a hold of Max, we will have to use a rideshare. All of our cars have GPS monitoring. So, even if I can sneak one out, they’ll just track us down.”

I blew out a breath. He had a point, something that I begrudgingly admitted to myself that I hadn’t thought of.

A rideshare was a good starting point, but that could be tracked down just as easily if we used any kind of digital payment...

All they’d have to do was call up the company and report the card stolen and demand for an itemized receipt to file with a police report. Then suddenly we’d have the entire Machiavelli syndicate hot on our asses.

“We should call a taxi instead.” I flipped the phone around in my hands. “They take cash, and I doubt a Vegas taxi cab would remember the two of us forking our thumbs on a street corner a block from here.”

“Right, good point. As long as we get out before the dinner party ends, we can head up toward the strip. Plenty of cabs that way. The safehouse is off the grid, so we should be safe there.”

Standing, I flipped the phone around in my hands again. There had to be a way to contact Max and Sam to let them know that one, I was still breathing, and two, I had a plan for getting out of here.

I doubted Max would be a fan of me taking the kid with us, but he’d proven himself to be much too valuable as an asset at this point. Not to mention, we needed the off-the-grid

safehouse to lay low while we figured things out. And the only way we were going to get to it was if Ricard came with us.

Maybe as long as I returned him in a few days, his parents wouldn't actually hunt me down.

Though, knowing them, that wasn't exactly in their wheelhouse. Revenge burned bright in their bloodstreams, after all.

If a fight came down to it, I'd need to be prepared for the very real possibility of dragging others into the crosshairs. Especially Sam who had no skills in defending herself.

I didn't want her witnessing any of that. I wanted her to be able to go back to her parents and live a normal and happy life, not plagued by the memories of seeing me get gunned down by a psychopath and a mafia family.

I didn't want to think about her fate after that. Because chances were, if she did live to see another day, it wasn't going to be from them wanting her to go live her happy life in Montana or New York.

I was an expensive investment, according to Liam, something that he'd been putting a lot of time and energy into. He seemed to have thought he was purchasing—a killing machine, someone to do his dirty work for him, a future partner? Who fucking knew? But whatever it was, it would be logical that he would want to put me down as an outlet for his anger for not only wasting his time, but his money and energy too.

Liam never did strike me as the type of guy who would take "losing" graciously.

I caught the phone in my hand one last time and gripped it tight between my fingers.

I needed to get a hold of Sam before he could.

Actually... maybe she still had her phone on her. She'd kept it to keep in contact with her parents, and chances were she hadn't told Max about it in the off chance that he would chuck it out the window with the rest of our phones.

Quickly dialing the number, I held the phone up to my ear and silently chanted to myself for her to pick up.

On the fourth ring, the line clicked on the other end.

“...Hello?”

I breathed out slowly. Her voice was like music to my fucking ears. “Sam.”

She gasped. “Caleb?!”

God, I missed her. “I don’t a lot of time, but can you put me on speaker?”

CHAPTER 25

It turned out that Max was already way ahead of me.

After coming to the conclusion that I'd completely disappeared off of the face of the earth, he'd quickly tracked my location with the phone I'd taken with me before it'd gotten tossed on the freeway heading into Nevada.

He'd said that the only logical guess as to why I'd been brought back that way and not flown to New York was because it was obvious that the Machiavellis were being used as some sort of halfway house for Liam's business dealings.

Which... wasn't a half-bad conclusion.

I didn't know why I expected anything less from him, honestly.

He and Sam had made it into the city about an hour ago and had been trying to come up with some way of getting into the Machiavelli estate when I'd called.

"It's nice to hear you're still breathing," he teased—though I could tell underneath the words there was a sense of relief.

I snorted softly to myself. "Tell that to the mark from the seatbelt they choked me out with."

"Damn. Sorry, Sam. Guess that means he's not into breath-play."

I smirked at the sound of a loud smack following with a short, "Ow!"

“Keep talking like that and I’ll show you what your own seatbelt can do,” she warned.

“Ugh, why’d you pick this one, cuz? She’s violent.”

I grinned. “What can I say? I like ’em tough.”

“Yeah, *clearly*.”

I shook my head. “You guys sit tight. We should be leaving here soon.”

“We’ll keep the phone on us, Caleb,” Sam spoke again. “Just in case you need something.”

“You guys want to volunteer as our getaway car?”

She laughed. “Tell us when and where and we’ll be there.”

I glanced over at Ricard, making sure he was still with me. He had an intense frown on his face, but it looked like it was more out of concentration than anything else. He was as ready to go as I was.

Least that made this a quick transition. “Max, pull around to the back service entrance. We’ll be out soon. “

“Got it.”

I ended the call and tossed Ricard’s phone back to him. All of this was coming together more smoothly than I would’ve predicted. But there was a weird feeling in the pit of my stomach, and as usual, I was letting that foreboding feeling get to me.

“You don’t need to be down there for that dinner at all, right?”

He shook his head. “No. They didn’t send for me. I only heard about it from the kitchen staff who were talking about it when I went in there earlier.”

It was beginning to look like a blessing in disguise with how his parents neglected to remember his existence. At least we would be able to move freely without someone wondering where he’d gone.

“Before we leave,” I nodded to his bag, “think you can sneak me a gun?”

He shrugged. “What kind?”

I grinned. Now that was the spirit.

With the dinner party in full swing and Ricard back from scavenging for a gun to give me, I was antsy to get the fuck out of here.

The window of the room I was staying in faced the long drive coming up from the gated street; dozens of cars were pulling in and dropping guests off at the front as valet’s took the cars to a car park.

While the crowd was going to help make for an easier escape, it also came with the added pressure of many more eyes wandering around.

Sure, most of them would be two or three glasses deep by the time we were ready to head out, but that also meant loud-mouthed drunks leaving the party to get into trouble elsewhere around the property.

When Ricard slipped back into my room just before ten, with a bag strapped to him and a gun tucked into the waistband of his cargo pants, I was quick to take it off him and tuck it into the back of my own pants.

I felt much more in control with the harsh chill of steel against my bare skin and the familiar weight pressing into my spine. Would I have preferred it if we could get in and out without having to worry about taking someone out? Sure, but the reality was that if things got dicey and I had the means to protect us both.

