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HEATHER MACKINNON



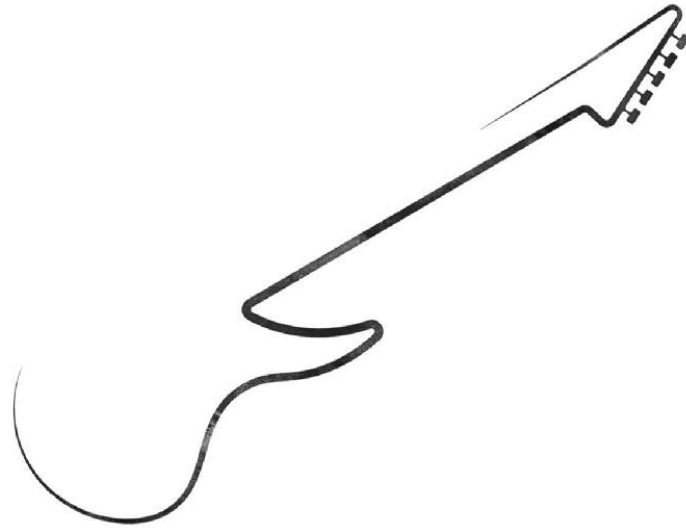
Rhythm
BOOK ONE

SOUTHERN WEREWOLF
ROCKSTAR SERIES

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HEATHER MACKINNON

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Chapter 1

Declan

Who the hell do I have to bang to get a drink around here?”

All the men in expensive suits standing around ignoring me froze, and I worked to hold back a laugh. My manager, Mason, growled softly from a few feet away, but I pretended not to notice.

We’d been at this stupid label party all night, and my drink had been empty for at least half an hour. There was only so much self-control I had left.

Besides, I’d been on my best behavior the whole time. I was just thirsty and sick of being talked over. Was it my fault these record execs had such large sticks up their asses?

“Uh,” one of them said, finally breaking the silence. “Sorry. Let me just find Will—”

“Oh no,” I yelled over him, causing even more people to stop and stare. “I’m not fucking some dude for a little champagne. That’s too far.”

The man blanched, and it took everything in me to keep the smile off my face. “Of course, we would never expect—”

“A handy *maybe*, but only with the lights off. And I’m sayin’ *maybe*.”

The poor guy’s eyes went wide as his face turned red, and this time I couldn’t stop the chuckle from bursting out of my mouth.

“You’re an idiot,” Theo muttered from next to me, but I ignored my bandmate. He’d become a lot less fun since he found his fated mate a few years ago.

I shrugged and held up my empty champagne flute as I heard the sounds of rapidly approaching feet. “Will, darling,” I called as I waved the glass in the air. “Be a dear and fetch me some more champagne.”

“Here you go, sir.”

My whole body froze as my gut twisted deep inside me. I turned to find one of the caterers in their frumpy black and white uniforms, but this wasn’t the dude I was expecting. Instead, it was a woman with long ginger hair tied into a braid at the back of her head and dark green eyes that seemed to see right through me.

I stood there and stared at her for a long time as one of her brows quirked and her face fell. “Um,” she said, her voice like a fucking melody. “Did you want this?” she asked as she nodded to the glass of champagne she was still holding out to me.

“Shit,” I muttered as I reached for it. My fingers brushed against her smooth skin, and my gut churned harder. “Thanks.”

“You’re welcome,” she said, her words trembling just the slightest as she placed her hand back on the serving tray.

She started to leave, and I jumped into action. I’m not sure if she was trying to get back to her job or trying to get away from me, but it didn’t matter.

I needed to talk to her.

“Will, you are by far the hottest guy I’ve ever seen,” I blurted out.

She gasped, and I could smell the blood rush to the surface of her skin, but there was something else. A hint of something wild. Something ancient.

She was a werewolf like me.

Her pretty eyes darted to mine, and my heart began to thump unevenly. But when they slowly narrowed, I felt my balls shrivel up into my abdomen.

“Do I *look* like a guy to you?” she asked, with a wave at herself.

I took that as an invitation to stare and wasted no time gluing my eyes to every curve of her body. They weren’t easy to find under the shapeless clothes, but it didn’t really matter. She’d be hot in a fucking garbage bag.

“The shitty uniform is a little deceiving, but no. You definitely look like a chick to me.” Her eyes lit with fire, and I couldn’t hold back a smile. “Why do you have a dude’s name, then?”

She rolled her eyes and turned away. “My name isn’t *Will*. It’s *Willow*.”

That should have been that.

She was just another caterer at another label party. Sure, she was hot, but so were hundreds of other girls in this city.

Besides, if she was interested, she wouldn’t be walking away from me right now. She’d be batting those long eyelashes and giggling at all my lame jokes while trying to get me to invite her back to my place.

Instead, she was walking the other way, her ass swaying so hypnotically, I took a step in her direction before I could stop myself.

“Are you sure that’s a good idea?” I turned to find another bandmate, Sawyer, standing behind me with a concerned look on his face. Before I could open my mouth and lie, he spoke again. “You know how the label’s been on Mason about our image. Fucking the caterer is not a good look.”

“I’m not gonna fuck the caterer. I just want a drink.”

Sawyer snorted as his twin brother, Walker, joined us. “Right.”

I rolled my eyes as I turned away. “Why don’t you concern yourself with your own chick? Your phone sex session last

week was pitiful. I really expected more from a couple who's been together for so many years."

Sawyer's face turned bright red, but I walked away before he could say anything. It wasn't easy getting under the stoic werewolf's skin, but like always, I somehow managed.

"So, Will," I said as I stepped up next to her. "Are you from around here?"

Her green eyes went wide before she apologized to the suits she was serving champagne to. "Did you need something, sir?" she asked when she turned back toward me, that fire in her gaze already stoked to life.

"Sure. I'll take a drink."

Willow glanced down at my hand, still holding a full champagne flute, and ground her teeth together. "You haven't even finished that one," she said before she turned to walk away again.

I moved to block her path as I lifted the glass to my lips and drained it. Truthfully, I shouldn't be drinking like this in public, but it wasn't like it would do anything to me. Our metabolisms were too fast for regular human alcohol to have an effect. But still, if Mason was worried about our image, slamming back champagne at a label event wouldn't look good.

But that didn't stop me.

When the liquid was gone, I set the empty glass on her tray and held out my hand. "Now I'll take that drink."

Willow ground her teeth again as she handed me another flute of champagne. “Here you go.”

I purposely reached out and wrapped my hand around both her fingers and the glass. The low-grade stomachache I’d had since I first heard her voice finally dissipated, and I sighed in relief.

“Um.”

I looked up to find Willow’s horrified eyes darting from my face to where I still held her hand. A low chuckle rumbled out of my chest before I finally took the glass and let her go. “Thanks,” I said as I lifted it to my lips again.

My eyes didn’t leave her for a second, so I didn’t miss the harsh way her throat bobbed as she watched me. And even though the party was way too loud, it was impossible to miss how fast her heart was racing.

She stood there for another few moments before she blinked and shook her head. Willow backed up a step and spoke again. “Enjoy your evening,” she said before she spun on her heel and walked away.

This was another opportunity to do the right thing. To leave this woman alone and let her do her job. To be on my best behavior so Mason didn’t bitch.

But again, I didn’t do that.

“Hey, do you like swords?” I asked Willow as I caught up to her again.

She glanced at me out of the corner of her eye but didn't stop walking. "Not particularly."

"Why not?" I asked, my voice carrying over the other conversations around us.

Willow's face blanched as her gaze darted around us. "I'm just not the biggest fan of weapons," she whispered before she tried to walk away again.

"Ah, but a weapon is only bad if it's used to do bad things, right?" I asked as I followed her.

Willow glanced at me out of the corner of her eye. "I suppose."

"That's why I think you'd like *my* sword," I announced. "It's never been used for evil, only good."

She stopped walking away and turned to me with a cocked brow. Her dark eyes raked along my body before she finally dragged them to my face again. "Ah. I see." Willow's graceful hands repositioned on the serving tray before she started speaking again. "Well, *sir*, I'm not interested in your *sword* or any other weapon you may possess. If you'd like something to drink, I'd be more than happy to help you."

"I'd be happier talking about my sword."

Willow's eyes dipped below my belt before her pale cheeks turned pink, and she cleared her throat. "I'd be happier doing my job."

Her words were sharp, but not sharp enough to deter me.

“Okay, we can talk about your job.”

Willow blew out a deep breath through her teeth, and I held back a laugh. “I didn’t say I wanted to *talk* about my job, I said I wanted to *do* my job.”

I waved a hand like the distinction didn’t matter. “How long have you been a caterer? Is it something you always wanted to do? Did you consider the uniform before taking the job? Because it’s horrendous.”

Willow squeezed her eyes closed and took another deep breath, this one through her nose. “Sir—,”

“It’s Declan.”

Her lids snapped open, and her green eyes blazed my way. “*Sir*,” she repeated, with more venom this time. “Can I get you something to drink?”

Seeing that she wasn’t in the mood to talk about her job or that uniform, I switched lanes. “Sure. Could I get some moonshine?”

Willow’s eyes flashed my way, and I knew she knew what I meant. I was talking about the alcohol specially made for werewolves and only served at very specific places. If she didn’t know what I was before, she sure as shit did now.

“No,” she finally replied, her voice lower than before. “They don’t serve that here.”

I sighed loudly and held out my hand. “I guess champagne will have to do.”

Willow watched me carefully for a moment, her teeth digging into her bottom lip as she did. Finally, she straightened up and said, “They have wine too if you want. And I think I saw some beer in the fridge in the back.”

My stomach cramped even harder as I studied the sweet expression on her face. Gone were the lines of irritation I’d caused, and without them, she was even more stunning. I realized I’d been staring too long when her brows furrowed, and her lips quirked to the side.

“A beer would be great, actually.”

Willow nodded and turned for the back door before I could say anything else. I watched her ass again as I wondered how far I was going to take this.

Sawyer was right. The label had more than a few meetings with Mason recently about the headlines we created, and I knew he was getting fed up. Between Walker’s pregnancy scandal with the roadie, Theo getting shot by Mason’s assistant, and Roman’s physical altercation with the paparazzi, we’d had a rough couple of years.

But there was something about Willow I just couldn’t ignore. Something that drew me to her in a way I’d never felt before. Something that told me to not let this one go.

I’d never been so sure of something in my life, and the dicks at our record label weren’t going to keep me from her.

That feeling in my gut intensified, and I looked up in time to see Willow coming through the back door with her tray empty

except for one drink. Her eyes met mine, and I watched a million emotions race through them as she walked back over to me.

Wariness. Suspicion. Interest. Anxiety. Fear. Hope. And then nothing.

She blinked, and her face was wiped clean of any thought she might be having. I didn't know how she'd done it, but the door she'd just slammed between us was locked up tight.

"Here," she said as she handed me a frosty glass of beer with a slice of orange wedged onto the rim. "I hope you like Blue Moon because that's all they have back there."

I could feel the moment growing awkward as I stared at the condensation sliding down the glass. Finally, I cleared my throat and threw on the best idiotic smile I could manage. "You did all this for me?"

Willow's cheeks turned pink again as she looked away. I could tell I'd made her uncomfortable, and I hated that.

Without thinking, I grabbed her free hand and dragged her closer. I dipped my head and looked straight into her eyes as I said, "I think I'm in love. Will you marry me?"

Her pink lips fell open with shock, and I even heard her breath hitch in her throat before my words sank in, and she rolled her eyes.

"We don't get *married*," she muttered as she pulled her hand from my grasp and took a step back.

She was referring to the fact that werewolves *mated* instead of *marrying*, and I just grinned. “I could make an exception for you,” I said with a wink.

Willow’s expression didn’t change, but I still heard her heart stutter in her chest. Despite how hard she tried to act unaffected, she wasn’t. And that was all I needed to know.

“What are you doing after work?” I asked as I took a small step in her direction.

Her eyes darted around the packed room before landing on mine again. “Um.”

“That sounds like fun. Can I join you?”

This time, Willow’s gaze grew wide as she looked up at me. “Um.”

“Willow!”

Her heart stopped beating for a moment before she straightened up and glanced over my shoulder. “I need to go,” she said as she tried to step around me.

I moved with her. “But what if I need another drink?”

“There are a dozen other servers here,” she said as she tried to take another step away from me.

“Okay, but what about after your shift? Are you free?” I asked as I shadowed her again.

“I... don’t think so.” This time, she actually made it past me.

“Why not?”

She turned back to me and glanced around to make sure no one was paying attention to us. “That just sounds like a really, *really* bad idea.”

“Sometimes bad ideas lead to the most fun.”

“Goodbye Declan,” she said before she spun around and walked away.

I watched her ass sway as she hurried away from me. Now I needed to figure out a way to get her to say my name again.

Chapter 2

Willow

Why is Declan Holmes staring at you right now?”

I worked to swallow past my dry throat, but it wasn't easy. “Who?”

Vicki scoffed as she turned to me with a hand on her hip. “You're telling me you don't know who Declan Holmes is? The rhythm guitarist for the biggest band of all time?”

“Aren't The Beatles the biggest band of all time?”

She rolled her eyes as she adjusted her standard black tie. “Yeah, maybe a hundred years ago. Today the biggest band is Phase, and if you're not interested, I sure am.”

Vicki stood up a little straighter and fiery hot jealousy ripped through my veins. She was tall and blonde and so freaking pretty I knew she could have any guy in here. But did she need to go for *that* one?

“I didn't say I wasn't interested,” I muttered as I took a quick glance over my shoulder. I'd meant to be sneaky, but that was impossible when the person you were trying to spy on was already staring directly at you.

I whipped back around and pretended like I was busy filling my tray again. My boss had already yelled at me once for slacking off, and I couldn't afford to lose this job. I was only a couple thousand dollars away from my goal, and freedom was so close I could almost taste it. I wouldn't do anything to jeopardize that.

“Ha,” Vicki scoffed again. “Even if you did get a guy like Declan Holmes, what would you do with him? Play Minecraft?”

My face burned, but I kept my chin to my chest so she couldn't see. “I haven't played Minecraft in months. I've been too busy with school.”

Vicki puffed her chest out and licked her lips as she turned around. “Then you're too busy to go home with Declan Holmes tonight.”

“I—,”

Before I could say anything else, Vicki tipped her chin in the air and began strutting through the party toward Declan. I watched carefully as his bright blue eyes jumped from me to her and back again.

It seemed like he didn't want to look away, but when she came to a stop right in front of him, he had no choice.

“Hi,” she said, her voice breathy, like she'd just run a mile to get to him.

“Hey there,” Declan said as he ripped his eyes off me to look at her. “How you doin'?”

“Better now,” Vicki said with a little giggle that was faker than her bleached hair.

Declan’s smile was pleasant as he reached in his back pocket and pulled out a Sharpie. “Did you want me to sign something?”

I bit my lip to hold back a laugh as Vicki wilted before my eyes. It didn’t last long, of course. A moment later she was back to arching her back to stick out her chest.

“You can sign these,” she said, her voice deep and husky now.

My mouth fell open in shock as I watched this woman blatantly throw herself at him in the middle of a party she was supposed to be working at.

“How about I sign a picture instead?” he said with a grimace I think was supposed to be a smile.

Vicki’s face fell, and I had to hold back another giggle. “Fine,” she said as she unbuttoned her sleeve and rolled it up her arm. “How about here?”

Declan shrugged as he uncapped his marker. “Sure.”

I watched carefully as he wrapped one hand around her wrist and bent his head over her arm. This was nothing. Just a musician giving out an autograph.

So why did it feel like a betrayal?

Why was my throat slowly closing and my heart straining to pump as I watched them interact?

“Make sure to leave your number there too,” Vicki said, like she knew those words would be the final nail in my coffin.

Declan had shown interest in me first, but I’d turned him down. Repeatedly. What did I expect? That he’d wait around for *me*? Frumpy and freckled Willow Greene?

Not likely.

“Okay,” Declan said with a shrug as he went back to writing on her arm.

I tried to hide the wince, but that single word was like a slap to the face.

When he was done, he lifted his head with a smile and turned to wink at me before he capped the marker and tucked it behind his ear. “Okay. All done!”

Vicki lifted her arm with a coy smile that slowly faded as she read what he’d written. “What’s the number thirteen for?”

Declan’s lips spread into a wide grin as his eyes darted back to me quickly. “That’s my favorite number.” Vicki’s brows furrowed, but his smile never dimmed. “You asked for my number. Thirteen *is* my number.”

Her mouth contorted into some kind of frown as her forehead creased with confusion. “Um. I meant your telephone number.”

“Oh,” he said, and in that one syllable, I could tell he’d known exactly what she’d meant, and he didn’t care. Declan’s eyes found me again as he lifted his beer to his lips and drained the contents. “I don’t give my phone number out to

strangers. But thanks for asking,” he said with a smile so big and beautiful I saw stars from here.

Without another word, he stepped around Vicki and started heading my way. His eyes didn’t leave mine once, and I had no doubt about his intentions. But my heart still slammed to the back of my throat when he stopped right in front of me.

“Hey, Will. Could you get me another beer?”

I pressed my lips together to hide my smile. “You know you could have asked any of us for a refill,” I said with a casual wave toward where Vicki stood watching us and fuming.

Declan shrugged. “But I didn’t want to ask just anyone.” The sincerity in his tone drew my eyes back to his. “I wanted to ask *you*.”

How was I supposed to resist that?

How was I supposed to keep fighting this?

I plucked the empty glass from his hand, careful not to touch his skin. “You know, you can’t always expect this sort of special treatment.”

“Says who?”

I rolled my eyes at his antics before turning to fetch his beer. The longer I stood in his presence, the worse my brain seemed to function, and that was a problem.

My entire life had been about controlling myself and my destiny, and Declan was threatening to upheave all of that. His

charming smile and baby blue eyes alone were almost enough to break all my rules.

But damn.

The way he watched me. Like I fascinated him. Like I was the most interesting person he'd ever seen. Like he could stand there all day with his eyes on me just sipping his beer.

It made my toes curl in my non-slip shoes and the hair on my arms stand on end. It should have felt intrusive to be stared at like that, but it didn't.

Instead, it was thrilling.

I'd *never* had a guy show me attention like this before. Hell, I'd only been with one man, and he was just an old study partner. Most of the time, he'd paid more attention to his textbooks than he did to me.

So, although Declan's constant focus was new, it somehow wasn't uncomfortable. And that meant something different coming from the girl who'd tried to be a wallflower her whole life.

"What the fuck, Willow?" Vicki said as she burst through the door and stormed across the kitchen.

I was busy pouring Declan's Blue Moon into a fresh glass, so I didn't bother to look up. "What's the matter?"

"What's the matter?" she repeated, her voice twice as loud as mine had been. "Why did you let me walk over there and ask for his number? I just made a complete ass out of myself."

I frowned at the golden, foamy liquid as I emptied the bottle. Honestly, I only put up with Vicki because she was someone to talk to at work. She was a little superficial and a little vapid, but she was usually nice enough.

That was probably because I'd never stood in between her and something she wanted before.

"I didn't tell you to go over there," I reminded her as I moved to put the empty beer in the recycle bin.

"No, but you let me do it!"

I snorted as I cut another slice off the orange I used earlier and slipped it onto the glass. "Like you would have listened if I tried to stop you."

Vicki was quiet, but I could still feel her eyes on me, so I knew we weren't done yet. "Do you two know each other?"

I shrugged. "I served him a drink earlier."

She didn't need to know about the conversation we'd had or the way he'd followed me around the room.

"Then why is he so interested in you?"

I'm not sure she even meant for her words to sting, but they did. It was just a reminder that I'd been the forgettable friend my entire life.

Until today, I guess.

"I dunno," I finally said with a shrug as I put his beer on my tray and lifted it off the counter. "Maybe he has a thing for red-heads."

Vicki snorted as she eyed my strawberry-blond hair suspiciously. “Maybe,” she finally conceded, although it looked like it hurt her to say.

Thankfully, it seemed like our conversation was over, so I walked past her and out of the kitchen.

And right into someone’s hard chest.

“Oof,” I said as my nose collided with a nipple. The beer on my tray wobbled dangerously, but at least I was able to keep it from tipping over.

Someone chuckled, and I noticed my belly twisting like it did earlier around Declan. I pulled back and looked up into his blue eyes that already somehow seemed familiar.

“Hey,” he said with a grin.

My heart shot to the back of my throat before I remembered where I was. And more importantly, *who* I was.

I cleared my throat and took a quick step away from him. “Hi. Here’s your beer,” I said as I shoved the drink in his direction.

Declan once again wrapped his hand around both my fingers and the glass, but this time he didn’t let go. I finally relented and met his eyes which were already focused on me.

“You didn’t answer my question from earlier.”

I frowned. “What question?”

“I asked what you were doing after work and if I could join you.”

I tried to swallow, but my throat was too dry. “Oh. Um.”

Declan laughed. “That’s what you said last time.”

A nervous giggle spilled from my lips before I could press them together. “Uh. I was just going to go home. And study.”

“Study?” he asked, like the word offended him.

“Yeah. I have a final on Monday.”

“But it’s Thursday.”

“Right, which means I only have four days left.”

Declan rolled his eyes. “Do you think you could take *one* night off from studying?”

Realistically? Yeah, I could. And after a night like this, binge-watching K-dramas in my fleece pajamas was probably what I’d wind up doing, anyway.

But I was pretty sure that’s not what Declan had in mind.

“We could go get a burger or something,” he said, but it was more like a question. “If you have to eat the shit they’re serving us here, you’ve gotta be hungry.”

“They actually don’t let us eat.”

Declan’s eyes grew wide with outrage. “What?” he yelled. “Why the hell not?”

I shrugged, my eyes darting around to make sure my boss hadn’t heard his outburst. “The food isn’t for us, it’s for the guests.”

“That’s bullshit,” he muttered as he grabbed my wrist and dragged me through the party. “Here,” he said as he swiped an appetizer plate off a passing server’s tray. “Eat this.” Declan shoved the food toward me, but I dodged his offering.

“No, thanks. I’m fine.”

“You’re not fine. You’re probably starving!”

I rolled my eyes. “I’m not *starving*. I’ll eat after my shift.”

His blue eyes scanned my body quick before he shook his head. “No. You need to eat something right now, and *then* you can let me buy you dinner later.”

I glanced around and took a step closer in order to keep our conversation as private as possible. “I’m not allowed to eat the food we’re serving, and I can’t afford to lose this job,” I whispered as sternly as I could.

Declan was obviously not as worried about secrecy. “Will, I’m telling you right now, if you don’t put this weird little cracker thing in your mouth, I’m gonna cause a scene.”

I pressed my lips together to stop a smile from spreading, but it was impossible. “That’s a gourmet hors d’oeuvres.”

“It looks like it’s already been eaten once, but I don’t give a shit,” he said as he held it in front of my face.

I tried to resist, but it was obvious Declan wasn’t going to budge, and I couldn’t afford the “scene” he’d promised. So, I opened my mouth and with a carefulness I hadn’t expected, he placed the cracker on my tongue before retreating.

He hadn't even touched me, but I felt hot all over. And when I got the courage to meet his eyes again, they blazed so bright, it almost hurt to look at him.

I glanced away before I could lose myself in that sky blue color and worked to chew the hors devours. Honestly, it tasted just as bad as it looked, and I swallowed it as quickly as I could.

"You were right," I croaked as the dry cracker worked its way down my throat. "That was disgusting."

Declan chuckled and held his beer out to me. "Here. Wash it down."

My eyes went wide before they darted around the party again. "Are you nuts? I can't drink while I'm working!" I whisper-yelled.

Declan rolled his eyes. "It's just one sip. No one's gonna see."

I looked around again and had to admit no one was paying attention to us. And that hors devours was really nasty.

After another quick glance I grabbed his glass, took a quick gulp, and thrust it back in his hand. The whole process took less than two seconds, but my skin was still flushed with guilt from head to toe.

I'd never broken a rule in my life until I met Declan. He had this way of making bad ideas seem like good ones. I knew he was trouble and yet, the longer I spent with him, the less I wanted to listen to that little voice telling me this was wrong.

“So.”

Declan’s voice broke me out of my mental spiral, and I swallowed hard before I looked up at him again.

“Are we getting burgers after this party or what?”

His persistence was relentless, and I was out of reasons to refuse him.

“A burger?” I asked, because even though he’d won, that didn’t mean I had to go quietly.

“Or we can get pizza.”

“Are those my only options?”

His eyes widened, and I didn’t miss the way his heart started to race. “Does that mean you’re going out with me?”

“I don’t know. Are burgers and pizza my only options?”

“Fuck no. You can have whatever you want.”

My lips twitched with a smile. “Okay, I want barbecue.”

“Barbecue?”

I nodded. “I want a whole rack of ribs to myself.”

His head tipped back with a laugh.

“And mac and cheese. And cornbread,” I added.

“Is that all it takes to get you to go out with me?”

I shrugged. “This time.”

Declan’s heart thumped unevenly once again as a grin spread across his face. “Deal.”

Chapter 3

Declan

What are you doing back here?”

I jumped and gasped as I spun to face my manager.
“Mason! What the fuck?”

He just narrowed his eyes at me. “What are you doing back here?” he asked again.

“What are *you* doing back here?”

Without a word, he reached into his pocket and pulled out a set of keys. He pressed a button and a pair of headlights flashed from nearby. “I parked back here. Now, I’ll ask you again: What the hell are you doing back here?”

I sighed as I glanced toward the rear door of the event space and then turned to Mason. “Avoiding the paparazzi?”

Mason sighed too. “You know when you phrase your answers like questions I don’t believe you, right?”

“Fine. I was just out here taking a breather, okay? After that big party full of people, I needed a little time to myself.”

Mason pursed his lips before looking pointedly at the dumpster full of rotting food less than five feet away. “You decided to come *here* to take a *breather*?”

I tipped my head back and rolled my eyes. “*Fine*. I just—,”
“Enough,” Mason said over me as he put a hand in the air. “Just stop.” He shook his head before pinching the bridge of his nose and sighing. “Are you out here waiting to bother that waitress again?”

My mouth dropped open with a gasp. “I haven’t been *bothering* anybody!”

Mason just stared at me until I had to look away. “Right,” he said before letting out another sigh. “Listen, Declan, I’m not in charge of your dick or what you do with it, but if I have to explain one more headline to the label, I’m going to lose my fucking shit.”

“I hate to break it to ya, Masey, but I think you lost your shit a long time ago.”

His brown eyes darkened as he drilled them into mine. “Keep your business out of the papers or keep your dick to yourself. Got it?”

Mason was the closest thing to an alpha we had in our little group of werewolves, so when he got pissed, we all listened.

“I got it, Masey. I’m just gonna get some food. Nothing scandalous, I promise.”

He eyed me critically for another long moment before he shook his head. “I still don’t believe you, but I’m too fuckin’

tired to argue.” Mason turned around and headed for the parking lot. “Make sure you’re ready and downstairs at *your* apartment building by ten tomorrow morning,” he called over his shoulder. “I have a car picking you up to bring you to the radio station for your interview.”

I didn’t even know we had an interview tomorrow.

“Got it, Masey. See you in the morning! Sweet dreams, Shnookums!”

His growl from across the lot only made me laugh. It died soon after though when I heard the steel door slam open behind me, and my gut started to churn.

Dozens of workers had already left the building, but I’d been waiting for one in particular.

Willow stumbled through the doorway as she struggled to hold onto her phone, a water bottle, and what looked like a takeout container. A smile pulled at my lips as I watched her fumbling with her things, seemingly unaware I was here.

Her ginger hair was starting to escape her braid and curl around her face while her freckled nose scrunched in concentration. Willow finally got herself situated with a sigh of relief, and I couldn’t hold back the chuckle any longer. Her dark eyes snapped up, their depths filled with fear and shock for only a second before she recognized me.

My heart pounded in my chest as I watched her gaze soften, and her lips curl with a smile. I stood there like an idiot, frozen to the spot as she sauntered over.

“What are you doing back here?”

Another chuckle burst out of me. “I’ve been hearing that a lot lately.” Willow frowned, and I laughed again. “I was waiting for you, obviously.”

Her eyes widened with the tiniest bit of shock. “Really?”

I scoffed and grabbed her wrist as I started walking. “You’re not gonna tempt me with barbecue ribs and then back out, are you?”

Not like I was giving her a choice as I hauled her toward the street where I had a car waiting.

“I just figured when I saw you leave that you’d changed your mind.”

Her voice was soft and even sounded a little hurt, which was *not* okay. I ground to a halt before I spun around to face her.

“I wanted to give you some space to finish what you needed to do,” I said with a shrug. “You know, you could have solved this problem by giving me your number sooner. Then I could have texted to let you know I was waiting out back for you.”

Willow bit her lips like she was holding back a smile before she shook her head. “Oh, this is my fault?”

“I’m glad you understand,” I said as I reached into my pocket and pulled out my phone to hand to her. “Better hurry up and give me your number so we can make sure this never happens again.”

A soft chuckle fell from her lips as she took my cell and saved her information. Before I could say anything, she placed a call to herself and waited for it to ring before hanging up and handing the phone back to me.

“Problem solved,” she said with a wide smile that made my heart slam against my ribcage. “But I already have dinner,” she added as she held up the white Styrofoam container.

I sneered at the box. “What is *that*?”

“Leftovers,” she said with a shrug.

I shook my head as I took the container and my phone back from her. “I’m throwing this away,” I said in reference to the food.

Willow’s eyes went wide. “No! That’s perfectly good food!”

“Good?” I yelled louder than I’d meant to.

Willow pursed her lips for a moment before she snatched the food from my hand and took a step back toward the building. “I’ll get rid of it, but I’m not throwing it out.”

“Then what are you doing?” I asked as I propped a hand on my hip.

“I’m gonna bring it back inside and see if anyone else wants it.”

“Almost everyone else is gone.”

Her eyes flashed with anger, and I could barely hold back my laugh.

“There are still a few people left, and they might be hungry,” she said before she turned around and walked away.

I stood there, running her words through my head as I watched her head back inside. She was only in there a few minutes, but it felt like forever.

“Okay. Now what?” she asked when she made it over to me again.

“Did you have a barbecue place in mind?” I asked. “Or are you leaving it up to me?”

Willow’s big green eyes narrowed as she watched me. “That depends. Are you from Tennessee?”

A laugh burst out of me. “Yeah, why?”

Suspicion still covered her face as she answered. “I just need to know if you know what good food is.”

I scoffed as I grabbed her arm again. “I’m bringing you to the best barbecue place in the county.”

She dug in her heels, and I reluctantly let her pull us to a stop. “What’s the best barbecue place in your opinion?” I tried to respond, but she interrupted me before I could speak. “Answer carefully because this will decide if you’re eating alone tonight or not.”

My mouth fell open in shock. “No. I don’t think so. You already agreed to go out with me!”

She shook her head. “Consent can always be rescinded. Now answer the question, Declan.”

“Ooh,” I groaned as I took a step closer. Willow’s floral scent filled my nose, and I breathed in deep. “I like the way you say my name.”

Her heart thundered, but the look on her face never wavered. “Out with it.”

The urge to kiss her was almost enough to overwhelm me at that moment. I glanced at her pretty pink lips and then shook my head as I tried to slow down.

I cleared my throat and tried to ignore how fucking good she smelled. “I’m going to City Barbecue, and you’re comin’ with me, so I can buy you that rack of ribs whether you like their food or not.”

Willow watched me for a long minute before she finally shrugged. “I’ll accept City Barbecue. Let’s go.”

This time she grabbed *my* hand and started dragging me around the side of the building. I stumbled in my haste to catch up to her, which just made me laugh.

“You in a hurry?” I asked as I finally matched her pace.

“I’m always extra hungry after work,” she explained with a sheepish smile.

Anger fizzed in my veins as I wrapped my arm around her shoulders and walked us even faster toward the car. “Damn it,” I muttered. “I should have made you eat more of those cracker things.”

“Why? What did I do to deserve that?” she asked with a smirk in my direction.

I rolled my eyes as we made it to the discreet black car I'd ordered and opened the door for her. Willow seemed to hesitate for only a moment before she ducked her head and got in. I followed her onto the back seat before I addressed the driver.

"We're going to City Barbecue." Then, with a glance at Willow, I turned back and added, "You wouldn't have any snacks in here, would you?"

The driver nodded his head and reached into his center console. He pulled out a couple little bags of chips and passed them back. "Help yourself."

I ripped one open before I shoved it in Willow's hand. "Here. It's not much, but it should help."

She was quiet for so long I finally turned to her. Willow's eyes were soft and so green in that moment I got lost in their depths. She smiled as she pulled a chip from the bag and opened her mouth. I watched entranced as she placed it on her pink tongue and sealed her lips shut.

It wasn't until she started chewing that I snapped out of it.

"Thanks," she said with a wave at the snack.

I was almost too flustered to answer. "You're welcome," I finally choked out as the driver pulled away from the curb.

The car fell silent except for the soft sounds of Willow chewing her food. I was trying to give her some privacy, but couldn't help sneaking glances at her every few seconds.

Because I was watching so carefully, I didn't miss the way she tugged at the black tie still wrapped around her neck.

“You didn't bring anything to change into, huh?”

Willow smirked in my direction. “You really hate this uniform that much?”

I tilted my head to the side like I was considering her question when I already knew the answer. “Actually, yes. It's hideous.”

“I feel like I should be offended.”

I waved a hand before she could finish speaking. “Don't be. You'd look hot in anything.” The smell of her blush filled the confines of the car, and I took a deep, *deep* breath before speaking again. “But that's not what I meant. You look uncomfortable.”

She yanked again at her collar, which only confirmed my suspicions. “Yeah, it's not my favorite, but I hadn't planned to go anywhere after work,” she said, almost like an accusation in my direction. I just smiled wide, and she rolled her eyes before continuing. “But it's not a big deal. I'll live.”

Maybe it wasn't a big deal to her, but knowing she was in any kind of discomfort because of me was not okay. I watched her finish the bag of chips as my mind raced with ways to make this better.

“Hey,” I said to the driver as I scooted to the edge of my seat. “Do you have any merch in the trunk?”

The label provided most of the cars we used when we were in town, so a lot of them carried merchandise with them in case we encountered a fan. According to them, all promo was good promo.

“Yes, there should be some Phase products in the trunk. Would you like me to pull over and check?”

“That would be great.”

“I really don’t need new clothes,” Willow whispered as I sat back next to her again. I purposely shifted a few inches closer, but I wasn’t sure she noticed.

“They probably don’t have pants, but I’m sure there’s a hoodie at least,” I said, like I hadn’t heard her.