“Ready?”

He nodded at me, that serious look crossing over his face again.

It kind of made me want to reach out and pinch his cheeks. Maybe I was beginning to become a little too fond of him, as weird as that was.

I nodded for the door and followed him over to it. My hand grazed the loop of his bag and grabbed at it to stop him from opening the door before me.

“We’re going to go the back way where the service entrance that leads down to the library is.”

He craned his neck to look back at me. “Is that where you told them to meet us?”

“No, but that’s where there’s going to be the least amount of people. The party’s on the other end of the house. No sense in staffing anyone at the library if they have guards making sure everyone stays around the dining hall.”

He gave me a curt nod after a moment. “There’s a door that leads to that service entrance over this way, but we have to walk down to the other end of the hall to get to it.”

“Just stick to the shadows while we walk, and stay behind me.”

He nodded again.

I let go of the loop of his bag and reached over him to fist my hand over the handle.

He was quiet as we both stepped out into the hallway, our heads craning to both ends while I pulled the door shut and locked it from the outside. It would take them a while to notice I was gone.

Even if on the off-chance guards were sent up to check on me, I doubt any of them would be entering my room to actually lay eyes on me. The windows in it were permanently sealed shut, and there was no other way out but through that same door.

Plus, no one would be suspecting their own mafia prince to help me escape—an idea like that was unfathomable if not plain laughable.

I kept Ricard close behind me as I led us down the hallway, completely silent other than our soft breathing and quiet footsteps.

These service entrances were rarely ever used anymore, even though they were kept in relatively good condition considering how large this estate really was.

I'd seen the occasional lovers sneaking off into them on the rare occasions I spent wandering these same halls when I worked here, but other than that, they were always empty.

As we reached the other end of the hallway, I grabbed back at Ricard's jacket, halting him while I stuck my head out into the intersecting hall.

Empty. Perfect.

Heading over to the service door, I open the door to peer down the dark stairwell. It wrapped around in a spiral, curving to the left with only the first few feet visible with the light spilling down into it from the hallway.

I turned to look over my shoulder. "You got a flashlight on that burner?"

He dug his hand into one of his pockets and pulled it out, fingers nimble as he toggled the settings and turned it on before handing it over to me.

The light was harsh against the stone walls but cast a wide arch that I kept pointed down at the stairs as I stepped down onto the first step. My hand followed along on the wall, grazing over the smooth surface while I descended. Ricard shut the door behind us, his hand grabbing onto my elbow while he kept close to me, letting me guide us down the narrow passageway.

Getting to the bottom of the stairs, we ended up in a small, unused kitchenette that had definitely seen better days. My hand shot out when Ricard stumbled over a large bag of what looked like flour, hauling him back onto his feet as he pitched forward with a sharp gasp.

"You good?"

He kicked at the bag, pushing himself away from me. “Fucking piece of shit... Who leaves that laying around?”

I smiled a little to myself but kept my hand on his shoulder to steady him as we made it over to the other side. The door was hard to open with one hand; the lock felt either broken or intentionally tampered with.

I handed the phone back to Ricard, nodding for him to keep the light up as I braced my hand on the underside of the latch and shifted my entire body weight up against it. The latch broke free, a piece of it flying off and landing somewhere across the room from us with a loud metal clattering sound that had us both wincing at the volume.

I held my breath, waiting for the inevitable sound of someone’s footsteps coming over to investigate.

After a long moment, I breathed out slowly.

“This place sucks,” he mumbled at me.

“Seriously.”

As I opened the door, I could hear faint classical music coming from somewhere down the hall. The marbled walls and floor in this estate were impressive with how far sounds could bounce off of them and carry. We were practically on the other side of this damn place and that shit could still be heard as clear as day.

Before stepping out, I looked over Ricard one more time. “You good?”

He gave me a thumbs-up, turning the flash from his phone off and shoving it back into his pocket once more.

I kept my hand on his shoulder while heading out of the room, guiding us away from the music to where the library was. His neck was craned back behind us, keeping an eye on the other side of the hallway while I focused frontward. To my prediction, this side of the estate was completely empty and no signs of guards were posted outside of the library’s doors. It would’ve been a waste anyway. What drunk person wanted to come out all the way this way just for a smoke?

When we reached the small side door leading out onto the side of the estate, closest to the road, a small keypad lit up when I hovered my hand over it. Ricard smacked my hand out of the way, tapping on the pad to enter the code.

The screen lit up, the door next to it unlatching easily.

“Damn,” I nudged him. “You sneak out often.”

“What’s it to you?”

I laughed, despite myself. “Guess it came in handy.”

He rolled his eyes before grabbing onto the door and nudging me in the ribs with an elbow. “Guess so.”

The dry desert air that greeted us had never felt so damn freeing. I’d only been locked away in that room for just under a day, but it already felt like it’d been two weeks since I’d seen the actual starry sky above me.

“Damn...” Ricard mumbled, his eyes wide and focused on the lush grass that I knew cost his family a cool million just to keep looking nice under the hot Nevada sun.

“Let’s go find our getaway car.”

For once, he grinned at me.

He jogged ahead of me, stopping a few feet away to stretch his arms above his head, and let out a satisfied groan that I felt in my bones. There was nothing quite like the freedom of finally being out of the cage you’d been placed in for so long.

I’d felt that only two other times in my life. The first when I’d gotten the fuck out of my hometown and the second when I’d finally handed in my resignation for active duty.

And the third was right about now—

Behind me, I heard the soft click of the door unlatching from its jamb. I turned, my hand already stretching out to head back to grab it before it flung open and banged against the outside wall and alerted whoever the fuck might be walking by.

I felt the world slow around me as I watched it pull back from the jamb farther, too much for it to be a simple breeze or

a difference in the outside pressure mixing in with the inside air conditioning. What appeared instead was a man.

I froze in place.

“Well,” he said. “I would love to say I’m surprised. But unfortunately, I’m not.”

My eyes went wide.

Liam.

CHAPTER 26

A cigarette was tucked between his lips, dangling slightly out of his mouth as he sighed at me.

“Really, Caleb. After we *just* talked about this?”

My mouth refused to work—refused to form any kind of coherent thoughts or sentences other than a small, choked noise.

No.

No, no, no.

We were so close.

He shook his head at me like a disappointed father, cupping his hands over the end of the cigarette to flare a lighter and light the end of it. He puffed it a few times to get it going before pocketing his lighter again.

“I really don’t know what to do with you, Caleb. I’m at a loss here. *And* you’re taking Ricard’s son with you?”

He shook his head again, a crease forming between his brows. He took a long drag of his cigarette, blowing out the smoke in a dark cloud that dissipated quickly into the night sky.

“All these plans I had for you.” He sighed again, flicking off the ash on the end of it. “Now it looks like I’m going to have to figure something else out.”

I swallowed thickly, finally finding my voice. “You’re... letting me go?”

He took another long drag, staring me down while doing so. He looked so damn tired—as tired as I felt. “No.”

“Liam...”

I hated that my voice came out more as a plea than as a demand. At this point, I was ready for this all to be over with. For one of us to just throw in the towel and walk away and to call it quits before we were really going to have to go down that road and end it like fate was apparently pushing us to do.

“I’m disappointed in you, Caleb. I really thought I could fix you.” He slid a hand into his suit jacket, hand palming the butt of a gun. “But I guess broken things can be mended only so much before they end up crumbling again worse than before.”

Oh fuck.

He flicked the safety off and cocked it. “Go on. I’ll give you a head start.”

“Are... you serious?”

“Get going... it makes it more fun this way...” He smiled sadly, an ominous look in his eyes. He seemed resigned to things taking a turn in this direction. In a way, I could understand. I, too, was ready for this all to be over.

But not like this.

Never like this.

I spun around and sprinted across the lawn, slamming into Ricard and hauling him up by his backpack. I dragged him through the hedges separating the property from the main road, a strangled noise leaving him when I cleared us through the thick branches.

“Holy fuck!”

“Yeah, I know!”

The second the words left my mouth, the sound of a gun firing off shot through the quiet air, followed by the whistle of a bullet whizzing by our heads.

“Shit!”

My hand fisted the back of Ricard's head, throwing us both down onto the ground.

It hit somewhere to the right of us, thunking loudly into something hollow—a tree, I thought vaguely.

“Up! Get to the road!” I hissed at him, lifting him up from the ground and shoving him again.

He stumbled before taking off.

Rolling onto my knees, I ripped the gun out from my waistband and took the safety off, cocking the chamber back and waiting.

Another bullet whizzed by me, splintering the bark next to my head, inches away from where I was kneeling. I shot off two rounds, both of them snapping branches through the shrubs in front of me.

Silence echoed loudly on the other side. There was no sign of a body dropping or either of the bullets landing into anything solid, only my own breathing ringing in my ears giving me an eerie feeling.

Getting back up onto my feet, I took off after Ricard, finding him already climbing his way over the retaining wall with his bag tossed onto the other side.

Using my free hand, I pushed up onto his foot, giving him the extra boost to get him over it and drop onto the ground on the other side.

“Go find Max.”

“But—”

The brick directly next to my hand shattered as a bullet slammed into it, sending pieces of it flying everywhere. I snatched my hand back and stumbled away from the spot, just barely grabbing onto the side of it to keep from falling flat on my ass.

“Go, Ricard!”

“Caleb—”

Another bullet flew past me, forcing me to let go and hit the ground. “Shit!”

On the other side of the wall, I could hear Ricard scramble to get to his feet and take off down the road, his footsteps growing fainter by the second.

Thank fuck.

“Liam!” I called, rolling onto my side to point it at the dark space in front of me. “Don’t.”

I fired off another warning shot.

There were no lights out this way, so it made it hard as fuck to tell what shape was human and what wasn’t. Everything looked like the same shapeless blob that vaguely resembled Liam’s body mass.

There was nothing but me and the small rustling of the trees surrounding the property line.

It was foreboding and didn’t trick me for a second that he’d suddenly come to his senses and given up hunting us down like game animal.

Not with how close those shots had been to landing.

As long as Ricard reached Max at our pick-up point, I did my job. Wishful thinking, maybe, but I could use the delusion with my back literally against a wall.

Slowly standing, I kept my gun out in front of me. It occurred to me suddenly that I had no idea how well trained Liam was in combat—given that he’d come mere inches away from slugging me right in the back when we’d run, it was safe to say that his experience level wasn’t that of a typical businessman.

He came with real skills, and that was the most terrifying part of it all.

Taking the sudden silence as a sign to get moving, I moved and quickly got myself over to the other side of the retaining wall, landing with soft feet and my body squatting low to the road.

This side of the property was connected to a private road that led down to the main road, which headed toward the strip. I hadn't exactly told Max where to meet us other than along this road, but he was smart. If anyone could figure out where the fuck to pick us up, it was him.

Scanning along the wall, I slowly moved across the road with my eyes trained on any sign of movement coming over it. With the trees blocking any kind of light coming from the moon overhead, it made it almost impossible to see anything as I made my way away from the Machiavelli estate.

I walked slowly, but my heart was beating so rapidly I swore the night owls could hear it.

Liam wanting to hunt me down was something I hadn't considered before. Sure, I knew he wanted me back, but this? This shit was like the Hunger Games.

Never would I have thought he'd resort to something so animalistic.

Just how twisted was this man?

I headed up the road until a street light peeked out from between trees, alone and my only source of vision for the next few hundred feet.

"Caleb."

I stopped short, whipping my head around and pulling my gun up to see a figure approaching me from down the road.

I breathed out when I recognized the familiar shape.

Max had a gun clutched in both hands that I could barely see in the dim lighting from the street light, keeping them both aimed at the ground as he got closer.

Relief flooded through me.

"Hey..."

He looked me over carefully, his frown filled with worry. "You good?"

I was now. "Sam okay?"

“She’s back at the car with Ricard. He said you were being shot at.”

“Liam found us.”

“Shit.”

“I know.”

Brushing my shoulder against his, we hurried back where he’d come from, crossing through the unkempt landscaping of the Vegas verges and down another side street until we hit the main road.

His car was pulled off to the side with the hazards on and directly under one of the street lamps lighting up the road. It was a welcomed sight, if I was being honest.

As we approached the car, I saw the light on the inside pop on, shadows moved around in the back seat before the door propped open and Sam’s head peaked out.