The driver slowed the car and pulled over as Willow huffed in irritation.

“I said I don’t need new clothes. I’ll be fine in this,” she said with a wave at her uniform.

Honestly, it made me itch just looking at it.

I eyed her for a moment before responding, trying for once in my life to think before I spoke. “What’s the real issue here? You’re clearly uncomfortable. Why don’t you want a new sweatshirt to wear instead?”

Willow sighed before turning to glare out the window. She was quiet for so long, I didn’t think she was going to answer.

Finally, she let out another deep breath and said, “I don’t like receiving handouts, and I don’t have the money to buy

your probably way overpriced merchandise.”

I couldn't help the smile that pulled at my lips. “No one's charging you for the way overpriced merch.”

“Then we're back to a handout, and I don't like that either.”

I had a retort on the tip of my tongue, but before I could say anything, there was a knock on my window. The driver was there with a pile of clothes in his arms.

“These are all the hooded sweatshirts I could find, but there are also t-shirts if you're interested,” he said as I rolled down the window.

I accepted the clothes from him with a shake of my head. “This is perfect, thanks.”

He walked away, and when I turned back to Willow, she was already eyeing the merch suspiciously. A laugh burst out of me before I placed the sweatshirts on the seat between us.

“Listen,” I said when the chuckles subsided. “All of this is directly from the record label. They make us travel around with this stuff just so we can give it away.”

Willow's eyes narrowed as she watched me, like she was gauging the truth for herself. “Aren't you supposed to be giving them away to your fans, though?”

My mouth fell open, and a gasp flew out as the car started moving again. “Are you telling me you're *not* a fan?”

Willow's cheeks turned red, and her scent flooded the car, making my dick twitch. “I mean, I know a few songs...”

“A few?” I yelled over her. “Okay, we’re fixing that tonight.” I leaned toward the driver again and hoped he hadn’t had enough of me by now. “Can I hook my phone up to the radio?”

“Of course, sir,” he said as he reached for the button to connect the Bluetooth.

Moments later, I had one of our songs drifting through the speakers. “You had to have heard this one,” I said to Willow, knowing this record was our highest charted single to date.

She rolled her eyes. “Yes. I know this one.”

“Thank fuck,” I muttered as I reached for the hoodies. “Now, what size do you want? I only see medium and extra-large here. Do you want it to be baggy or a tighter fit?” Before she could speak, I answered for her. “I have a feeling you like oversized, am I right?”

Willow smiled, and my heart thumped unevenly. “Yes.”

“That’s fine,” I said as I handed her an extra-large sweatshirt. “I love a good mystery.”

She frowned for a moment, like she was piecing together my words as she reached for the buttons on her shirt. My heart leapt to the back of my throat, and it must have been loud enough for her to hear because Willow smirked in my direction.

“I’m wearing a tank top underneath,” she explained.

I swallowed hard past the lump in my throat and nodded. “Like I said, I love a good mystery. And the satisfaction of

solving it in the end.”

The scent of her blush filled the car again. And I breathed deep. Fuck, I could get used to this.

Chapter 4

Willow

Are you gonna finish your fries?" I ask around a mouthful of mac 'n cheese.

Declan laughed, but handed them over to me. "Where are you fitting all this?"

His bright blue eyes scanned as much of my body as he could see, and I had to fight off a shiver. "I haven't eaten since breakfast."

As soon as the words were out of my mouth, I regretted them.

"What?" Declan yelled. "Why?"

I shrugged as I pulled another rib off my rack and put it to my lips. "I was busy working," I said, which was only half a lie.

When I'd told him we weren't allowed to eat while on the clock, it was the truth. He'd seen me try to take home leftovers, he just didn't know that was both my lunch and dinner. It wasn't tasty, but it was free, and that's what mattered most.

“What time did your shift start?” he asked as he eyed me critically.

I took my time chewing a hush puppy before answering him. “I got there at two forty-five.”

His face only hardened more at my answer. “Then why didn’t you eat before work?”

I shrugged again as I focused on my plate and racked my brain for a way to veer away from this topic. “I... was in a rush and didn’t have time.”

My eyes were still on my food, but nothing looked appetizing at the moment. I could still feel Declan’s stare, and I knew we weren’t done.

“Is that the truth?” he finally asked, his voice the sincerest I’d ever heard it.

There was so much depth to those four little words that I had to look up and meet his gaze again.

Declan’s expression wasn’t full of accusation like I’d expected. Instead, he just looked curious, and that only made me want to tell him the truth more.

I opened my mouth to speak, but my throat was too clogged to let any words out. The *last* thing I wanted to talk to this famous rockstar about was my financial situation.

I’d always been embarrassed by how poor we were growing up, and I think that’s what fueled me most. Since the moment I was old enough to work, I’d had a job, and I saved every

penny I could. I'd chosen to keep living in poverty so I could amass enough money for my future.

That meant I sometimes had to skip meals.

Declan's blue stare was still focused on me, and I had to lick my dry lips before I could speak. "No," I finally said. "Not entirely."

"Then what's the truth?"

I blew out a deep breath and sat back in my chair as I wondered how much to share with him. Although it didn't feel like it, Declan was still a stranger. Was I ready to spill my deepest, darkest secrets to him like this?

As I took a deep breath, I realized that's exactly what I was going to do. "Yes, I was running a little late because I got caught up studying, but I'd already planned to skip lunch today."

His brows bunched as he continued to watch me. "Why would you plan to skip lunch?"

I licked my lips again before reaching for my drink and taking a long sip. "There wasn't much left in the house, and I knew I'd be able to take home food from the party, so I left what was there for Colton when he got home."

Declan's face hardened again. "Who's Colton?" he spat.

I rolled my eyes as I popped another fry in my mouth. "My brother."

His posture relaxed immediately, and there was no denying the butterflies flapping around my stomach. “Oh.”

A laugh burst out of me, and Declan smiled back, but it was short lived.

“Hey, are you Declan Holmes?”

The question came from a curvy brunette who’d just walked up to our table. Declan glanced my way for a split second before his face transformed and he turned back to the woman.

“Yeah, hey! How are you?”

“Oh my god! I knew it was you!” she squealed.

I watched in awe as Declan interacted with this clearly excited fan. He was engaging and entertaining, and you could tell he actually listened to every word she said.

And she had a lot to say.

After fifteen minutes of her talking and me being completely ignored, I’d finished the food on my plate and pushed it away from me. I couldn’t remember the last time I’d been this full, which only led to depressing thoughts that I shook out of my head.

With the two of them occupied, I slid my chair back and got up from the table without a word. The bathrooms were in the back corner, and I headed that way to go wash the barbecue sauce off my hands.

Knowing I wasn’t going to be missed, I took my time using the facilities and even messing with my hair. When I finally

conceded to the ginger mess on my head, I turned and left the bathroom.

The door didn't even have time to swing closed before someone grabbed my wrist and pulled me further down the hall. I sucked in a deep breath, ready to scream when I recognized Declan's scent. I realized that churning in my belly was because of him and not fear, and I instantly relaxed.

"What are you doing?" I breathed as I worked to slow my racing heart.

Declan reached out and grasped my chin, tilting my head back until I had no choice but to meet his eyes. "I wanted to see if you were okay."

I frowned up at him. "Huh?"

He licked his lips, and my eyes focused on them. "I watched you get up and leave. I figured you were upset."

My brows only furrowed more. "Why would I be upset?"

His blue eyes darted between mine as if he were trying to read the answers there for himself. "Um. Because I was ignoring you while I talked to a fan?"

"You weren't ignoring me, you were just giving her your full attention." I shrugged. "It's part of your job, right?"

His gaze narrowed like he was suspicious of my words. "Yeah. It is."

I shrugged. "Then why would I be upset? *You* didn't get upset while I was doing my job."

Declan's lips curled with a smile as he snorted. "Actually, I kinda did."

I giggled as I wriggled out of his hold and took a step away. It was impossible to think with him that close. "Well, that's because you're a brat."

His mouth fell open, but I could tell he wasn't really shocked by my assessment. "No. It's because I really wanted to talk to you."

My cheeks burned with a blush, and I looked away before he could see it. Declan's blunt words and direct approach were still new for me, and I was having trouble keeping up.

"But now," he continued, his voice getting deeper as he closed the distance between us again. "I don't wanna talk. I just wanna kiss you."

I gasped as my heart slammed to the back of my throat, and my hands started shaking. A million thoughts raced through my head, but none of them would help me navigate this situation.

Before I could get a grip, Declan moved even closer, his warm body pressing against mine now. "I'm not gonna ask you for a kiss because I know that brain of yours will start runnin', and you'll find some reason why it's a bad idea."

One of his hands slipped to the back of my neck while the other gripped my hip.

"If you really don't want this, you can say no," he said, his eyes boring into mine. "But you only get three seconds."

The whole place started to spin, and I realized I hadn't been breathing. I took in a deep gulp of oxygen as he began counting.

“Three... two... one.”

And just like he promised, Declan Holmes kissed me.

His lips were warm and soft as they pressed against mine, but the urgency wasn't far behind. Declan grabbed my hip and yanked me closer to him, making me gasp into his mouth. He used his skillful tongue to deepen the kiss as I worked on remaining upright.

The hand on my hip slid underneath my sweatshirt and tank top, making me shiver as his calloused fingertips grazed my skin. Goosebumps broke out wherever he touched and without thinking, I grabbed two fistfuls of his shirt and dragged him closer.

Declan laughed against my lips, but it was short-lived.

Now *I* was the one driving the kiss.

Now *I* was the one holding onto him like a lifeline.

Now *I* was the one frantic to get just one more taste.

My fervor seemed to surprise Declan, but it didn't take long for him to reciprocate. With a growl, his hands slid to my ass, and he gripped it tight as he lifted me up and pinned me against the wall. Declan's hips met mine, and I instantly felt how hard he was.

Which just drove me higher.

There were only a handful of sexual experiences in my past, but none of them compared to this. None of them compared to *Declan*.

He seemed to be everywhere.

In my lungs.

Under my skin.

There was no part of me that didn't include him in that moment. It was like we'd merged into one single form.

I wrapped my arms around his neck and kissed him harder as my hips began to move against him. Declan groaned as he gripped my ass tight.

It felt like we were teetering on the edge of a cliff, just barely holding on. One stiff breeze would be enough to tip us over, and I didn't know what came after that.

Someone cleared their throat from nearby and all at once, the spell was broken.

Declan pulled his lips away from mine with a gasp before he turned to see who'd interrupted us. I buried my burning face into his chest as he slowly set me on my feet.

"Sorry," Declan said as he turned to face them. "She was choking, and I was giving her mouth-to-mouth resuscitation."

I shook my head from behind him as a giggle slipped out. "You do the Heimlich when someone's choking," I whispered. "Not mouth-to-mouth."

Declan turned to give me a look. “Don’t interrupt me when I’m trying to lie.”

This time a full-blown laugh burst out of me, and I heard the other person huff with irritation before they walked away.

When their footsteps finally faded, my head fell back against the wall, and the laugh I’d been suppressing burst out of me. The embarrassment, and excitement, and nerves, and anxiety all frothed together until there were tears in my eyes, and my stomach was cramping.

My vision was blurry, but I could still see the smile spread across Declan’s face when he leaned in close. “You look so fuckin’ beautiful when you laugh.”

For some reason, I found that even funnier, and this time a snort slipped out. I was sure that was going to send him running, but his smile only spread.

“Ooh baby, snort for me again.”

A laugh barked out of my throat before I could stop it, followed by the snort he’d been asking for. That sent us both into a dizzying spiral of giggles that lasted so long my ribs ached.

“No more,” I wheezed. “I can’t laugh anymore. Please.”

Declan took a deep, steadying breath before he slung his arm along my shoulders. “Okay, Wilbur. Let’s go.”

I erupted in chuckles again as he led me through the restaurant and out the front door. The cool fall air was so

refreshing, I closed my eyes and tilted my head back to enjoy it.

Declan was still leading me somewhere, but I didn't bother to worry about where. Somehow, in the course of only a few hours, I'd come to trust this man completely.

Maybe it was because he'd never really felt like a stranger.

"So," Declan said, and I finally opened my eyes. "What now?"

My heart jump-started in my chest, and I licked my lips. "Um. What time is it?"

Declan watched me for another moment before he reached in his pocket and pulled out a cellphone. "Eleven-thirty."

My mouth fell open with shock as I raced through the ramifications in my head.

I hadn't been out this late in years, and all I could think about were the things that I should have done with that time instead of eating barbecue with a rockstar.

"Okay, it seems like we have two options here," Declan said, his voice breaking through the panic in my head. "I can have the driver take you home, or you can come back to my place, and we can hang out."

My heart leapt to the back of my throat, but somehow I was able to keep my face straight. "Hang out?" I deadpanned.

Declan, unsurprisingly, wasn't fazed by my tone. "Yeah. Hang out. I could show you my sword," he said as the smile

grew on his face.

My pulse raced even faster as I struggled to breathe again. It was crystal clear what he was asking and even more obvious what *sword* he wanted to show me, but was that what I wanted?

Did I want to stay out all night for the first time in my life?

Did I want to go home with a virtual stranger?

And worse, did I want to wind up sleeping with a man I *knew* had a long list of ex flings?

I finally found the courage to look up into his eyes, and the real question became clear.

Would I be able to live with myself if I just went home?

“Okay,” I said before I could stop myself.

Declan’s blue eyes widened, and my heart pounded even harder. “Okay what?” he asked, his voice so deep it made goosebumps rise all over my body.

I licked my lips and did my best to keep my voice even. “Okay, we can go to your place.”

His face broke into such a bright smile I had to blink my eyes. “Really? Can I show you my sword?”

My pulse tripped over his words, but I recovered quickly. “Sure,” I said, but my voice squeaked, so I cleared my throat and tried again. “Sure. We can do that.”

Declan’s grin was even wider as he grabbed my hand and dragged me toward the black car we’d arrived in. I tried to

focus on my feet, so I didn't have to think about what awaited us at his place, but I still wound up tripping.

“Easy there, Will,” Declan said as he wrapped an arm around my shoulders. “It’s a little early to be falling for me, don’t you think?”

And just like that, the panic was gone.

Somehow, Declan found a way to break through the fear racing through my head and remind me why I was doing this and what I wanted—which was him.

Chapter 5

Willow

This is it!” Declan announced as the driver pulled the car to a stop in front of a luxury apartment building.

The kind I couldn’t even afford to drive past.

“This is... nice,” I offered as he slid out of the backseat and held out his hand for me.

“Meh,” he said with a shrug as he pulled me to my feet. “It’s okay. I’d rather be out of the city, but usually when we’re in town we have so much going on it made sense to get a place nearby.”

He shut the door behind us as I worked to take in his nonchalant words.

I’d never even dared to dream of being able to afford a place like this, and Declan wasn’t even impressed. It just served to highlight how truly different we were.

Declan grabbed my hand and led me toward the building’s large, ornate entrance. A set of men in pristine charcoal suits pulled open the double doors for us in unison as we approached.

“Good evening, Mr. Holmes,” one of them said, his eyes on the ground.

“Hey y’all,” Declan replied, his voice just a little too loud for the opulent setting. “How’s it hangin’?”

The two men straightened up and exchanged worried looks with each other before one of them answered. “Very well, sir.”

“Thank you for asking,” the other piped up.

Declan gripped my hand tighter as he led me through the doors. As soon as they closed behind us, he leaned in close and whispered in my ear. “I’ve been tryin’ to crack those guys for a year and so far, no luck.”

My mouth fell open in shock as I turned to him. “You’ve been purposely trying to get a rise out of those poor men for a whole year?” I whisper-yelled at him.

“No!” he said with a wave, like my question was ridiculous. “There are more than just two guys who work the doors, of course. I’ve been trying to break all of ‘em.”

My head fell back, and I rolled my eyes as he led me through the marbled lobby. I didn’t bother cataloguing the finer details anymore because they just made my stomach hurt.

We came to a stop at a hallway full of elevators and another man in a suit. I worried he’d have to suffer through the same treatment as the other men, and Declan did not disappoint.

“Hey, Jimmy. How’s it hangin’?”

The older man pressed the call button for the elevator before he turned to us. “At seventy-five, it is, as always, a little lower today, sir.”

My mouth fell open again, but Declan tipped his head back and howled with laughter. When he finally pulled himself together, he reached up and wiped the wetness from the corner of his eye.

“See, Will?” he asked as the elevator dinged and the doors slid open. “Jimmy is my kind of people.”

“Thank you, sir,” Jimmy said as we walked past him. “Have a good evening.”

“You too, Jimbo,” Declan called as the doors slid shut. He turned to me, a wide smile on his face. “He says the same shit every time, but I don’t know, man. It just cracks me up.”

I rolled my eyes and shook my head, but I couldn’t stop my lips from curling into a smile. “You’re ridiculous. Why do all these people put up with you?”

He shrugged as the elevator slowed to a stop and the doors opened. “It’s just the money, Will. That’s all anyone cares about.”

His hand found mine again, and he led me out of the elevator as I worked to process his words.

They weren’t said with any kind of inflection, but I couldn’t help hearing what lie beneath. Like he’d learned this lesson the hard way and now didn’t question it.

Honestly, it was the first time I'd heard Declan sound jaded, and I didn't like it at all. He was usually upbeat and bubbly. Animated. Now he just sounded worn down and tired.

But like he'd flipped a switch, the melancholy was gone, and the playfulness was back. "I hope you're ready to see my sword," he said as he led me to the only door on this floor.