“Oh, thank god.”

I held out my arms when she came running for me, catching her and lifting her off of her feet while I buried my face into her hair. I fucking missed her so damn much, I could cry.

“We heard you were getting shot at...” She squeezed me hard. “I’m so happy you’re okay.”

I put her down slowly. “Sorry for scaring you.”

She shoved me, pulling back from me to wipe at her eyes with a watery laugh. “You need to stop doing that.”

I smiled. “Don’t know if I can promise that just yet.”

She looked well, even with her hair slightly messy and bags under her eyes from most likely staying up with Max the entire trip over from Wyoming. I wanted to grab her and kiss her and bend her over the back of the car to show her how much I missed her when a hand came down onto my shoulder to jolt me from the thoughts.

“As much as I love this tear-filled reunion,” Max interjected, “we need to go.”

“Right.” That’s when I heard the distinct whistling sound of a bullet flying through the air. My hands shot out to grab Sam by the front of her shirt, pulling her against me while Max’s hand slapped me on the back of my head, driving me down onto the ground.

He landed somewhere next to me, the bullet ricocheting off of the bumper right next to his face and slicing him clean across the cheek and nose.

“Motherfucker...!”

Sam’s startled gasp had me curling my body over her, protecting her from any stray bullets, my hand cupping the back of her head while it scraped against the rocky asphalt.

Max’s hand slapped against the side of the car hard with the butt of his gun, his entire body twisting around to fire off two bullets into the air from where the shots had come from.

“Start the car!”

I leaned back and lifted Sam up off of the ground, keeping her low and shoving her toward the open back door.

“Go!”

She dove into the backseat, keeping it open while Ricard revved the car to life. I grabbed at Max’s collar and hauled him backward, moving us toward the backseat, while the clutch choked as it was shifted into gear.

His body jolted when he fired off another round, hitting something solid that let out a soft grunt a few yards from us.

Sam had crawled into the front passenger seat, giving Max and me the rest of the backseat to scramble into. The second the door closed, Ricard stepped on the gas and peeled down the street, throwing all of us back from the force of it.

“Jesus fuck.” Ricard’s shoulders were tense as he gripped the steering wheel. “That guy’s *insane*.”

Repositioning myself upright again, I turned to the window and punched the button down. “You’re telling me.”

Sam turned around in her seat, glancing back at us. “You think he’s following us?”

“Don’t know.”

“Fuck us,” Ricard muttered.

Sam was kind enough to reach across his body and buckle him into his seat before doing the same to herself. “Step on it.”

“Don’t worry about cops,” I told him. “We’ll deal with them after we get there.”

Had Liam only followed us on foot, then we were at least in the clear for now. It’d take him a while to figure out where we’d gone, even if we did attract police attention from blowing through a couple of red lights.

But hopefully by then, we’d be long gone.

CHAPTER 27

The safehouse was dark when we arrived.

Out in seemingly the middle of the desert like Ricard had described, and with no neighbors for at least half a mile on either side, he parked the car and sagged in his seat with a long sigh and his hands coming up to rub at his face.

“Everyone check for bullet wounds,” Max called out, patting himself and then glossing a hand over the cut stretching along his nose and cheek.

Sam unbuckled herself and swung around in her seat to look back at us. “You okay?”

I patted myself down, feeling nothing but my sweat-soaked clothes. “All good. You?”

She nodded. “All good. Max, you want a tissue or something?”

“What I want is for people to stop trying to shoot me in the face. That would be nice.”

I leaned forward, knocking my knee against his. “Least you’ve got a matching one on the other side.”

“Oh, fuck you.”

I grabbed onto Ricard’s shoulders from around the driver’s chair to shake him slightly. “You did good, kid.”

He scoffed. “Can’t say I ever thought I’d be a getaway driver.”

“Guess we can add this to your resume.”

He found my eyes in the rearview mirror, his lips tilting up into a slightly smirk.

Sam was the first out of the car, coming around to my side to pop the door open and drag me out into the fresh air. She wrapped her arms around me tight, leaning into me with her full body weight.

“This needs to be over soon,” she mumbled.

My hand rubbed slow circles into her back. “I know.”

What I wouldn't give to pack us both up and get us across the border to someplace tropical. Maybe even one of those honeymoon destinations that had the infinity pools that looked over the ocean. As stupid as it sounded, a vacation away was like a dream at this point.

We couldn't be safe with Liam running around, though. It was safe to say he was willing to go to the ends of the earth to take me down, wiping himself of the debt he created once and for all.

Curling my arm around her, I led her over to the front door of the safehouse. It was a small home in the middle of practically nothing, with the Blue Diamond Mountains cresting in the distance.

Ricard pulled out a set of keys and shoved it into the deadbolt. “There's no security system, but there's plenty of ammo. And a few more firearms.”

“That's fine.” I caught the keys as he tossed them to me.

He pulled out his phone, tapping on the screen a few times to dial a number. “I'm going to call my cousin. She's got another safehouse we can stay at after this one.”

That had me blinking in surprise. Weirdly enough, he didn't seem very rattled. Just like back at the estate, he had a different demeanor about him. He seemed to like being in charge. “Damn, Ricard. What, you got your own little network going on behind your parents back too?”

He shrugged. “Something like that.”

I couldn't help but wonder if Max knew about any of this.

As he wandered off with his phone pressed against his ear, and Max still over by the car pulling our bags out of the trunk, I led Sam through the doorway and into the house.

Her hand patted around on the wall, finding the light switch and flicking it a few times.

Nothing happened.

She turned to me. “You think he’s got a generator?”

The place was well furnished, another thing that surprised me. Had Ricard stayed out here before? And if so, it seemed like it was often enough for him to have made the place comfortable.

I knew the dynamic with his parents wasn’t ideal, but I never thought it was bad enough for him to need a safe space away from them.

Though, knowing him, this place was where he made deals in the dark behind his parents’ backs and not some kind of retreat from the crushing pressure of a future Don.

The latter was much more likely.

“Probably. Let me go check around back.”

As I headed for the door again, she grabbed my wrist. “Wait... should you be out there by yourself?”

She was too endearing.

“I’ll be fine.” I turned around and cupped her face and pecked her lips. “I’ll be back before you know it.”