My heart ricocheted to the back of my throat, and I had to swallow hard before I could speak. "I... I'm ready."

He pulled a set of keys out of his pocket and held a fob up to the sensor next to the doorframe. It beeped, and he reached for the handle.

"I used to show my sword to everyone, but I had to stop doing that," he continued as he led me into a grand foyer. "People were mishandling it, and I was worried something might happen."

I wanted to take a minute to study my surroundings, but his words were breaking through the panic and only serving to confuse me. "Huh?" I finally said.

Declan dropped my hand and turned to me with a smile. "Now, only special people get to see my sword, and lucky for you, you're one of them."

I stood there staring at him, wondering if all his sexual encounters were this weird. "Um. Thanks?"

He smiled and waved my words away. "Don't thank me until you've actually gotten to see it," he said as he turned. "If you wanna get comfortable in the living room over there," he

said with a wave toward one side of the foyer, “I’ll be right back with *the sword*.”

Before he disappeared, he turned back and winked at me, officially initiating the panic deep in my system again. I swallowed hard and fisted my shaking hands at my sides as I slowly shuffled toward the living room he’d pointed out.

It was, of course, beautiful and extravagant, but I could hardly focus on that.

Was I really about to have sex with this man I’d just met?

Was I really about to be the next of many for a famous musician?

My heart raced, and my stomach cramped, but this had nothing to do with Declan’s presence. This was pure terror at the thought of trying to live up to the dozens of women before me.

Hell, maybe hundreds.

There was no way I could contend with that.

There was no way I could be anything other than a faceless girl in the morning.

It was then I knew I needed to leave. I needed to go before this went any further. I couldn’t *be* what I’m sure he was looking for, and I had no business trying.

I spun around and hurried back into the foyer, ready to order an Uber to take me back to my car.

My hand gripped the handle, but I didn’t turn it.

Instead, I stood there, my rapid breaths the only sound other than my even faster heartbeat. I squeezed my eyes closed and tried to quiet the noise in my head, but it was almost impossible.

My brain felt like it would crack in half as each side argued their case. One wanted to run and forget this all happened while the other wanted to have a little fun, despite the consequences. The two were impossible to reconcile, but as I stood there, one thought drifted to the top of the pile, forcing me to answer.

Which would I regret more? Leaving or staying?

I closed my eyes and took a deep breath before I let go of the handle and spun back around. We'd already come this far, and I knew deep down I could trust Declan.

Who cares if I was just one of many?

I could be a one-night stand, right?

I could be just another woman warming his bed for the night, right?

As long as we used protection, what did it matter?

With the confidence slowly building in my system, I turned back around and strode into the living room.

The man had been thrust into my life for a reason, not a season. There was no harm in having a little fun while he was here.

But, as I stood there in the middle of the living room, doubt began to creep back in.

I didn't *do* stuff like this. I was so far out of my depth, I was just about drowning.

Was I supposed to sit down? Was I supposed to lay down? Was I supposed to take my clothes off? Would he rather do that himself? Would he already be naked when he got back?

The questions swirled viciously around my head as I fought with what to do. My hands found the back of his leather couch and held on tight as my nerves threatened to overwhelm me again.

Before I had a chance to fully descend into panic, I heard Declan's footsteps heading toward me. With a sniff, I straightened up and tried to position my stiff limbs into a carefree posture before he got back.

Moments later, Declan walked through the doorway, thankfully still fully clothed. "Sorry that took me so long," he said. "I couldn't decide whether I wanted you to see it sheathed or unsheathed for the first time."

Holy shit.

A hysterical giggle burst out of me, and Declan finally looked up with a frown. His blue eyes studied me for a long moment before he finally spoke. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing," I said, but my voice was too high pitched to be believable. I didn't let that stop me and instead said the first

thing that came to my mind. “Now, how about you whip out that sword of yours?”

I hadn't even finished my sentence before heat erupted throughout my entire body. My face had to be beet red by now, so I ducked my head to hide it. I'd never been more embarrassed in my life as I stood there and prayed for a tornado to blow through and pick up only me.

“Okay,” Declan said, but his voice sounded unsure. “Here it is.”

My heart leapt to the back of my throat again, but I couldn't stop my eyes from darting towards him. To my surprise, he didn't reach for his belt buckle.

I watched in confusion as he pulled a long piece of leather out from behind his back and held it before him like an offering. “I present to you, Andúril. Once just the pieces of what used to be the sword Narsil. The Elves reforged this blade into the masterpiece I have here.”

My mouth fell open as I stared at Declan and tried to figure out what was happening. “Elves?” I finally asked.

Declan nodded as he crossed the room to stand in front of me. He gripped the sword's hilt and pulled it from the sheath as I watched him. “The Elves of Rivendell to be exact.”

“Rivendell?”

He nodded. “Yeah like in—”

“*The Lord of the Rings*,” I finished for him.

Declan's eyes darted to mine before a smile split his face in two. "You know about *The Lord of the Rings*?"

I shook my head but couldn't keep the grin off my face either. Especially as I studied the beautiful sword in his hand. "Of course, I do!" I looked away for a moment as I made my next confession. "I've only read the books through once."

Declan opened his mouth to speak, but before he could, I raised my voice and kept talking.

"They're just so *long* and *dry*," I explained. "I've seen all three movies at least a dozen times, though!"

His blue eyes narrowed as he watched me, but I couldn't take him seriously with the big smile still on his face. "What about the *Hobbit*?"

"Read it twice. Seen it maybe ten times." Before he could respond, I added, "It hasn't been out as long."

He stared for another few seconds before finally nodding. "That'll do." With that, he placed the blade in my hand and took a step back. "You've proven you're worthy of her glory."

I giggled at his theatrics, but the sword really was beautiful.

"And now," he said as he grasped my elbow. "I figured out what we're doing."

My heart skipped one whole beat, and I almost tripped over my own feet as I followed him out of the room. "Oh?" I squeaked. "What's that?"

He turned back to grin at me, and I swear every organ in my body stopped working. “We’re having a Lord of the Rings movie marathon, obviously.”

It took a moment for his words to work their way through the panic in my head, but when they did, I laughed. “That would take over twelve hours if you include *The Hobbit*.”

Declan turned back to frown as he led me into an industrial-sized kitchen. “*Of course*, we’re including *The Hobbit*,” he said with a scoff and a shake of his head. “Here,” he said, as he led me to a closed accordion door. “Pick out some snacks while I grab drinks.”

He walked away before I could ask any questions, so I set the sword down next to the doorway before walking into his enormous pantry. It was chock full of so many different things, he could open his own convenience store. I stood there trying to calculate how much it would take to fill a room like this with food before I shut down that line of thinking.

With my arms full of snacks, I exited the pantry to find Declan shaking his head as he re-sheathed the sword. “I can’t believe you would disrespect Andúril by leaving her behind like that,” he said, fake disappointment lacing his words.

I rolled my eyes. “I didn’t think she belonged in the same room as the Twinkies,” I deadpanned.

He held the somber look on his face for only another moment before his lips curled with his usual smile. “We should eat a Twinkie off her blade while we watch her slaying Orcs!”

A laugh burst out of me before I could stop it. “Is *that* how you treat a respected Elven sword?”

His grin only grew as he grabbed a small cooler, the sword, and my hand. “Hey, if the Elves had Twinkies in Rivendell, I bet they’d eat them off their blades too.”

“That sounds more like something a Dwarf or Man would do. Elves are more refined.”

I could feel his eyes on the side of my head as he led me through his enormous apartment. “You were an Orlando Bloom fan, weren’t you?”

My spine straightened, and I kept my gaze straight ahead, but I could feel the heat in my cheeks, and I knew that would be all the answer he needed.

“I should have seen that coming,” Declan said as he stopped at a door and ushered me into what looked like a small theatre. “Obviously, you have a thing for pretty boys,” he continued with a wave at himself.

The last knot of anxiety unraveled in my belly as the tension oozed out of my shoulders. I felt myself relaxing with him again like I had earlier.

This was just the reminder that I needed.

I was with Declan, and I was safe.

Chapter 6

Declan

Will,” I whispered. “Willow,” I tried again. “Wilbur?”
Still no answer.

The red-headed beauty was sound asleep on my arm, and I hadn't been able to feel my fingers for over an hour. I'd warred with myself all that time, watching her eyelids flutter with dreams and knowing it would be an asshole move to wake her up.

But *damn*, the pins and needles were killing me.

“Willow,” I tried again. “Could you just move your head a few inches—”

Before I could finish my request, a soft snore fell from her lips, and she scooted even closer, curling her whole body around me. Her knee was on my thigh, her arm around my waist, but the best part? She'd moved her head onto my chest, and my arm was finally free.

I tried to not wake her as I pumped my fist and shook my fingers, working to circulate the blood and get some feeling

back again. When the tingling finally subsided, I realized I didn't know where to put my hand now.

Willow had just about every part of her body touching mine, but she was asleep. Would it be okay for me to touch her, too?

Where would be appropriate?

Her shoulder? Her waist? Her hip?

What would she want? What would she be okay with?

My mind raced as I listened to her deep, even breaths and smiled at the occasional snore. After a long time of watching, I knew exactly which part of her I wanted to touch.

Willow's wild red hair had fascinated me since I laid eyes on her, and now, I was finally going to know what it felt like. My fingers shook a little as I slowly picked up a curl that had escaped her ponytail.

I held the strands up to the little bit of light still coming from the projector screen and marveled at the different shades of gold and red. It was also a lot softer than I thought it would be. I wrapped the hair around my finger and stroked it with my thumb as I focused on her face again.

Sleep had a way of lowering all your walls and leaving you vulnerable. The fact that a woman as smart and cautious as Willow trusted me enough to fall asleep here was astounding. It humbled me like not many things could.

Feeling bold, I dropped that lock and placed my hand on the back of her head. Slowly, I began stroking her hair from her forehead to her neck, over and over, as I watched her sleep. I

didn't know why touching her like this felt so right, but it soothed me to my fucking soul.

My eyes drifted closed as I rubbed her head and listened to the movie, her snores becoming the backing track with ease. I couldn't remember the last time I'd felt so content to just *be*. Unfortunately, it didn't last long.

"Are you rubbing my head?" Willow mumbled against my chest, her voice deep and scratchy with sleep.

The corner of my lip curled with a smile, but I didn't care I'd gotten caught. And I wasn't ready to stop. "Yes. I am."

She was quiet for a moment, and I could almost hear her sleepy brain cranking. "Why?" she finally asked, her voice gentler than before.

I swallowed hard, but didn't stop what I was doing. "Your hair is really soft." It wasn't the whole truth, but hopefully it was enough of an answer for her.

Willow was silent for another long moment before she finally sighed. My heart clenched hard in my chest as she nuzzled her cheek against my pec. "Okay," she said around a yawn. "You can keep going. It feels really good."

For some reason, my dick took those words completely out of context and jumped to attention. I pressed my lips together and tried to think about anything else, but erotic images of Willow filled my head, anyway. Worried she'd see the way my hand shook, I dug my fingers into her hair to hide them.

Which was the absolute wrong thing to do.

Willow moaned against my chest, the sound vibrating through my body and making my cock even harder. I needed to find a way out of this, but I refused to move even a muscle. The last thing I wanted was for Willow to get off me.

Scratch that.

The very last thing I wanted was for Willow to see the boner in my jeans from just cuddling on the couch.

“Um,” I tried, but my voice sounded too squeaky. I stopped to clear my throat before I tried again. “Did you wanna finish the movie?”

Willow yawned and arched her back like she was stretching, and I had to look away. “Mmm, what time is it?”

I used my free hand to pick up the cell phone lying next to me. “Almost six-thirty.”

Willow froze before she turned her head to look at me. “In the morning?”

She was so fucking cute in that moment, I had to laugh. “Yeah. In the morning.”

“Shit,” she muttered as she sat up, taking all her warmth and sweet smelling hair with her. “I should get home.”

My gut twisted as I realized our night was abruptly coming to an end. “Are you sure?” I asked as I straightened in my seat. “You could stay and get another few hours of sleep. You probably shouldn’t drive while you’re this tired.”

Willow rubbed her hands down her face and shook her head. “It’s okay. I’ll wake up on the Uber ride back to my car.”

“Absolutely not,” I said as I grabbed my phone again. “I’ll call you a car.”

“That’s really not necessary.”

“It’s really not negotiable.”

She huffed in irritation, and I could smell the heat of her anger from here. “I can take an Uber if I want to.”

“Not by yourself when it’s still dark out.”

Willow scoffed. “The sun will be up soon. It’s not a big deal.”

“Willow,” I said as I sent the message to the car service. “I brought you here, and I’m going to make sure you get back safely to your car.” She opened her mouth, and I knew an argument was coming. “And my guy will be here quicker than an Uber at this hour,” I rushed to add.

She closed her mouth and narrowed her eyes, but I knew I’d won this one. With a smile, I reached for Willow’s hand and pulled her up with me. “Let’s go get you a cold bottle of water and a snack for the ride,” I said as I led her out of the theatre room.

“Actually, could I use the bathroom?”

I nodded. “There’s one right off the kitchen,” I explained as we traveled through my stupidly large penthouse. I swear, I

was never taking Roman's advice on anything ever again. "Here," I said as we finally got to the right door.

She gave me a smile that made my heart thump harder before she slipped inside and was gone. I took a deep breath and let it out slow before turning around to grab that drink and snack I mentioned. But my body moved on its own while my mind spun.

This was it.

I was out of time with her, but I wasn't ready to let go. Hell, I was two seconds away from begging to come home with her. Then I remembered she lived with her twin brother and knew I wasn't prepared for a conflict like that this early in the morning.

But I hated the thought of being separated from her. I hated even more that I didn't know when I'd even be able to see her again.

We didn't spend much time at home in Nashville anymore, but when we did, our days and nights were usually packed. I expected no less this time, and the dread was already dripping through my system as I picked up my phone to search my calendar.

Mason always made sure it was filled with what we had planned, but I'd never paid much attention in the past. Now, I was scrolling through the long days Mason mapped out for me, and my gut sank further and further as I read.

I was basically booked solid for the next fourteen days. There wasn't even time left over for me to drive home and see my mom and sisters. My teeth ground together as I shot Mason a text telling him to figure something out because I wasn't leaving Tennessee without seeing my family.

The sound of the door unlocking broke through the haze of anger, and I turned in time to see Willow step out of the bathroom. She looked up at me with a wide smile that made my fucking knees weak. I had no idea what I'd done to deserve it, but I was gonna find out and do it again.

"That bathroom is really nice," she said as she crossed the room toward me.

I nodded. "It's my favorite place to poop."

Her eyes darted to mine like my words surprised her before she laughed. "You have a favorite bathroom for pooping?"

I shrugged. "When you have six, you eventually find your favorite. The bathroom that really caters most to your individual needs."

Willow shook her head, but giggles kept escaping, so I continued.

"For instance, you'll notice in this bathroom a set of shelves opposite the toilet. That was not placed there for trinkets, it's so I can prop my phone up and watch a video while I'm shitting."

"You're so ridiculous."

“I think that’s important in a poop room,” I continued, like I hadn’t heard her. “It also has ample elbow space for wiping, and a great ventilation system.”

“You really put a lot of thought into this, didn’t you?”

“Of course. Why wouldn’t you rank your bathrooms when you have so many of them?”

Willow rolled her eyes. “Sorry. I’ve only ever had one.”

Despite the small smile on her face, I could hear the sadness in those words, and I rushed to make it better. “Then I guess your ranking system was pretty easy, huh? Lucky.”

She snorted at my lame joke, but her green eyes were just a bit brighter, and that was all that mattered.

“Now,” I continued as I handed her a bottle of water and grasped her elbow. “A pee room is completely different. There are needs that you have to meet in each instance.”

“Why are we still talking about your bowel movements?” she asked with a laugh.

“Because this is important,” I said as I dragged her to my front bathroom. “This is my favorite place to pee. It’s the closest bathroom to the front door, which is important when you get home and really need to take a leak, but the best part is the wall art.”

“Wall art,” she deadpanned as she followed me inside.

I pointed to the framed picture above the toilet seat and then stepped aside so she could examine it.

“Is that...?” she whispered as she got closer. “Is that a Where’s Waldo picture?”

Willow turned to me with a frown, but I was smiling ear to ear. “Sure is. Except it’s a Where’s Declan picture.” I leaned over and pointed to the tiny image of me in a red and white striped hat. “I commission this artist to make me one of these every month, so I have something to do when I’m taking a leak.”

Her brows bunched together even tighter before she looked back at the picture and then at me again, clearly fighting off a smile. “Is that what rich people do with their money?”

Her words were so unexpected, the laugh that burst out of me sounded more like a bark. “Not most of them, I don’t think.” Realizing I wasn’t painting the best image of myself, I added. “If I have stupid amounts of money, I might as well give it away to people like local artists, right?”

Willow shook her head as she looked at the picture on the wall again. “You know, every time I think I have you figured out, you do something else to shock me,” she said as she stared.

I frowned at the back of her head. “Is that a good thing or a bad thing?”

She turned to look at me with a small smile on her face. “I’ll let you know when I figure that out.”

I stood there trying not to stare at her lips as she talked, but it was almost impossible. It had been hours, and I wanted

another taste in the worst way. All it would take was a step or two in her direction and I'd be close enough to tell if she wanted that too or not.