She watched me for a long moment before letting me go. Moonlight spilled into the front foyer, draping her in a soft glow that gave her an ethereal look. My hand fisted at my side, resisting the urge to reach out and brush my fingers over her cheek gently.

I was getting too distracted.

Heading out, I rounded the corner to the back of the house and spotted a generator already hooked up to the back panel outside of the siding.

I had to hand it to Ricard, the kid came plenty prepared. Even if this did turn out to be some den for his shady dealings, he clearly had a mind to keep things under wraps and out of sight from his parents.

Pulling the latch back on top of the generator, I squinted in the soft moonlight overhead. While the generator had gas in it, it wasn't going to be nearly enough to hold us over for the next few days. All I needed was a little time to get in touch with a few old contacts who could help me sort out Sam's passport situation.

"Damn," I mumbled.

Hopefully Ricard's cousin could come through for us.

Lifting away from the generator, I rounded the side of the house again and stopped in my tracks when a light flashed over the bend in the road coming up over the small hill leading down to the safehouse.

Since this place was out in the middle of the fucking desert, it wasn't hard to notice when a car with only its low-beams on was coming down the small drive. I wasn't aware of any neighbors that Ricard's property had, but this wasn't a private road, so traffic wasn't all that suspicious.

Although...

Low-beams in a desert?

Fuck.

I raced to the front of the house. "Car!"

Max dropped our bags immediately, bending to rip through the biggest one with our guns in it.

I grabbed Ricard and lifted him back up onto the porch from where he'd sat on the lowest step to take his phone call. "Get in the house."

Sam came to the door. "Caleb?"

"In the house. Lock the door."

Her eyes went wide, peering over my shoulder to the car traveling down the road. She backed up and slammed it the

second Ricard cleared the doorway, the deadbolt sliding into place a moment later.

Max tossed a gun and a fresh clip at me, reloading his own two while ducking behind the car on the opposite side of the road. I made my way over to him and crouched down next to the hood, giving me cover and a good view of the road as the car approached.

It wasn't one I was familiar with—an old-looking beamer with a rumbling motor that was out of place coming this far out into the desert.

Max squatted near the back bumper and aimed for the car as it slowly approached, taking two clear shots at the front tires when it grew close enough. The sound of them popping echoed off of the mountains in the distance, loud enough to mimic a small explosion.

The car skidded sideways, brakes engaging hard, before the entire car came to a hard stop. The front of it was angled toward the house at a diagonal, the harsh beams from the lights casting a wide arch of light around both Max and me.

I held my breath in the off-chance that whoever was behind the wheel was some stranger that just happened to be coming down this way on a late-night drive.

But no such thing happened. Instead, whoever was inside the cab remained idling in the same spot, the engine of the car rumbling softly in the quiet night.

I flexed my hand around my gun, flicking the safety off of it.

The car's high-beams came on, blinding me.

Shit.

I ducked my head behind the hood, blinking a few times to clear my vision.

The sound of the door opening had me lifting my head again, squinting into the harsh brightness while a figure stepped out with their hands raised over their head.

“I just want to talk,” Liam called out.

“Don’t move.” Max trained a gun on him, tucking the other into the back waistband of his pants.

“Caleb,” he called again. “I know you’re here. I just want to talk.”

How much fucking talking did this guy want to do?

Back and forth over and over again. It was never ending. Neither of us were ever going to be happy with this arrangement. It needed to end no matter what the outcome was. I couldn’t do this anymore—be trapped in a gilded cage with my captor trying to pretend that I was living in a dream.

I gritted my teeth. “I don’t want to talk, Liam.”

“Caleb.” Gravel crunched under a boot.

Max fired off a warning shot. “Motherfucker. What did I *just* say?”

There was a soft curse, followed with, “Tell your friend to stand down, Caleb.”

Though Liam was shrouded in a dark silhouette cast off from his car’s lights, I could tell that his hands were free of any weapons.

“Please let me shoot him,” Max muttered.

“Caleb, please.” The desperation in Liam’s voice was so out of character that it stunned me for a moment.

This was what he’d been reduced to—a man single-handedly hellbent on world domination, only for some ex-military john like me to come around and tell him no. A word I was sure he’d never heard in his entire life.

I’d let him try to seduce me into a higher lifestyle. He’d shown me what it would be like to a prince in his world and to want for nothing. And yet, I’d chosen a simple girl and fallen in love.

It was everything that someone like Liam would look down on, and I’d done it right under his nose. I’d pushed away the life he’d offered me in favor of one that I chose to work for.

It was honestly a beautiful kind of irony.

Slowly, I lifted myself up to my feet.

“This ends now.”

“I know.” The silhouette of his body sagged as he sighed.
“I know it does.”

The searing pain in my chest came from out of nowhere, knocking me back and crumbling me to the ground. I hit the rocky and uneven driveway with a gasping breath, the wind knocked out of me as pain radiated throughout my body.

“Fuck! Caleb!”

Shots rang out, metal grinding against metal as bullets pelted the car covering us. Multiple guns going off echoed in a trippy sort of fashion as they reverberated off of the mountains and back to us.

He’d brought backup.

Of course he did.

I was so fucking blind.

“*Fuck*, get up!” Max yelled at me. “Don’t you fucking die on me, you asshole!”

I blinked up into the night sky, the warmth from my blood pooling around my shoulder and running down onto the ground beneath my body. It didn’t hurt as badly as I thought it would, getting shot right in the chest.

I’d been shot in plenty of places, but not one so close to a vital organ.

My arm screamed when I lifted it, patting the area that the bullet had pierced. It was closer to my shoulder and up toward my clavicle, not exactly hitting my heart but close enough that it had definitely broken the bones there.

I rolled myself onto my side, grunting softly as the pain flared again.

Goddamn, what a good shot.

That fucker.

The crunching of more gravel caught my attention as another figure came around to the side of the car I was on. I squinted at their shoes, seeing the shiny leather of expensive loafers come into view.

Liam grabbed me by the back of the neck and hauled me to my feet, throwing me onto the other side of the car away from Max.

I skidded across the hood, landing hard on my side. The sound of my bones crunching from the impact made me groan. “Fuuuck...”

The clicking of a gun had me pushing myself onto my back.

He loomed over me, the silver flash of his gun glinting.