Unable to wait any longer, I took that one step in her direction, my eyes glued to hers, as I waited for her reaction. When her pupils dilated and her heart started to race, I knew I had my answer.

She wanted this, too.

But before I could move another inch, my phone started ringing in my pocket. With a huff, I pulled it out to find the car service calling me. I ran a rough hand through my hair and turned around to answer.

“Hi. We'll be right down.”

I hung up before he could respond and spun back around to face Willow. The moment I did, I could see the spell was broken. Her good sense had returned, and she was ready to finally end this night.

Some might have conceded here, but I've never given up on anything in my life.

So I reached for her hand and gripped it tight as I led her out of the bathroom. “Come on. The car is here.”

The place was quiet as we walked through the foyer and out the front door. As we waited for the elevator to arrive, Willow looked up at me with such a sweet smile my heart stopped beating all together.

“Thanks for inviting me over. I’m sorry I fell asleep during the movie.”

“The *first* movie,” I added.

Her grin turned apologetic, but I squeezed her hand so she’d know I wasn’t actually upset.

“Next time we’ll have to start earlier,” I said.

Willow’s eyes widened. “Next time?”

Here was my moment. Whatever I said next would grant me another night with her or doom me to getting my number blocked.

I licked my lips and loaded my shot. “I mean yeah, you didn’t even make it to the part where they introduce the Hobbits. That’s gotta be your favorite, right?”

The elevator doors opened, and I nodded to Jimmy’s relief as I walked her inside.

“*Why* would you think the Hobbits are my favorite part?”

I pressed my lips together to hold back a smile, but it wasn’t working. “Because you’re little and cute and eat a lot just like them?”

The emotions swirled in Willow’s bright green eyes. Everything from annoyance to humor to irritation to acceptance. Finally, she huffed out a big breath and scowled at me. “Am I supposed to take that as a compliment or not?”

I laughed hard as the elevator doors opened, and I pulled her into the lobby. “Didn’t I say you were cute?”

The smell of her blush filled the air, and I drank it in with greedy gulps.

“Yeah, but you also said I eat a lot.”

“Did I say that was a bad thing?” I pulled her to a stop at the front doors and motioned for the men working there to keep them closed for a moment. “I find it really attractive when a woman stuffs her face in front of me.”

Willow snorted and pushed away from me. “Goodbye, Declan.”

I watched as the two suited men pulled open the large doors to let Willow walk through them. The car I’d ordered was at the curb where they said they’d be, and I knew he’d get Willow back to her car safely.

But I wasn’t done with her.

Before the doors could swing shut, I squeezed through them and jogged the few steps to her. I grabbed Willow’s hand and spun her around before I cupped her face and kissed her.

It was supposed to be quick.

It was supposed to be chaste.

But fuck, this was *Willow*, and I could *not* control myself when it came to her.

Minutes later, we were both breathless and clinging to each other. I took a deep breath to steady myself and kissed her one last time on the forehead before taking a step back.

“I’ll see you soon,” I said before I turned around and walked away. I knew if I didn’t, I’d never let her go.

Chapter 7

Declan

“What the fuck did you do?” Mason asked the second my ass hit the back seat of the car he’d ordered for me.

Which I thought would be empty.

“Good morning to you too, Masey. How’d you sleep?”

Mason growled, but I ignored him as I sipped the latte I’d made myself before leaving home. I think I finally perfected my caramel macchiato.

“I slept *fine*, Declan. It wasn’t until I woke up that I felt the ulcer brewing in my gut.”

“Ulcer?” I frowned at my travel mug. “You should get that looked at.”

He growled again, louder this time, and I glanced toward the driver to make sure he hadn’t heard. “He’s one of us,” Mason said before shoving a newspaper in front of my face. “I wanna know what the *fuck* this is,” he said, his voice somehow louder and deeper at the same time.

I felt the first tendril of apprehension slither through my veins and decided to set my drink down in a cupholder so I

could give him my full attention. Mason was almost always worked up, but not like this. When he got this mad, I paid attention.

He was still glaring as I took the newspaper and looked at it.

Instantly, my stomach fell.

On the front page of the Nashville Inquirer in bright technicolor was Willow and I making out in the open doorway of my building. I flipped through the pages and sure enough, there were more pictures. Shots of my face, shots of her face, more shots of us together.

It was crystal clear, and there was no denying it.

But I was going to try, anyway.

“Sorry,” I said as I handed him back the paper. “I’ve never seen these pictures before.”

Mason growled again as I picked up my latte. “Of course, you’ve never seen them! They were only taken at seven this morning!”

“Hmm. That makes sense,” I muttered as I took a sip of the hot liquid.

Mason’s next growl rattled the windows, and I knew I needed to stop fucking around. “Who is she?” he spat. “Where did you find her?”

I sighed and finally turned to him. “Her name is Willow. I met her last night at the label event.”

His dark eyes searched mine for a moment before his features became even angrier. “It’s the fucking waitress, isn’t it? Goddamn it, Declan, I told you to keep your dick out of the news!”

“I didn’t know papps were gonna be right outside my building at fucking sunrise, Mason!”

“Couldn’t you have taken her to a hotel instead? Maybe gone to her place?”

“I wanted to show her my sword.” His head fell back with a load groan, and I rushed to add, “And we didn’t even have sex. We watched movies and fell asleep.”

Mason picked up the paper and shoved it back in my face. “Do you think they care you only watched movies last night, Declan? No! Not when they catch you trying to devour that poor girl’s face the next morning.”

“Hey! I’ve got good form. You’re just trying to be hurtful.”

Mason rolled his eyes as he threw the newspaper on the floor. “I don’t give a shit about your form, Declan. I give a shit about you fixing this. Now.”

“What do you want me to do? Threaten the newspaper? Break some fingers? Shoot a few kneecaps to make them retract the photos?”

My manager turned to me with a look so vicious, I withered under his stare. “No. You’re going to find that girl and take her to the CMN Awards tonight.”

I frowned at him as my stomach started to flutter with anticipation. “Wait. What?”

His features stayed hard as he pointed to the paper at our feet. “You’re going to take that waitress as your date and prove to the media she’s not just another groupie notch on your belt.”

“Holy shit, really?” I asked, sitting up straight in my seat and itching to reach for my phone.

“Stop being so fucking happy about this,” Mason grumbled as he snatched the latte out of my hand. “It’s supposed to be a punishment, not a reward.”

I frowned as he took a big gulp of my drink, but it didn’t last long.

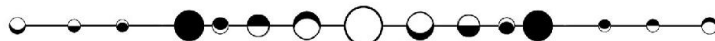
Mason had just given me the perfect excuse to see Willow again, and I couldn’t fucking wait.

“Whatever you say, Masey,” I said as I took the latte back from him. “And stop stealing my shit.”

Mason shrugged as he pulled out his phone. “Next time, make me one. That was good.”

When he was sufficiently distracted, I grabbed my own cell and quickly tapped out a message to Willow.

Me: Are you working tonight?



Willow

Me: No, I'm working a lunch today. I'm off tonight so I can study.

Declan: But there are still THREE whole days before your final!

My heart fluttered as I fought back a smile. I couldn't believe he'd remembered exactly when my test was. I tried to contain my excitement, but my hands still shook as I typed out a response to him.

Me: Which means I definitely need to study.

I shoved my phone in my pocket without waiting for a response from him. There was a whole shift to get through, and I couldn't let Declan distract me at the beginning of it.

My cell buzzed in my pocket a few times, but I ignored it as I got lost in the rush of preparing for the next event. It was a lavish luncheon for a politician's wife, so everything needed to be perfect.

There was only about thirty minutes before the event started when my red-faced boss came to find me.

“Greene, I thought I told you no visitors at work.”

I frowned up at her. “Visitors?”

She gestured toward the front entrance and the woman I hadn’t noticed before now. Her dark eyes were already fastened on me and if I wasn’t mistaken, there was a hungry sheen to them.

“Get rid of her, Greene,” Tracey grumbled as I hurried toward the strange woman.

“Hi,” I said as I approached her. “Can I help you?”

“Hi,” she said as she thrust her hand toward me. “I’m Gabrielle with the Nashville Inquirer. I was wondering if you had a couple minutes to speak with me.”

Unfortunately, I’d already made the mistake of accepting her offer to shake. With her hand firmly wrapped around mine, my options seemed limited.

“Um. I’m kind of at work right now...” I said, as I gently tried to extricate myself from her hold.

“I’ll be really fast, I promise.” Gabrielle used her free hand to pull out a cell phone and hold it up to my face. “Do you mind if I record this?”

Before I could answer, someone else called my name.

“Willow?”

I turned to find another woman I’d never met hurrying toward me in nude kitten heels and an expensive suit. “Hi, Caitlin with The Nashville Record, do you have a minute?”

“Um.”

“Willow!”

My head snapped in his direction, Declan’s voice easily breaking through all the noise around me. The clenching in my belly should have warned me he was near, but with both these reporters shoving their phones in my face, I was having trouble focusing.

“Get out!” Declan yelled as he tried to force a man snapping pictures back through the door he’d just walked through.

My heart leapt to the back of my throat as I caught a glimpse outside.

Sometime in the two hours I’d been here, a crowd of reporters and photographers had surrounded the front entrance. On any other day, I’d have assumed they were here for the guests soon to arrive at the event.

Today, I knew better.

“Declan,” I called, as he finally slammed the door shut behind him. “What is going on?”

The two reporters in front of me, having heard Declan’s name, spun in his direction, and started firing off questions.

“Declan, where did you meet Willow?”

“Declan, is she a fan of Phase?”

“Declan, are you officially off the market?”

“Declan, is she coming to the CMN Awards with you tonight?”

“Greene! What the hell is all this?” Tracey yelled as she barreled toward us.

My eyes darted from my angry boss to the reporters, to Declan and back. I had a bad feeling about all these people being in the same place at once, and Tracey did *not* disappoint.

“Greene! I told you to get rid of her! Not invite more of your friends here!”

“These aren’t my friends.”

“Hey!” Declan called, his tone hurt.

I squeezed my eyes closed and took a deep breath before facing my boss again. “I’m sorry. I don’t know why they’re here, but I’ll get rid of them.”

“We’re here because you were photographed leaving Declan Holmes’ apartment this morning. Was that the first night you two spent together?” Caitlin asked with a vicious twinkle in her eyes.

“No,” I said, holding up my hands like I could stop this whole trainwreck from happening. “That’s not what’s going on at all. We just—”

“Greene,” Tracey interrupted, her voice like a whip. “You know our policy on dating the guests.”

My stomach plummeted to the floor as I turned wide eyes toward my boss. “The handbook says we can’t fraternize while on the clock.”

“And I caught you doing that yesterday too!” she seethed.

I shook my head back and forth as I struggled to come up with an argument.

“Okay, okay,” Declan said as he approached us. “Let’s not be hasty. This is all just a misunderstanding.”

“No,” Tracey said with a shake of her head. “Greene, your transgressions last night, coupled with the crowd of reporters you’ve attracted here right before an event, is more than enough grounds for me to terminate you.”

I gasped and held that breath like it was my last. “You’re *firing* me?” I whispered.

“You’ve left me no choice, Greene,” Tracey said with a shake of her head. She turned to walk away, but Declan jumped in front of her.

“Listen, Ms...”

“None of your business.”

“Okay, Ms. Noneofyourbusiness, could you just give me a moment of your time? I’m sure I can convince you none of this is Ms. Greene’s fault.”

“I’ve heard enough,” Tracey said as she tried to walk around him.

“Ah, but you haven’t heard from me yet. Maybe I have a fresh perspective on the situation.”

“Greene,” Tracey spat as she looked around Declan to glare at me. “Get your shit and get out. I’ll send your last check in the mail.”

She spun around and stormed off as my whole world twisted and turned around me.

I'd never been fired from a job in my life. I'd never even been written up. I had always been a model employee until last night.

Until Declan Holmes.

I turned narrowed eyes toward him, but he was still watching my ex-boss walk away.

"Damn, she's a tough nut to crack," he said as he rolled up his sleeves. "But I'm gonna give it another shot."

"No," I said, my voice louder than I'd meant it to be.

Guests for the upcoming event were beginning to arrive, and you could tell by their harried expressions that they'd had to contend with the paparazzi outside.

I squeezed my eyes shut and tried to understand how my entire life flipped upside down so suddenly.

There were reporters following me around, and I'd lost my job all in less than twenty-four hours because of *him*. My eyes snapped back open, and I leveled Declan with a glare.

"You've done enough. Just get rid of the reporters and leave me alone," I spat before I turned around and stomped away.

I kept my head down, and my tears at bay as I hurried through the kitchen to the back, where we kept our personal belongings. Hopefully, no one else had heard the boss fire me, and I could get out of here without anyone noticing.

But of course, I wasn't that lucky.

"Jeez, Willow," Vicki said as she leaned her hip against the wall next to me. "You got fired over fucking Declan Holmes, huh?" She chuckled once, but it was as fake as her eyelashes. "Hope it was fun, at least."

I grabbed the deodorant and hairbrush I kept in my locker and slammed it shut. "I didn't fuck Declan Holmes."

Vicki stared at me for a moment before she straightened up and laughed. "Wow. You're dumber than I thought. Tell me you at least gave him a blow job."

With a roll of my eyes, I pushed past Vicki and hurried toward the back door. I didn't owe her anything, and I was officially done with this place. As I made my way outside, I'd almost convinced myself this could be an opportunity for a fresh start.

But as I got a glimpse of my car in the parking lot, I remembered I'd had to drive to work with the gas on empty, and it needed a new set of tires before winter. My throat began to close as tears filled my eyes.

This was so unfair. I hadn't done *anything* wrong, and yet I was being punished.

What was I going to do now?

I was supposed to leave Nashville within the next month. How could I do that with no job? I'm sure I could find another one, but how long would that take me? How far would that set my plans back?

Tears still burned the backs of my eyes, but I wouldn't let a single one fall. Not until I was in my room alone, where no one else would see or ever know about my weak moment.

I was only halfway to my car when he found me. It shouldn't have surprised me based on his history of persistence, but I'd assumed my harsh words would have sent him running. I'd assumed wrong.

"I got rid of the reporters for now, but there's no guarantee they won't come back," he said instead of a greeting.

I shrugged as I walked past him. "What does it matter? I don't work here anymore."

Declan sighed. "Yeah. I'm sorry about that. I might have a solution, though."

"I don't want to hear it," I said as I fumbled my key into the lock on my door.

"How do you know?" he asked, his voice closer than it was before. "Maybe you'd love this idea."

"Doubt it."

"Will you just give me a chance?"

"No."

"Come on, Will—"

"Do you ever take no for an answer?" I yelled as I spun around to pin him with a glare.

Declan didn't look fazed at all as he met my eyes. "Not when it comes to you," he answered right away. Almost like

he'd prepared the answer in advance.

I stood there stunned for a moment, and that was all he needed.

“Just hear me out, okay? I need a date for this thing I have going on tonight and my manager wants to pay you to come with me.”

My lips pursed as I digested this information. “Why would your manager want to pay *me* to go with you?”

Declan sighed, but his gaze never wavered. “A picture of us made the front page of the Nashville Enquirer. Mason thinks it would make me look better to show up with you tonight.”

“So, this is all to protect your image? What about me? I don't want to be on the front of a friggen newspaper!”

He sighed again, his shoulders falling like they were carrying a heavy load now. “I can't take you out of the public eye now, and I'm sorry for that. It's the price you pay for all this,” he said with a wave at himself.

I rolled my eyes and turned away, but he caught my wrist with a chuckle and pulled me to a stop.

“Okay, okay. That was a dumb joke. But it's true. Everyone in my life is open to scrutiny. That's just the way it is.”

“But I didn't sign up for that,” I argued, like it made a difference.

Logically, I knew he was right, and I'd known the risk last night. But last night, I was still employed.

“I get it,” Declan said, his voice lower as he grasped my other wrist, too. “And I’m sorry.” His bright blue eyes stared so deep into mine I felt bare before him. “The best I can do is make them believe you’re something more than just a one-night stand.”

That one word rang over and over in my head.

More.

More.

More.

But I needed to listen to the rest of the sentence. He’d said this was make believe. He’d said this wasn’t real.

“I don’t know,” I said as I half-heartedly tried to pull away from him.

“This is the best way I can protect your reputation,” he said as he dipped his head to catch my eyes again. “And don’t forget the money. I’m sure your old job doesn’t have a severance package.”

I winced at the reminder that, above all, I needed this money. “How much?” I asked as I squeezed my eyes closed and waited.

“Is five grand enough?”

My eyes snapped open and met his. “Are you kidding me?”

“Is that not enough? Would ten be better?”

“Ten thousand dollars?” I yelled over him.

Declan chuckled through his teeth as his eyes darted around us. “You wanna keep that a little more private, Will?”

“Sorry,” I winced.

“So, are we agreed? Ten thousand dollars for coming with me tonight?”

I stared up into his eyes, searching them for any sign of deceit, but there was none. All I could see was raw hope and anticipation.

“I don’t have anything nice to wear...”

“I’ll handle that. Hair, makeup, nails, wardrobe, shoes. I’ll take care of it all, okay? Just say yes.”

I bit my lip and tried to come up with a good reason to say no, but just like last night, nothing came to me. There was absolutely no reason to turn down ten grand for a single date. Especially with Declan.

“Okay,” I finally breathed.

A wide smile spread across his face. “Yes?”

“Yes.”

Chapter 8

Declan

Me: I'm on my way back. How's it going?