“I’m sorry, Caleb.” He smiled sadly. “Hopefully the next one isn’t so rebellious as you.”

I grinned at him. “Good luck. Hope you and your daughter get hunted down.”

His finger flexed on the trigger. “Always one to have the last word, aren’t you?”

“Fuck you, Liam.”

He chuckled. “I suppose I’ll see you in hell, then.”

Right as his finger twitched to pull the trigger, his entire body jerked to the side. Blood splattered in a wide arch from his head, cresting up in a fan that caught the lights in a red wave.

His mouth fell open, eyes going wide while his body shuddered and collapsed onto the ground.

I sucked in a quick breath, pushing up from the ground with my good arm.

The bullet hole in the side of Liam’s head leaked red and clear fluids, draining down the side of his face while he stared at me unseeing. His hand was still clutched around the gun, now unmoving.

I followed the path to where the bullet had come from, all the way over to the front door of the safehouse and to where Ricard was standing just inside of the doorway with a gun held tight in both of his hands.

I hadn't even heard him opening the door, let alone loading a gun and shooting it.

He was staring at Liam's fallen form with a set frown on his face.

My breath caught in my throat, disbelief coming over me.

What the hell just—?

My head snapped back to Liam when he body twitched a sudden and final time before a long sigh let his lips and he went completely lax.

And with that, finally Liam was dead.

CHAPTER 28

It hadn't taken long for Max to take out the other two gunmen Liam had brought with him.

Their bodies soon dropped to the ground in heaps on the other side of the car they'd been ducked under for the past few minutes, trying to get a good shot on Max.

My mind was still reeling from seeing Ricard's finger on the trigger—the set look on his face as he'd realized what he'd done.

Good fucking god, who was this kid—man?—and when did he replace the bratty teenager that I'd come to know?

Sam had run out of the house to come get me once everything was quiet again and there were no more guns going off. She had her hands wrapped around my waist, hauling me up as best as she could until Max was able to help her.

I grunted at being moved around so much, letting them both help me up into the house. My body started to crumble once again as the adrenaline from earlier began to wear off. The pain from my bullet wound wasn't agonizing but hurt like a bitch and was enough for my already exhausted body to collapse into the couch when I'd been brought over to.

Sam tended to me as best as she could, the generator finally being turned on and the lights overhead flickering briefly before they warmed.

The only silver lining to all of this was that Liam had shot me cleanly, so sanitizing and stitching up the area had been easy enough. He'd managed to break my clavicle in the

process—the fucker—but the fracture didn't feel bad enough to need immediate medical attention.

I could still breathe, and that's all that mattered at this point.

“Fuck us, now what?”

I turned slightly to see Ricard hovering over the other end of the couch, his eyes drawn to the gauze Sam was taping to my shoulder. “You call your cousin?”

He rolled his eyes at me. Such a cheeky little shit after shooting a man dead. “I meant with the bodies. They're still outside.”

Actually, that was a good point.

They would need to be moved before daylight hit and some random neighbor did a double take and saw that not only did we have two cars that looked like swiss cheese after being sprayed with bullets, but there were also bodies scattered about.

Honestly, it was probably a massacre out there knowing Max. He didn't tend to make his shots look pretty; he was always going for the efficiency route instead of the glamorous one.

“You got any cleaners in your contacts, kid?”

He shrugged at me. “Yeah, probably.”

Of course he did. I didn't know why I bothered asking anymore. If I didn't know any better, I'd accuse him of having his own fucking mafia already under his thumb.

Actually... it was starting to appear as if that was exactly what he had.

“Have them bring a truck with a long bed. We'll need to ditch Liam's car too, so make sure they've got someone who knows where to dump a car.”

“That sounds all fine and dandy, Winters, but what am I supposed to do with Harrington's body? My parents will

definitely notice him missing in the morning if they haven't already."

Max came around the other side of the couch, leaning over the back to drape himself over it. "He's got a good point."

True.

Not to mention everyone else that would notice Liam's absence—like his own daughter, for instance.

If he hadn't told her he was coming here to bring me back to New York, she'd figure it out on her own. Who else would be bold enough to take out her father if it wasn't the person he'd slighted last?

"You got a cryo fridge or something to preserve his remains? You could sell it to whoever he pissed off the most."

"My god, Caleb." Sam shook her head at me.

I winced slightly. Maybe it was better to tone down the gruesome details while the events of the night were still fresh. No sense in letting my bloodthirsty side—a rare sight these days—get the better of me while Sam was still here.

I leaned back into the couch, shrugging my good shoulder. "Maybe a morgue would do."

Ricard nodded at me, pulling out his phone and punching in whatever contact came to him that he knew had a morgue on hand.

Later when all this was settled, I'd need to get the deets on who his friends were.

Maybe they'd come in handy later on down the line.

She patted my leg. "I'm glad you're okay."

I had half a mind to swing her legs over my lap and tuck her right into my chest to feel her heart beating up against mine.

I'd almost lost everything in the span of a few seconds to an egomaniac who thought putting me down was better than letting me go. I couldn't believe Sam stuck by me through all of this and didn't give up on me.

Oddly enough for the first time in months, even though I was shot, I felt some sense of peace. When we were in New York, I'd experience a sense of calm whenever she was around, but this was different. After everything we had just gone through, I finally had the clarity I'd been searching for. I wanted her in my life forever.

I wanted to spend the rest of my life making sure she felt loved and cared for.

Max chuckled. "You two are insatiable, you know that?"

I ignored him and leaned over to kiss Sam, loving when she swung her legs over my lap and pressed her body against my good side as if she'd read my mind. She kissed me deeply, like she never wanted to let me go. Reciprocating all of my thoughts before I even had a chance to say them out loud.

I felt the couch move slightly as Max swung up from it and headed across the safehouse, his boot shuffling slightly down the hall to where I assumed the bedrooms were.

I pulled back from Sam's lips gently, waiting until she slowly opened her eyes to whisper, "Stay with me."

She smiled. "For how long?"

"Until you're sick of me."

She let out a small laugh. "That's never going to happen."

I kissed her one more time. "Forever, then."

When she cupped my face with her hands, her eyes were brimming with tears.

"I'd love nothing more than to spend the rest of my life with you, Caleb."