I bit my lip as I waited for her response and willed the car to move faster. Willow showed up at my place a few hours ago to start getting ready, but I'd had another interview, and I'd needed to leave her there. I'd done my best to text her as much as possible, but it wasn't the same.

Finally, my phone buzzed, and I pulled up her message.

Willow: I feel... shiny.

I laughed as I typed out another response.

Me: Is that a good thing?

Thankfully, her next text was quick.

Willow: I think so. I definitely smell better than I ever have in my life.

I chuckled again, but the car slowed to a stop before I could write her back. When I lifted my head, I realized we were already back at my place.

“Thanks man,” I said as I yanked on the handle and got out.

The front doors were already open for me, and today I didn’t want to waste time fucking with them. There was a new guy at the elevators, so after a quick greeting, a door slid open, and I got inside.

My heart raced, and I couldn’t stop fidgeting as I rode upstairs to my penthouse.

“Come on, come on, come on,” I whispered as the damn thing seemed to move slower than ever.

I’m not sure where this urgency came from, but it felt like I’d spent too much time away from Willow. Like every second counted, and I was wasting them not being with her.

Finally, the elevator dinged, and opened to reveal my door. I let myself in and followed the sounds of voices deep inside the apartment. I’d seen them setting up in the kitchen before I left, so I checked there first.

Their conversations kept getting louder, and I kept walking faster until I was almost running through the halls. I skidded to a stop in the doorway of the kitchen and searched for her familiar red hair.

“Hi Mr. Holmes,” one of the makeup artists called.

I glanced her way with a smile and a nod before I asked, “Where’s Willow?”

Zaida, the stylist I’d asked to come and dress us both, spoke up next. “She’s in the bathroom getting changed. Do you want to go look at the suits I pulled for you?”

My eyes darted to the nearest bathroom door like I could see through it and get a glimpse of Willow. And for once in my life, I didn’t mean that in a perverted way. I genuinely just wanted to see her face.

“Sure,” I said with a half-hearted smile. “Are they in my room?”

She nodded and motioned for me to go first. We walked in silence down the long hallway to my bedroom, but I could only take that for so long.

“How did things go with Willow?” I finally asked.

“Great. She was fun to work with.”

“Great,” I echoed, at a loss for what to say next. I wanted to hear more about Willow without sounding like an absolute loser, but each question I came up with was more pathetic than the last. Finally, I gave up and just asked, “Did you guys find her a dress?”

“Oh yes,” Zaida said as we made it to my room, and she walked over to a rack of clothes she’d already rolled in here. “There were a few that looked amazing on her, but I think she made the right choice in the end.”

“Really? Do you have pictures?”

Zaida spun around with a raised brow. “You know, I always take pictures of my work.”

“Can I see?”

She pursed her lips before turning back to the rack of clothes. “The only thing I love more than capturing my creations is creating surprises.” She shot me a look over her shoulder and grinned. “I think I’ll make you wait to see her.”

My head fell back with a groan. “Come on, Zaida,” I whined. “That’s not fair.”

She rolled her eyes as she pulled a hanger off the rack. “Yes, yes. Your life is so hard. Now, go put on this five-thousand-dollar tuxedo so I can get you ready for the glitz and glamour of another awards show.”

I took the clothes from her with a grumble. “*Fine*,” I snarked. “But I’m not tryin’ on more than three suits this time! You better make your mind up fast because I wanna see her.”

Zaida rolled her dark eyes and shook her head. “Yes, yes. Go on and get dressed. I’ll have shoes for you when you come out.”

With a huff, I hurried into the bathroom to get changed, surprised she hadn’t handed me designer socks and underwear to complete the look. As I turned toward the mirror, I understood why.

Zaida had already left all that on the sink.

“Damn, she’s good,” I muttered as I pulled off my clothes.

I got dressed in the overpriced monkey suit as quickly as I could and stepped back out of the bathroom. “I think we have a winner,” I said. Which was what I said every time she made me try something on. Usually, she didn’t agree with me.

Thankfully, today was different.

“Actually,” she said with a hand on her chin as she examined me. “I think you might be right. Tom Ford was definitely the move today.”

“Yeah, he’s an upstanding guy. Can I go now?”

She let out an irritated sigh and shook her head again. “Just let me accessorize you, please?” She held out a pair of shiny black leather shoes. “Put these on while I grab you a watch and a handkerchief.”

“What is this? Nineteen twenty-two?” I grumbled as I slid my feet into the uncomfortable ass shoes.

“Quiet,” she said as I stood up, and she fussed with the scrap of fabric in my pocket. “Here,” she said as she handed over the watch she’d promised. “Now that’s the best I can do under these circumstances.”

Zaida took a step back as I clasped the watch and gave her a fist bump. “You did awesome, as always.”

I’m not sure if she answered or not, because I dashed out of the room after that. It sounded crazy, but I swore I could pinpoint which heartbeat was Willow’s, and I felt drawn to it. Like it was a siren call.

I skidded to a stop in the doorway of the kitchen again, but this time, I spotted her right away. Willow had her back to me, but I'd know that shade of copper hair anywhere.

She seemed to turn around in slow motion, the sparkles on her bright red dress catching the light as she moved. When she was finally facing me, I didn't know where to look first.

Her hair was tame for a change and shining in the light. Her eyes were covered in dark makeup that made the green color pop even from across the room. And every single one of her curves were accentuated in the skin-tight red dress I couldn't wait to peel off her.

"Holy shit," I finally said, as I stood there still trying to take it all in.

Willow's heart stuttered, and I looked to her, but that green gaze was on her feet instead. "It's too much, right? I tried to tell Zaida it was too much, but she said it looked good with my red hair." She finally tipped her head up, but her eyes darted away before they could meet mine. "Zaida? Can you help me change?" she called.

Before she could even take a step, I hurried over and grabbed her hand. "Absolutely not," I said, my voice meaner than I meant it to sound.

Willow's bright gaze finally met mine, stunning me for a moment. "What?"

I shook my head to clear it, but with her floral scent so close after hours apart, that was not easy to do. "You're not taking

the dress off.”

I didn't add that I wanted to be the one to do that. She wouldn't be happy if I said that out loud with all these other people here, but it was the truth.

“You look fucking amazing,” I continued as I lifted her hand above her head. “Turn for me.”

Her eyes snapped to mine again, and she held them for a moment before slowly spinning around. My eyes followed the dips and grooves of her body, focusing longer on her ass than anywhere else. When she was finally facing me again, I was so hard I was about to split this expensive ass tux.

“Fuck,” I spat before I could stop myself. “You're so gorgeous.”

She had too much makeup on for it to show, but there was no mistaking the scent of her blush. I took deep, greedy inhales while it lasted.

“Thank you,” she finally said, her voice soft and unsure.

I brought her hand to my lips and waited for her to meet my eyes again. “Thank you for makin' me the luckiest guy in Nashville.”

“Oh?” she asked, a small smile curling her lips. “How did I do that?”

I pulled her close and worked to ignore the other people in the room as they collected their shit. “By comin' to this show with me tonight.”

She shook her head but couldn't fight the smile anymore. "You're not a lucky guy, you're a broke guy. This," she said with a wave at herself, "had to cost a fortune! And with the ten grand you're giving me on top of that?" she whispered. "How are you affording all this?"

I snorted as I let go of her hand and wrapped my arm around her shoulders instead. "Mason made us do smart shit with our money as soon as we started makin' it, so don't worry about that. In fact, you should be more concerned with your negotiating skills."

"My negotiation skills?" she deadpanned.

"Yep. I woulda' paid ten times that to get you to go out with me."

Willow pulled us to an abrupt stop with a gasp. "You're saying you would have paid me a hundred thousand dollars just to go out with you?"

"Well, not exactly. For that price, I'd probably expect a little more."

Her eyes clouded before they darted away from me, and she straightened her spine again.

I scoffed and grabbed her hand. "Not that, you pervert."

She gasped again, but I kept talking.

"I meant a second date or another movie night or somethin'. Get your mind out of the gutter."

Willow snorted, but didn't say anything else as I pulled her through the apartment. I yelled a thanks to everyone but didn't wait for them to leave. Our car was already downstairs, and I couldn't wait to get her alone, even for just a minute.

We stepped into the elevator, and I held onto her hand as I hit the Lobby button. The doors closed and instantly everything changed.

Willow's heart started to race along with mine as the seconds ticked by, and the car slowly descended through the floors. The walls seemed to get closer as I gripped her fingers and tried to stop myself from touching more of her. I squeezed my eyes closed, but it didn't help. I could still *smell* her, and that was enough to make my dick hard.

Finally, it was too much to take, and I was tired of trying to stay away from her.

In one swift movement, I tucked both our hands behind her back and dragged her body toward mine. Willow gasped, her wide eyes full of excitement, and my cock ached at the sweet sound. I ducked my head, ready to kiss that look off her face, when the elevator dinged, and the doors slid open.

She pulled out of my hold and straightened up before I had a chance to change her mind. Willow made sure to avoid my eyes as she exited the car ahead of me. Like a dumbass, I watched her ass sway for so long the doors started to close.

Thankfully, I was able to squeeze through and jog to catch up to her. Without asking, I grabbed her hand again. "Have I

told you yet how beautiful you look?” I asked as the front doors were opened for us.

Willow turned to me with a smile, her lips bright red and so tempting I had to clench my free hand into a fist. “I don’t think you’ve used the word *beautiful* yet, actually.”

Her words surprised me so much I laughed out loud as we approached the black limo. “I haven’t, huh? What about stunning? Or mesmerizing? Or exquisite?”

The scent of her blush filled the air, and I inhaled deeply as I opened the back door for her.

“No,” Willow said quietly as she struggled to meet my eyes. “You haven’t used those words either.”

I picked up her hand and kissed the back of it, running my lips over her knuckles until she finally looked at me. “Then I’m an asshole.” Her red lips twitched with a smile, and I kissed her hand again. “After you, ma’am,” I said as I waved at the limo.

Willow pulled her fingers from mine and turned around to carefully get inside. I picked up the back of her dress before climbing onto the seat myself.

The interior of the vehicle was spacious, but just like in the elevator, as soon as I pulled the door closed everything changed.

Suddenly, Willow’s scent filled my senses. Her hair, her skin, her blush. I could even smell the faint trace of her arousal as she settled herself on the seat next to me.

The smell was new and familiar at the same time. It made me feel both comfortable and excited. Safe and anxious.

It made me want more.

I shifted on the seat, hoping to get my dick under control, but it was useless. With Willow sitting next to me, looking and smelling as great as she did, I had no hope for my cock. The best I could do was try to hide the way she affected me.

What I couldn't ignore was the scent of her arousal getting stronger and stronger the longer we sat there. I would have thought it was my imagination if I couldn't see the blush creeping down her neck.

Willow was just as horny as I was.

Feeling bolder than ever, I slid closer until all there was no space between us. The sweet sound of her heart racing was like music to my fucking ears. I leaned down, taking my time breathing her in before I whispered in her ear.

"I can tell you're uncomfortable."

Willow shivered next to me, and I smiled wider.

"The dress is tight," she said, her voice breaking on the last word.

I shook my head, making sure my nose rubbed against the shell of her ear with each shake. "No. That's not it."

"I'm not used to wearing this much makeup?" she said, almost like a question.

I chuckled in her ear and watched the little baby hairs dance. “Nope.”

Willow let out a huff of irritation, and I decided to end the game early. We only had so much time before we made it to the venue.

One arm slid behind her neck while the other landed on her bare knee, exposed by a slit in the skirt. “I think you’re uncomfortable because you need to come,” I whispered in her ear.

Willow gasped, her heart racing faster than ever, but she didn’t say anything.

Which I took to mean she agreed.

The hand on her knee slid up a few inches until I reached the edge of her dress. I paused there for a moment and let her catch up. When I couldn’t wait anymore, I said, “Want me to help you, gorgeous?”

Willow let out a shaky breath before she said just one word.

“Please.”

Chapter 9

Willow

Wait,” I said before Declan could advance. My eyes darted toward the front of the limo. “What about the driver?” I whispered.

“He’s a human and he shouldn’t be able to hear with the partition up,” Declan said as he slid off the seat and knelt in front of me.

I stopped breathing for a moment as his calloused hands slid up my bare thighs. He leaned in close, but just a moment before his lips met mine, I pulled away.

“We can’t kiss,” I said.

Declan frowned. “Why the hell not?”

“You’ll mess up my makeup.”

He sighed, but then set his sights on my neck instead.

And I had to stop him again.

“I wouldn’t kiss there either,” I said, my voice breathier than before. “They put shimmer lotion and perfume and stuff all over my skin.”

Declan growled as he pulled a hand off my thigh and shoved it down the front of my dress. He wrapped his fingers around my breast and pulled it above the neckline before meeting my eyes. “What about here?” he asked, his voice deep as his thumb stroked my hard nipple. “Am I allowed to kiss you here?”

I licked my dry lips and tried to speak, but the words were stuck in my even drier throat. So, I just nodded.

He smiled before he dipped his shaggy blond head to my chest. His warm breath met my breast first before he pressed his lips to the tip. My heart thundered in my chest as I lay frozen beneath him, waiting to see what he’d do next.

The hand on my thigh began to move again as his hot mouth covered my nipple. My back arched as his tongue flicked the tip. When he pulled away again, his once warm breath felt cool, and I shivered beneath him.

Declan chuckled and pulled my breast back into his mouth as the hand on my thigh slid beneath my dress. My head fell back against the seat as his fingers crept along my skin. When he finally ran out of leg, he pulled away to stare at me.

“Where are your underwear?” he asked, his voice rougher than ever.

I shrugged. “I told Zaida I didn’t want panty lines in the dress.”

“Holy shit,” Declan muttered as he hung his head.

“Is that a problem?” I asked, my voice squeaking with confusion as I tried to understand his reaction.

He growled softly as the hand under my dress cupped me between my legs. He was barely touching me and still, my back arched, and I moaned beneath him.

“You’re telling me I have to suffer through this whole stupid show knowing you’re sitting next to me, not wearing any fucking panties?”

“Um. Yes?”

Declan growled again, louder this time. “Fine,” he said as both hands slid back to my thighs. “Then I’m going to have to make you come so hard you can’t even think about sex for hours.” He leaned in close, his deep voice making me shiver. “Because I promise, if I smell one hint of your arousal tonight, I’m gonna find the nearest bathroom or janitor’s closet and fuck you. Do you understand?”

My heart slammed to the back of my throat, where it pounded out of control. I sat there staring at him, reading the truth in his eyes for myself. I would have thought a threat like that would send me running, but it did the opposite.

I just wanted more.

“Willow,” Declan said, his voice more stern now and serving to only turn me on more. “Do you understand?”

“Yes.”

“Good,” he said before he slid the dress up to my waist and spread my thighs. He leaned close and breathed in deep, his

blue eyes shining as they met mine. “You smell so fucking good.”

Before I could respond, his mouth covered my breast again and one of his hands slid between my legs. He used two fingers to dip inside me, making my back arch against him again. I think I stopped breathing all together as he dragged those wet fingertips to my clit.

The sensation was so good it almost hurt as he moved from deep inside me to that little sensitive nub over and over. I was experienced enough to recognize when an orgasm was approaching, but nothing could have prepared me for what was awaiting me this time.

Declan pulled his mouth off my tit and met my eyes again. “I need a taste,” he growled before he slid down my body and dug his head between my legs. Declan’s skillful tongue met my clit, and I dragged in a deep, sharp breath.

The pleasure became even more painful as he seemed to be everywhere. Licking and lapping and nipping and sucking. His hands roamed my body as far as he could reach before he finally settled them on my ass. Declan dragged me even closer, and I knew I was seconds away from losing control.

He squeezed my ass and moaned against me, setting off a series of explosions that rocked me to my core. It seemed to go on and on as Declan continued his assault and wave after wave of pleasure swept through me. Seconds turned to minutes that seemed to stretch on forever, but he never wavered.

Finally, I had to reach for him. “Declan,” I gasped. “I can’t.”

He finally pulled back far enough to meet my eyes and grin. He held my gaze as he slid one hand between my legs and plunged two fingers deep inside me. “I’m not done.”

Before I could explain that it was *me* who was done, he dove between my legs again.

This time Declan was merciless.

His fingers thrust in and out of me at impossible speeds while he alternated between licking and sucking my clit. I’d thought the last orgasm was all I had to give, but there was another one on the way.

Seconds later, I was erupting again, my body twitching and trembling beneath him as I came again. This one wasn’t as strong as the last one, but was more than enough to exhaust my entire body. When I was finally spent, I slumped against the seat and closed my eyes.

Declan chuckled and slid his fingers out of me. “That was so fuckin’ hot.”

I cracked a lid open to watch him pull the handkerchief from his jacket pocket and use it to wipe his face. I squeezed my eyes closed again as a fierce blush engulfed my entire body.

That was *me* he was wiping off his smiling mouth.

Declan laughed again as his gentle hands pried my legs apart. “What are you blushing about now?” he asked as he cleaned me with the silk cloth.

My face burned even hotter as I laid there, trying not to react to his touch. I couldn't remember the last time someone had bothered to try to take care of me and had no idea how I was supposed to act.

"I just..." my words trailed off as I tried to figure out how to finish that sentence.

Before I had the chance, noise from outside started to filter into the limo, and I turned to see we were driving toward a crowd. I hurried to sit up and pull my dress down as Declan chuckled and slid onto the seat next to me.

"Don't worry," he said as he nudged me with his elbow. "The tints are too dark to see inside."

I blew out a small breath of relief, but it was short-lived. "Where are we?"

Declan's stare on the side of my face never wavered as he answered. "The CMN Awards."

That got my attention.

I whipped around to stare at him. "The what?"

"The Country Music Network Awards. Haven't you heard of them?"

"Of course, I've heard of them!" I yelled over them. "Why didn't you tell me that's where we were going tonight?"

Declan shrugged. "I didn't think it mattered."

"You didn't think it mattered?" I screeched as the limo pulled to a stop in front of a crowd of reporters and a long,

ominous red carpet. “Oh no,” I said as I shrunk in my seat. “I can’t do this.”

“Can’t do what?” Declan asked, like he was actually confused. “We’re just gonna take some pictures, probably talk to a reporter or two, and then go inside and have dinner. It’s no big deal.”

Before I could start shrieking again, a staticky voice sounded through the speaker. “Mr. Holmes. Are you ready to get out?”

Declan turned to me like the decision was mine, and I gulped hard. Ten thousand dollars was a lot of money to give up, but what were my other options? I couldn’t walk down the red carpet with a rockstar. It was absolutely out of the question.

“Listen,” Declan said, his voice so sweet and sincere I had to meet his gaze. “I won’t let anything bad happen, okay?” he said as he held out his hand.

I stared at it for a moment, but already knew what my answer would be. I’m not sure when I began to trust him, but I did.

With a sigh, I placed my palm on Declan’s and let his fingers grasp mine. “Okay,” I finally said.

Declan smiled and kissed the back of my hand before reaching over to press the intercom button. “We’re ready now.”

Moments later, the muffled noise from outside blared into the back of the limo as Declan's door was pulled open. I wanted to cover my ears, but just grit my teeth and slid across the seat after him.

When Declan stepped out of the vehicle, the crowd got even louder, and my heart thumped, listening to them cheer for him. He turned and waved to his fans before reaching his hand out to me. I grasped his fingers and let him pull me out of the limo and directly into the limelight.

“Declan, who did you bring tonight?”

“Declan, who are you wearing?”

“Declan, is this the mystery girl from yesterday?”

A tall, blonde woman in a sharp suit slipped through the crowd to flank Declan's other side. “Let's keep it moving,” she said as she led him forward.

Declan pulled me along as he made the introductions. “Willow, this is my publicist Kristy. Kristy, this is my date, Willow.”

“A little heads up would be nice next time,” she said with a roll of her eyes.

Declan shrugged and turned to smile at me. “It was a last-minute thing.”

“You know how the last minute is my favorite minute,” Kristy grumbled as she walked us over to a camera and a woman with a microphone. “Here. Talk to CMN while I figure out who else is available.”

Before we could respond, the reporter had a microphone shoved in front of Declan's face. "Hi there! Shannon with CMN news, how are you doin' tonight, Declan?"

I did my best to hide behind him as his face split with a smile. "I'm doin' real good, Shannon. How are you? You look lovely this evening."

Her heart started to race, and I tried not to roll my eyes.

"You are always such a charmer," Shannon said with a laugh. "You look very dashing yourself. Tell me, who are you wearing tonight?"

"This old thing?" Declan said with a wave at himself which just made Shannon laugh again. "I think my stylist called it a Honda? Or was it a Buick?"

I snorted behind him. "It's Tom Ford, you bozo," I muttered.

Declan turned to wink at me. "That's right. My beautiful guest has corrected me," he said as he wrapped an arm around my shoulders and tugged until I was standing next to him. "It's Tom Ford."

Shannon glanced at me briefly before settling her gaze and microphone on Declan again. "And who did you bring with you tonight, Declan?"

My heart sank to my high-heeled shoes as I looked up at him. Declan's gaze was already on me, a small smile on his lips. "This is my..."

His words trailed off, and his eyebrows bunched with a frown as he stared. It was almost like he was trying to pull the answer from me, but I had nothing for him.

I had absolutely no idea how he was supposed to finish that sentence. We'd never even bothered to talk about what our story was. He certainly wasn't going to tell her he paid me to be here.

Finally, he shrugged and turned to Shannon again. "This is my girl, Willow," he finally said.

Which did nothing but make my heart pound faster.

Shannon didn't seem to like that answer, so her smile was brittle as she looked up at him. "Your girl, huh? Does this mean the elusive Declan Holmes is officially off the market?"

I could feel him looking at me again, but I was busy studying my shoes.

Declan leaned closer to her and grabbed the microphone. "Let's just say, tonight I'm taken."

My pulse thundered in my ears at the implication of his words. Did that mean he expected me to go home with him?

Well, of course I had to go home with him because all my stuff was there.

But did he expect me to stay? Did he expect to do more of what we did in the limo? Did he want more? Did *I* want more?

Before I could answer any of those questions, the microphone was thrust towards me, and I looked up to find

Shannon's fake smile pointed my way.

"Hi Willow! Is this your first time at the CMN Awards?"

I licked my lips before leaning into answer. "Yes."

"Great! Are you having a good time so far?"

"So far, so good."

She looked like she was getting irritated with my lack of answers, but I couldn't help that. Just forcing those few words past my numb lips was hard enough.

"Okay, Willow, last question," Shannon said through her teeth. "Who are you wearing tonight?"

Thankfully, I had the answer to that one.

"Alexander McQueen."

"Love it," Shannon said as she finally pulled the microphone away from me. "You two both look great. I hope you have an amazing time tonight."

Declan wrapped his hand around my elbow, and that small touch was enough to calm my nerves. "Thanks, Shannon. Have a good one," he said before he started pulling me away.

Kristy materialized again and started giving out instructions. "You're going over there to pose for some pictures before a couple more quick interviews."

My heart sank as I realized we were nowhere near done with this chaos. Declan seemed to sense my mood and squeezed my hand. "It's okay. The food makes this all worth it, little Hobbit," he murmured in my ear.

I tucked my free hand in close to his ribs and pinched hard. “Why do you always try to use food against me?”

“Ow!” he whispered. “And I use food because it works. Go on and try to tell me you’re not a little more excited about taking a bunch of pictures, now that you know there’s some Kobe beef waiting for you on the other end.”

“Kobe?”

His smile widened as he nodded. “Yep.”

I sighed. “Okay. Fine. What do I have to do?”

Declan chuckled and leaned down to kiss my cheek. “Just smile for the cameras. You’re already so beautiful you don’t need to do anything else.”

My heart slammed against my ribs viciously as I stared up into his sincere blue eyes. A million words were on the tip of my tongue, but I didn’t get to say any of them.

“You’re up,” Kristy said before she grabbed Declan’s arm and pushed him toward an empty space on the red carpet.

He pulled me along with him, although gentler than she’d been. We were quiet as he led me to the very middle and spun me toward the flashing lights. I did my best to smile, but they were blinding and all the people yelling for us to look here or there were confusing me.

Before I could panic, Declan grabbed my hand and lifted it above my head. He spun me around once before wrapping an arm around my waist and dipping me low. My hair almost touched the red carpet before he paused and smiled.

“Three... two... one,” he said before he kissed me.

Chapter 10

Declan

Declan!”
“Declan!”

“DECLAN!”

I turned away from the flashing lights to find a group of fans waving signs and screaming my name. With a chuckle, I ducked to speak in Willow’s ear.

“I should go say hi and sign some shit, or they’re just gonna get louder.”

She giggled. “Is that all right with Kristy?”

I rolled my eyes and grabbed her hand. “Listen, Kristy works for *me*.”

Willow scoffed as I dragged her toward the group of fans. “I’d pay money to see you say that to her face.”

I turned wide eyes back to her. “No thanks. I value my life.” I looked away before a thought came to me, and I met her eyes again. “And if you tell her, you’re gonna regret it.”

Her bright red lips quirked with a smile. “Oh yeah. What are you gonna do?”

Holy shit.

There were a hundred answers to that question, and most of them ended with her naked pressed against something. But I had a feeling that’s not what she meant, so I shook those thoughts out of my head and leaned close to whisper in her ear.

“If you tell on me, I’m gonna lick your Kobe beef before you get to eat it.”

Willow snorted and stretched up to reach my ear. “You’ve licked a lot more than my Kobe beef. I’m not that concerned.”

A laugh burst out of me before I could stop it. Loud and boisterous, it drew the attention of everyone around us, but I didn’t care.

That shit was funny as hell.

“You’re dirty,” I whispered against the side of her face as I wrapped an arm around her shoulders. “And I kinda like it.”

Willow shivered next to me, making my dick even harder before she slipped out of my hold. “That’s enough. Go say hi to your fans,” she said, her hands making a shooing motion.

I stood there for a moment, trying to decide whether I wanted to fight her on this or not before I heard them yelling again.

“DECLAN!”

“All right!” I yelled with a laugh as I spun to face them. “Were y’all lookin’ for me?” The girls in the crowd yelled even louder, their screams actually hurting my ears. “Okay, okay. I heard you. Jeez.”

Their laughs were loud, fueling the adrenaline in my system and making the smile on my face feel permanent. “Who has shit they want signed?”

“ME,” half a dozen people yelled as they shoved their posters and markers my way.

“All right, all right, let’s see. It’s D-E-,”

“C-L-A-N,” the crowd chanted.

“That’s right. That’s right. Y’all know I didn’t go to the best schools.” They laughed again, and I smiled back at them. “Okay, honey, what’s your name?” I asked the first fan.

“It’s Maria,” she said, her voice so soft I almost didn’t catch it over the noise even with werewolf hearing.

“Got it,” I said as I signed her notebook. “Thanks for comin’ out today, Maria.”

She smiled wide as I handed it back and grabbed the next item.

I did my best to quickly sign each thing passed my way. There were water bottles and book bags and folders and t-shirts. Anything they could reach, they had me sign. But when someone handed over a stuffie, I looked up with a frown.

“How do y’all expect me to sign this?”

They laughed again before someone yelled from the back of the crowd. “Sign the tag!”

I searched the little stuffed lamb until I found a tiny tag near its ass. With a sigh like this was the hardest thing I’d ever done, I left my initials on the scrap of fabric. “Y’all are really too much,” I said as I handed it back.

When I was out of things to sign, I called out, “Okay, who wants a picture now?”

“ME!” they all yelled.

I chuckled as I grabbed the first cell phone and leaned in to take a selfie. “What’s your name, darlin’?”

“It’s Jasmine!” she yelled, her voice too loud for our close proximity. “And I love you so much! I have all your albums, and I’ve seen every one of your shows in Memphis.”

“Hey,” I said as I turned to face her. “Were you at the show we had there a few weeks ago?”

“Yes!” she screamed again. “You guys were amazing!”

“That was a great show! You folks in Memphis always treat us right.”

A few other fans cheered, and I gave them a little wave.

“Could you get my sister in the picture, too?” Jasmine asked as she grabbed the girl next to her.

“Sure. What’s your sister’s name?”

“It’s Tammie!” the other girl yelled. “Can I have a selfie with you, too?”

“Of course. Come on, Tammie,” I said with a wink as I waved her over. “Get in here.”

We spent a few moments trying to arrange ourselves to all be seen in the camera, but it wasn't going well. I was a good twelve inches taller than both of them, and I kept cutting off their faces.

“Can I help?”

I turned to find Willow only a few feet away, her smile wide and her eyes bright.

“That would be great,” I said as I straightened up. “Is that all right with you two?”

“Yes!” Jasmine yelled. “Thank you!”

I laughed as I handed her the cell phone. “Thanks, gorgeous,” I said, my voice only loud enough for her to hear.

The sound of her heart racing was like music to my ears as I walked back to Jasmine and Tammie.

“You two ready?” I asked as I put my arms around both their shoulders.

They nodded, and Willow started counting.

“Okay, one... two... three!”

The flash went off a few times as Willow snapped multiple pictures for them. When she was done, she walked over with a smile and handed the phone back.

“Thank you so much!” Tammie gushed as he handed her cell over next.

“Happy to help,” Willow said as she backed up a few feet and took some more pictures.

When she was done with that, she called out to the crowd before I had a chance to. “Who else wants me to take their picture?”

“ME!”

She smiled graciously as she was handed phone after phone and took picture after picture for us. I kept watching and waiting for her to get fed up or annoyed or jealous of the women draping themselves all over me, but there was never any of that.

The only thing I could find in her eyes was kindness, and that shit was sexy as hell.

We’d probably spent at least thirty minutes there, taking pictures with fans before Kristy found us. She was so tall you could see her coming a mile away, which gave me time to disengage from the fan holding onto me.

“I think our time is up,” I said to the crowd.

There were a bunch of awws and boos, but I was pretty confident I’d signed something or taken a picture with everyone there. Sometimes that was the best you could do.

“There you are,” Kristy hissed as she approached us. “I’ve got 109.8 Nashville’s Hot Country Radio ready to interview you before we go inside.”

“Okay,” I said as I straightened my tie and found Willow’s hand again. “Let’s go.”

Kristy led us to another overly friendly reporter, who asked the same questions they always did. Who was I wearing, who was I with, what did that mean, etc. I gave them the kind of canned responses publicists loved and finished the interview as quickly as possible.

“That should be it for today,” Kristy said as we stepped away from the reporter. “I’ll be in touch if you win anything,” she said before disappearing from my side.

Willow turned to me. “You’re up for an award?”

“Of course,” I said as I grabbed her hand and followed the other people streaming into the venue. “We’re the biggest band in country music right now. Duh.”

She giggled. “You’re so annoying.”

“I believe that’s awe you’re feeling, not annoyance.”

“Nope. Pretty sure it’s annoyance.”

“Strange,” I said as we made it inside, and I pulled her to a stop near the doors. “Most people feel awe in my presence.”

She snorted this time. “Yeah, well, I’m not most people.”

Those words rang so loudly in my head as I met her eyes again. “I know you’re not.”

We stood there with our gazes locked for a long time. I’m not sure what was going through her head, but all I could think about was getting her alone again. Even just to speak to her without all these other eyes on us.

“Mr. Holmes?”

The spell was finally broken, and I shook my head as I turned to find a man in a pristine tuxedo standing next to us. “Yes?”

“If you’ll follow me, I can lead you to your table.”

I straightened up and took a step away from Willow. Being that close clouded my head and I couldn’t afford that on a night like this. Not with half the country watching.

“That would be great,” I said as I grabbed her hand.

The usher led us into the large event space full of white linen tables and the soft glow of candles. I’d seen the same setup a dozen times before, but this was all new to Willow, so I watched her instead.

Those big green eyes lit up wide as she seemed to try to take in everything at once. I looked around too, but none of it held my attention like Willow did.

“This place is beautiful,” she whispered to me.

I squeezed her hand. “Not even close to as beautiful as you are,” I whispered back.

She rolled her eyes, but her lips were curled into a smile, so I didn’t care.

We finally made it to our assigned seats, the table already half-full of my bandmates.

“Thanks,” I said to the usher as he pulled both our chairs out for us. “Hey Theo. Hey Del. Hey Roman.”

“Sup,” Roman grumbled as the singer threw back a shot of liquor.

We all knew it wouldn't affect him, but the impression he was making on those around us would. I exchanged a glance with Theo, but it was Del who spoke up.

“Hey, Declan. Who's this you got with you?”

That question coming from most of the women in this industry would be a red flag, but this was Del, and she was as cool as they came.

I wrapped an arm around Willow's shoulders and smiled. “This is Willow. Willow, that's Del. She's toured with us a bunch. And that ugly guy next to her is Theo, her mate. And the even uglier guy with the scowl on his face is Roman.”

“Fuck off,” Roman muttered as he waved down a waiter for another drink.

We all ignored him.

“Where are Sawyer and Walker?” I asked as I glanced at the two empty seats at our table.

“They had to fly home for something,” Theo said as he took a sip of his water. “Mason's pissed.”

“When is he not?” I sighed.

Before Theo could answer, another usher approached our table and brought with him the two missing guests for our table. I looked up to greet them with a benign smile before I caught her scent, and my stomach turned.

My ex, Kari, sauntered over to the empty seat right next to mine and sat down. “Hey Dec. I didn’t expect to see you here. How you doin’?” she purred.

I glanced over her shoulder to see the douche bag she left me for taking his seat beside her. Apparently, he was still following her around like a lost puppy.

I’m not sure if that made this situation better or worse.

I cleared my throat when I realized I still hadn’t answered her question. “Um. I’m good, Kari. How are you?”

“I’ve been real good,” she said as she leaned an inch closer to me. “I’ve missed you, though. You haven’t been home in ages.”

I frowned as my mind raced to understand her words.

We hadn’t spoken in almost two years. I’d been home to Nashville countless times since then, and she’d never sought me out before. What was the difference now? What changed?

Before I could answer, she spoke again and things became a little clearer. “I saw you made the front page of the paper the other day,” she said with a breathy giggle. “You still love those groupies, huh?”

My back stiffened as Willow’s heart skipped a beat behind me. It was obvious she’d heard Kari’s words despite the noise in the room.

“She’s not some groupie,” I muttered to Kari, hoping she’d let it go.

But she just giggled louder. “Groupie. Roadie. Hostess. Concierge. When has it ever mattered to you?”

I grit my teeth to keep the words at bay, but it wasn’t easy.

The worst part was she wasn’t wrong.

I hadn’t been picky about who I went home with in the past. Hell, I hadn’t been picky up until a few days ago. But now that I’d met Willow, everything was different.