God, I truly didn't deserve this woman.

But I was going to spend the rest of my life proving to her that I could.

CHAPTER 29

MAX

I slammed the back of the truck's latch shut, giving the old thing a good solid pat before stepping back from it.

The motor rumbled to life and the man sitting in the front seat flashed me a big thumbs-up in the rearview before cranking the wheel to get the hell out of here.

Clouds of dust kicked up, causing me to squint and raise my arm up to cover my face from the small needle-like pinpricks of rocks hitting my face.

"Fuck," Ricard coughed. "What an asshole. Who takes off like that?"

Amusement tickled me.

I slapped my hand down onto Ricard's shoulder, jostling him mid-rant to stop him from talking. I knew how this shit went, especially when he didn't have a kick of caffeine in him to start the day off right.

Actually, a cup of coffee didn't sound half bad right about now.

The headlights to the truck slowly disappeared into the rising sunlight peeking out over the mountains.

"So... now what?"

I let my hand slip from Ricard's shoulder, nodding for him to follow me back to the house. "Now we get to send our friends off."

I could feel the frown focused on my back. “Is that a good idea? What if someone goes after them?”

Weirdly enough, it was nice to know Ricard cared—even if in the back of my mind, I knew it was for selfish reasons. Like me, he didn’t want other people getting in the way of the Grand Plan or whatever the fuck it was.

Though who knew? Maybe he and Caleb had bonded back at the estate while I’d been throwing back Redbulls and tossing coins at Sam to throw in the toll booths while racing to get over here.

“Best thing for them is to get the fuck out of here before more trouble comes their way.”

Ricard grunted, following me back into the house.

“You get a hold of that passport guy I told you about?”

He nodded. “It’s all set.”

I ruffled his hair, smirking when he shoved me away from him. My eyes tracked him as he headed into the small kitchen to rummage through the cupboards to find whatever he’d left in here the last time he stocked up.

Had I known he’d been using this place, I would’ve had half a mind to tell him to have someone drop off a few gallons of gas for the generator out back.

Shaking my head, I headed to the back bedroom to rap my knuckles against the door. “You two better be decent.”

Fuck knew they weren’t earlier...

“All good,” Caleb called from the other side.

I pushed the door open, leaning my shoulder against the frame of it. “You guys good?”

Sam turned away from the mirror over by the window, her fingers carding through the tangled ends of her hair. No doubt fucked up from Caleb pulling at it all morning.

They were like a couple of horn-dog rabbits, going at it so early in the ass crack of dawn.

The least they could've done was make us all a cup of instant coffee to say, "Sorry for the noise."

Though apparently that was asking too much.

Caleb had his shirt off, a fresh bandage attached to the wound on his shoulder.

I nodded to it. "How's it feel?"

"Good. Better than yesterday."

"Good enough to get on a plane?"

He frowned at me. "To where?"

I shrugged.

A part of me knew as soon as the words were out of my mouth, he was going to be throwing some kind of fit about it. A whole lot of "no, we can't" and "I'm not leaving you behind" kinda bullshit that—while I obviously appreciated—was a waste of everyone's breath.

Not to mention, wasting valuable time in getting them the hell out of here.

"Max," came Caleb's stern voice.

I grunted. "Look—"

"No. Whatever you're going to say, I'm not having it."

I threw up my arms. "At least let me get the words out!"

He shook his head, turning away from me to grab his shirt where it'd been tossed on the bed next to him.

"Caleb."

"What?" he hissed, glaring at me. "What are you going to say to me that's not involving us getting across the border? Because I know that damn look on your face."

"Wow, way to assume."

"Max," he bit out. "Knock it off."

"What's going on, you two?" Sam came over to step in between us, her eyes darting back and forth as she put her hands on her hips. "Why are you both getting so worked up?"

I sighed.

While I liked Sam, she tended to side with Caleb way too often. They both had their heads screwed on way too tight to see the actual bigger picture staring them right in the face. She was just as stubborn as him, and if he put his foot down about something, she was sure to follow.

Like fucking magnets, those two.

I appreciated the die-hard loyalty, but fuck it if wasn't a bitch to hammer into Caleb's head that he was more of a liability now than a helping hand.

"Look, you both need to get out of here. With Liam dead, there's a target on your back, cuz. No nice way to say it, not to mention that Sam's going to be used as a target to get to you."

Both of them frowned at me.

"I'm not leaving you behind." Caleb huffed.

"Not asking you to. I'm *telling* you to. See, there's a difference."

"What about Liam's body?" he argued. "We still need to figure out what to do with it. I'm not leaving until that's taken care of."

"We dragged Liam's body late last night to the back of the property where Ricard had a tool shed with a rusty lock on it." I didn't think Caleb would appreciate us dragging a dead body into the house and being warmed up in there, especially when he and his girlfriend had been getting cozy in their room.

So, shed it was.

"It stayed there until his cousin's guys came 'round to pick it up not long ago. They're taking it to the morgue."

"Max."

I sighed. "We took care of it, Caleb."

"*We*? Who the fuck is 'we'?"

I lifted a shoulder. "The only other two of us who were not sleeping last night..."

Caleb cursed under his breath and rubbed his face with his good side. “I’m not letting you stay here and deal with the fallout of all of this.”

I snorted. “Too bad. I’m already volunteering.”

“There’s no way.” Caleb dropped his hand back into his lap. “That you’re suggesting we leave you and Ricard to deal with his family *and* whoever is coming after him for killing Liam.”

“Yeah,” I spoke slowly. “That’s exactly what I’m suggesting.”

He stared at me. “No.”

Internally, I groaned.

Why did I pick the most stubborn bastard to be friends with? Out of our entire eight-man crew, I chose the one with the worst “dig-my-heels-into-the-dirt” syndrome I’d ever encountered.

“Fine, you want me to be honest? I’ll be honest.” I pushed away from the doorframe to cross my arms. “You’re both a liability. Not only are you going to make cleaning this mess up hard by being in the way, you’re just going to make yourself easy targets for every other ally of Liam’s to come out of the woodwork. I can’t do anything, let alone fix this mess, while I’m too busy protecting you both.”

Caleb shook his head. “I can help you.”

“Not when you’re trying to protect Sam. Who’s going to watch your back and Ricard’s back at the same time? Can’t be Sam. She’s got no training.”

“Really.” His hands fisted around his shirt. “And what about you? Who’s protecting your back?”

“Don’t worry about me.”

Caleb gritted his teeth. “You’re such a son of a bitch, you know that?”

I grinned. “You say that like it’s a bad thing.”

“It *is*.”

“Guys.” Sam put her hands out, stopping us from arguing again. “Please...”

I let my arms drop back to my sides. “Look, it is what it is. I’m staying here to get Ricard back to his family. I’ll be safe hiding with them while we see who crops up once people start realizing Liam’s dead. I know you, Caleb. You’re not going to risk Sam’s safety, and that’s all fine and dandy, but I can’t let you stay visible while doing that. It’s too much of a risk.”

He sighed, rubbing his face again. “What are you suggesting then?”

“You remember that safety deposit box we have?”

He popped his eyes open. “Our ‘get-the-fuck-out’ fund?”

“That’s the one.”

He leaned back suddenly, surprised. “You want me to use it? Why? It’s for emergencies.”

I gestured around us. “Kind of an emergency situation right now, isn’t it?”

His lips parted to argue with me but soon snapped shut when he had nothing else to say.

“Right.” I nodded. “Take it and go someplace nice. I heard Bali’s wonderful this time of year.”

He stared at me for a long while, emotions shifting in his eyes. Obviously he wanted to argue, but he knew deep down I was right. I felt bad forcing his hand like this, but if this was the only way I could save my brother, then I didn’t mind being a bastard about it.

He could be pissed at me all he wanted, as long as he did it on the other side of the planet and *alive* at that.

We’d been through hell and back together and like fuck I was letting some fucking asshole take him out when I was busy looking the other way.

As long as he used our disappearing fund, he’d be good to go. No traces would be left behind of him, and I could get

creative with faking his death without the hassle of worrying about something else cropping up in the meantime.

It wasn't a perfect plan, but it was good enough to get people to stop looking for him and Sam.

Caleb sighed softly. "It's not going to stop me from contacting you once we're settled."

I grinned. "I'll obviously want pictures of you both sipping Mai Tais on the beach so I can live vicariously through you."

That had him lightening up and smiling a bit. "Yeah, yeah. All right."

Sam was still frowning when she looked at me. "You're sure about this?"

I threw her a wink. "Deadly."

Shaking his head, Caleb stood and pulled his shirt on, getting a little help from Sam as he struggled getting it over his bad shoulder. A little R&R for both of them would do them some good. They were looking pretty beat up as it was, not to mention pasty.

The sun and the heat would do them both some good and get them far away from this shit-hole.

Ricard walked up with a piece of paper in his hand. "Plane's ready, and the car is on its way."

Caleb paused. "Wait, right now?"

"You both need to get out of here." He pulled a burner phone out of his pocket and handed it to Caleb along with the piece of paper with two numbers on it. "Text the top number when you're ten minutes from the airport. They'll meet you at the plane with a passport for your girl. The second number is the pilot. Text him right after that so shit's ready when you get there."

I folded my arms behind my back while a smile tried to creep across my face. Who would've thought I'd see the day when Ricard gave Caleb orders?

Caleb stared for a long moment. “Seriously... I don’t know what’s happened to you, but it’s kind of weirding me out.”

He reached over to rough up Ricard’s hair one last time, but there was a resounding smack before he got too far. Instead of letting it go, though, Caleb grabbed him and pulled him in for a hug, patting him on the back. “You take care of my brother, you hear me?”

Ricard rolled his eyes over Caleb’s shoulder, giving in to the tender treatment. “Yeah, yeah. Obviously. Why the fuck would I purposely get him killed?”

“Good.”

Caleb came over to clap me on the shoulder before pulling me into a tight hug. “Kid’s freaking me out...”

I chuckled. “Let’s just say, we’ve been working on a few things while you were gone.”

“Clearly...”

I laughed at his bewilderment. If he only knew what this kid was capable of. But the less he knew, the better.

“You take care of yourself, you hear me? If I get a call from Ricard telling me you’re dead, I’m going to be so pissed.”

I squeezed him back. “Promise not to use a ouija on me.”

“Absolutely not. You’re coming back to haunt me, remember?”

I groaned, pulling away from him. “You know, you’re not supposed to use what I say a thousand feet up in the air hanging over a bridge against me. I think that’s some kind of violation of ethics.”

He patted my shoulder twice. “Too bad.”

As he moved away from me, I was surprised when Sam came over and hugged me as well.

Not that she wasn’t a kind soul, but I figured she’d gotten rather sick of being stuck in a car with me for over fourteen

hours. I hadn't exactly been the best driving companion either.

Though, then again, neither was she.

Guess that's what stress and the thought of one of the only people you cared about possibly being beaten to death did to you.

"Take care of yourself, okay?" she said softly.

No promises...

"Of course," I told her, smiling when she pulled back from me. "Now off you lovebirds go. You've got a plane to catch."

Caleb wrapped an arm around Sam, pulling her against him to peck a soft kiss on top of her head.

I tried not to let the sight choke me up as they gave Ricard one last hug and both turned around to gather their things, eventually heading to the airport.

There was no guarantee that I'd ever see them again—more than likely I was going to end up in a body bag by the end of this. But at least I could get them free of this debt, this fucked-up karma that had somehow attached to my best friend, my brother, the one person in my life that I'd actually take a bullet for.

As long as he could be free to live the life he deserved, that was enough for me.

Even if I didn't live long enough to see it.

But that was a thought for another day.

For now, I had shit to do.

* BONUS SCENE *

THE MEETING



Keep reading for a * SNEAK PEEK *
from “The Meeting”...

THE MEETING

BONUS SCENE

“**Y**ou’re ready right?”

“Sure am, boss.”

Ricard huffed to himself and turned back to look out the window next to him. That typical crease between his brows was more pronounced lately, I’d noticed.

It was dusk outside of the window with purple fluffy clouds covering the horizon, giving the reds and oranges a weird contrast. Down below, I could already see that the city lights were beginning to twinkle.

“You know you can’t call me that in the meeting, right?” I searched his eyes and watched his body language for any hesitations.

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Simone Fox is a steamy romance author who loves to write about sexy bad boys.

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