Probably because she was so different.

“I know you know how it is, Kari,” I said with a shrug. “Wasn’t it your personal trainer you left me for?” I asked with a nod in his direction.

Kari’s face flushed beneath her heavy makeup as she shot me a brittle smile. “Oh, come on, Dec. That’s ancient history. Don’t tell me you’re still mad.”

I shook my head. “Not mad. Just not interested in half-truths.”

“Well, at least I’m not the one getting photographed making out with some fan on the streets of downtown Nashville at seven in the morning,” she huffed.

“She’s not some fan,” I gritted out.

Kari rolled her eyes. “I told you. I don’t care where you found her. I think the papers said she was a waitress or something, but it doesn’t matter. You’re just as bad as I am, and you always have been.”

Acid burned its way up my throat as I fought with all the things I wanted to say to her. I swallowed it down as best I could before I spoke again.

“She’s not a groupie, and she’s not just some waitress,” I spat through my teeth. My mind whirled again with how to classify Willow, but only one word felt like it fit here. “She’s my girlfriend, so you need to back off.”

Kari’s eyes went wide as Willow’s heart stuttered behind me again. “Your what?” my ex deadpanned.

I could feel Willow’s green eyes staring at the back of my head, but I couldn’t meet them yet. At best, there’d be dozens of questions I couldn’t answer right now. At worst, she’d be pissed.

I wasn’t ready to deal with either of those options.

“Gentlemen.”

I froze in place as we all turned to see another usher at the edge of our table.

“If I could have the members of the band Phase follow me, please. Your presence is requested backstage.”

My heart dropped as I turned to Theo. “What the fuck? Why are we going backstage?”

He rolled his eyes as he kissed Del’s cheek and stood up. “We’re presenting an award, dickhead.”

I finally turned to Willow and found nothing but apprehension in her eyes. As I watched, she pressed her lips

firmly together and swallowed hard.

“Listen,” I muttered as I leaned in. “I’ll be back as soon as I can, okay? Talk to Del. She’s really nice.”

Willow’s green gaze was still full of fear, but she nodded. “Okay.”

I felt like the biggest asshole in the world, but I had no choice but to stand up and walk away from her.

Now I just had to hope she was still there when I got back.

Chapter 11

Willow

Excuse me.”

I jumped in my seat at the familiar voice and turned to find a waiter standing next to me with a covered dish in his hands. Except he wasn't *just* a waiter.

He was my ex-boyfriend.

I ducked my head to hide, but he'd already seen me, and there was no escaping this encounter.

“Willow?”

I took a deep breath before lifting my head to meet his gaze. “Ethan? Hey! Nice to see you,” I lied.

His hungry eyes covered every inch of my body, and I had to stop myself from covering up. “Yeah. It's *really* nice to see you. What are you doing here?”

“Oh,” I said with a vague wave at the venue and then myself. “You know. I came with someone.”

“Who?”

“Are you going to serve the rest of us?” Kari spoke up from behind me.

Which was the first time I’d been grateful for her presence since I met her.

Ethan’s gaze shuttered before he leaned over and set the plate in front of me. “Of course,” he said. “Just a moment, please.”

I stared at my covered dish and willed the blush off my face as I listened to my ex serve the rest of the table. It was possibly the most awkward moment of my life, and all I wanted to do was disappear.

“Enjoy your meals, everybody,” he said before turning to me. “I’ll talk to you later, Willow,” he promised.

I cringed at the heat in his voice and hoped no one else at the table noticed.

Of course, that was futile.

“I wonder how Declan’s going to feel about his date flirting with the help,” Kari said as she lifted the lid off her plate.

The urge to cower was still there, but I’d never let girls like Kari talk down to me before, and I wouldn’t be starting tonight. With great effort, I straightened my spine and took the cover off my dish as well.

“He’s an ex,” I said with a shrug. “We haven’t seen each other in a while. There’s really not much else to it.”

Kari scoffed, but it was Del who spoke up next.

“He was kinda cute,” she said. I looked up in time to see a small smile on her red lips. “Not as cute as Declan of course, but you’ve got good taste.”

An answering grin spread across my face before I ducked my head to stare at my plate again. “You wouldn’t say that if you knew him,” I said as I picked up my fork and knife.

Del snorted. “Tell me more.”

I cut a corner off the medium rare steak as I answered. “Let’s just say, this is the first time *I’ve* seen him work.”

“Ugh,” Del said with a grimace on her face. “I can’t stand a lazy man.”

“Tell me about it,” I said as I popped the bite in my mouth.

Kari giggled from next to me, and we both turned to see her pointing at my plate. “You’re actually eating that?” she said with an even louder laugh. “No one eats the dinner at these things.”

The beef turned sour and tough in my mouth, but I forced myself to keep chewing and swallow. I looked back down at the meal, and my stomach growled. I hadn’t eaten anything since before I got to Declan’s hours ago to get ready.

And I’d been excited about this Kobe beef.

With a resigned sigh, I grabbed my plate to push it away when Del spoke up.

“Girl, they’re servin’ Kobe beef,” she said before shoving a large bite in her mouth. “I don’t care what you say, I’m eatin’.”

My eyes darted to Kari and the disgusted look she had smeared across her face as she watched Del. I guess I could be thankful her disdain wasn't only for me.

Emboldened by Del's attitude, I dug back into my own food. "The garlic butter sauce is perfect on this," I said around another bite.

Del nodded as she chewed. "I might have thrown some thyme in the pan."

"Ooh thyme. Good call."

We sat there eating and chatting while Kari stewed, with her arms folded across her chest. I almost asked her to donate her food if she wasn't going to eat but figured that might be too far.

I was about halfway done with my meal when the lights dimmed, and the show began. The host walked out and introduced himself, although that was unnecessary. Anyone in Nashville would have recognized him easily.

My eyes darted between watching him give his opening monologue and finishing the mashed potatoes on my plate. By the end, I'd mostly tuned him out until he mentioned the band.

"Now, I know these guys don't need an introduction, but that's my job, anyway. Here to present our first award is the band Phase!"

The crowd erupted in applause, and I set my fork down so I could clap along with them. I heard Kari's scoff but ignored her. There was no way I *wasn't* going to cheer for Declan. I

noticed Del doing the same and felt even better about my decision.

The three men took turns speaking as they read the category and announced all the nominees. My eyes stayed locked on Declan as I watched him pick me out of the crowd and smile. When they were done, they left the stage with the winning act, and I relaxed in my chair again.

Moments later, the host was back on stage, telling the cameras they'd be taking a break before a musical performance. I took that opportunity to return to my plate. "They did great, huh?" I asked Del when the noise died down a bit.

But before she could answer, Kari interjected. "Yes. They can all read a teleprompter. Very impressive," she said with a roll of her eyes.

My gaze darted to Del, and she looked just as irritated as I felt, so at least I wasn't alone.

"Yeah, they've all got great stage presence," Del said like she hadn't heard Kari. "I'm sad they're not playing tonight."

"Do they usually perform?"

Kari laughed again like that was a stupid question, but we both ignored her.

"Yeah, usually. I think they're all just really burnt out from touring so much lately."

I nodded like I knew what she was talking about, but really, it just made me realize how much I didn't know about Declan.

And it made me want to know more.

We all fell quiet while Del and I ate, and Kari stared at her phone. When Declan still wasn't back after the performance, I finally spoke up.

“Where are they?” I asked Del.

She looked up from her own phone and glanced around. “You know what? I think they're up for the next award. They're probably just waitin' backstage to find out.”

My stomach turned with anxious excitement for them as the host came back out to introduce the next announcer. It was a solo female artist I was only vaguely familiar with, and she said she was presenting the best performance of the year.

I set my fork and knife down as she read the nominees. When she got to Phase, I clenched my hands together in my lap so I wouldn't fidget. She opened the envelope containing the winner and stared at it for at least an hour.

Or that's how it felt.

“And the winner of the CMN award for best performance goes to... Phase!”

Before I could stop myself, I jumped from my chair and started cheering. My eyes even burned with a hint of tears as I watched the three men walk back on stage. Declan was the last one and as I watched, he seemed to be doing something to his tuxedo jacket.

My eyes stayed locked on him as Theo found the microphone and accepted the award. “Wow, this is incredible,

guys. Thank you so much.”

He continued with his speech as I watched Declan, his head still bent as he worked. When he was finally done, his eyes met mine across the venue and he patted his chest. I frowned at his odd behavior until I saw what was beneath his hand.

In the pocket of his tuxedo was the corner of a familiar handkerchief, and my whole body erupted in flames.

That was the handkerchief he used to wipe his face after he licked me until I orgasmed in the limo.

That was the handkerchief he'd cleaned me with when we were done.

My scent was all over that little scrap of fabric and he'd just tucked it into his pocket where anyone could see it.

I could feel my heart thundering in my chest as my insides warred between embarrassed and so turned on I didn't know what to do with myself.

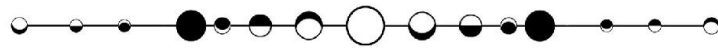
When it was finally Declan's turn to speak, I took a deep breath and held it.

“This is really amazing,” he said into the microphone. “I wanna thank everyone who has supported us. The ones who have been there since the beginning,” he said before his eyes found mine again, “and the ones who just found us. We appreciate every single one of you.”

His hand drifted to his pocket again as he smiled and winked in my direction. “Have a good night, y'all,” he said

before he stepped away from the mic, the goofy grin still plastered to his face.

When he was finally out of sight, I dropped my eyes to my mostly empty plate and took a deep breath. I had only a few minutes to decide if I was going to kill him or kiss him when he got back to this table.



Declan

“What the fuck was that?” Theo hissed as we walked off stage.

I shrugged, but before I could answer, Roman spoke up. “Smells like pussy to me.”

A laugh burst out of me as I slapped him on the shoulder. “Good nose, Romey.”

He shrugged me off and walked away as Theo tried to corner me again. “That,” he said with a pointed finger at the handkerchief I’d put back in my jacket pocket. “Better be from the girl you brought here tonight, or I swear I’m going to kick your ass, Declan.”

I laughed and waved his concerns away. “Don’t worry. It’s definitely her, and she knows it.”

Theo sighed as he followed me back to our table. “Okay, Declan,” he said with a sigh. “I hope you know what you’re doing.”

Another chuckle fell out of me. “I honestly have no idea, but I’m figuring it out as I go.”

We were close enough to the table that he didn’t bother to answer me. My feet moved faster as I got closer to Willow, my whole body calming as soon as I caught the first hints of her scent.

I put my hand on the back of her chair and leaned in close. “Hey, gorgeous. Did you miss me?”

Willow looked up with such a wide and beautiful smile, I swear I saw stars. “Hey! Congratulations!”

She reached up to wrap her arms around my neck, and I closed my eyes as I breathed her in.

Willow let go way too early and took her seat again with a big grin. “Congratulations to you guys too,” she said to Roman and Theo, who’d already taken their seats.

I sat down next to Willow and fought with every urge in my body that told me to touch her again. With a shake of my head, I tried to focus on something else.

The scent of meat drifted to my nose, and I turned to see Theo digging into his food. I let out a deep breath, hoping to calm myself as I uncovered my plate, too.

Just as I’d started to regain my cool, Willow leaned close and spoke in my ear.

“Careful,” she said softly, but loud enough for everyone at the table to hear. “I licked your beef while you were gone.”

I froze for one whole second before a bark of laughter burst out of me. My head fell back, and I held my ribs as I cackled. When I finally had the chuckles under control, I sat up and had to wipe a tear from my eye.

“I don’t know why you’re laughing,” Kari said from the other side of me. “That’s disgusting and I think illegal.”

I snorted. “Nah, it’s okay. She can lick whatever she wants.”

The smell of Willow's blush crept into my nose, and I breathed in deep as I turned to her. Willow's neck was bright red, the color spreading to the tops of her tits as I watched. Moments later, the scent of her arousal hit my senses, and my eyes snapped to hers.

Willow almost looked fearful, but I could see the edge of hunger in her gaze and knew she wanted this just as bad as I did. A soft growl was rumbling through my chest as I racked my brain for places to take her when someone else's voice broke through the haze.

"Hey, Willow. Are you all done?"

My eyes jumped to the waiter standing beside her with an empty tray in his hand. I frowned as I wondered why he seemed to be acting so familiar with her when Kari spoke up.

"That's Willow's boyfriend."

Everything inside me froze as I turned to look at Willow again. Her eyes were wide as she shook her head hard.

"Ethan is my *ex*-boyfriend," she corrected. "I haven't seen him in years."

"Yeah, I was hopin' to change that," the waiter spoke up again, and my gaze jumped to him. "We can get a drink after I get out of here."

"Are you fucking kidding me?" I asked before I could stop myself.

"Declan," Theo muttered, but I ignored him.

“No. You see me sitting right here next to her, right?” I asked, not taking my eyes off *Ethan*.

The waiter shrugged. “I didn’t see you here with her earlier. I thought she came alone.”

“Well, obviously,” I said, as I draped an arm over her shoulders. “She’s not alone. So go away.”

His brown eyes turned hard as they darted between us. “She’s a big girl. I think she can decide for herself who she wants to go home with tonight.”

“Woah,” Willow said as she held up her hands like she could referee this match. “Who said I was going home with anybody? I have a final exam in a couple days.”

I chuckled as I pulled her closer. “I’d be happy to help you study.” The tone of my voice made it crystal clear what kind of studying I was talking about, and I kept my eyes glued to *Ethan* as I said it.

His eyes narrowed as he clutched his tray tighter. “Willow, you still have my number?”

“Uh. I don’t think so?”

Ethan’s face twitched like that wasn’t the answer he wanted. “I still have yours. I’ll text you later.”

“Why don’t you get back to work?” I growled.

The waiter shot me a dirty look before he picked up Willow’s plate and left. I watched him storm away, wondering what the fuck I was going to do if he actually texted her.

Despite the fact that I told Kari she was my girlfriend, she actually wasn't.

It might be fun pretending for the cameras, but when we left here, we'd have to face reality again. I just didn't know what that would look like now.

Chapter 12

Willow

Hi, y'all! I'm here to present the award for Band of the Year!"

The table remained quiet in the aftermath of the encounter with Ethan. I looked around but no one seemed willing to break the silence.

Finally, I cleared my throat and turned to Declan. "Are y'all up for this award too?"

His blue eyes were hard when they met mine. "Yes."

The announcer continued to read off the nominees as he held my gaze. He didn't even waver when his band was mentioned.

"They won last year," Del piped up from across the table.

I ripped my eyes away from Declan to face her. "Really?"

"Yeah. So that means we're not winning this year," Declan said from beside me.

I chose to face the stage and not risk getting caught in his hard stare again. It was clear the Ethan thing had gotten to

him, but I couldn't understand why.

Not only was this a fake relationship, but there was nothing between me and my old study partner. I'd thought I'd made that clear, so what was his problem?

"And the winner is... Phase!"

"Fuck," Declan muttered as he laid his napkin on the table and stood up with the other men.

I frowned at the back of his head for a moment before the cameras and lights swung our way. My smile was quick, and fake, as I applauded along with everyone else. Thankfully, the spotlight followed the guys, and we were left in the shadows again.

"Oh, man," Kari said with a laugh faker than her tan. "You might as well do yourself a favor and leave now."

I glanced to Del, who looked just as confused as I was before I turned back to Kari. "Why would I do that?"

She leaned back in her chair, the picture of nonchalance. "Rockstars have the biggest egos, and you just bruised his. He's probably already thinking of ways to ditch you before the afterparty."

My stomach churned, but I didn't let it show. Not even a single muscle on my face moved before I opened my mouth to respond. "That's okay. I have no plans to go to an afterparty. Like I said, I need to get home and study."

A shrill laugh burst from Kari's pink lips. "You were serious about that?" She put a hand on her stomach as she faked

another giggle. “Where the hell did he find you?”

Her words stung, but my spine didn’t waver an inch. With my chin tipped up, I answered, “Clearly not the same place he found you.”

Del snorted from across the table, and I broke character for one single moment to grin at her before I slipped the mask back on and turned toward the stage. Theo and Roman had just finished giving their thanks, and now it was Declan’s turn again.

Instead of approaching the microphone, he patted the handkerchief still in his pocket twice, his eyes drilling into mine from across the room. After that, he kissed his hand and waved to all the cheering fans as the three of them walked off stage.

The moment they were out of sight, I dragged in a much-needed breath of air as the next performer began to set up. That peace didn’t last long, though.

“Hey, Willow,” Ethan said, having materialized next to me again.

It should be hard to sneak up on a werewolf, but with this much going on, it was easy to let things slip. Without a glance at Kari, who I already knew was staring at me, I looked up at Ethan.

“Hey. What do you have there?” I asked with a gesture at the tray full of small, covered plates in his hands.

He looked down at them, his expression falling. “Oh. That’s just dessert. Some cheesecake thing.”

“Ooh, cheesecake,” I said as I held out my hands.

Ethan handed me a plate and cleared his throat. “Um. So, I was thinking. Did you want to get that drink after the show? I should be out by midnight.”

My belly flipped as I set my dessert down and reluctantly met his gaze again. “I don’t think that’s a good idea,” I finally said when no other excuse popped into my head.

He frowned as he shifted on his feet. “Why not?”

“Well,” I said as I tucked some wavy hair behind my ear. “Like I’ve been saying, I need to get home and study.”

His brown eyes lit up as they traced my body again. “I can help you study. It’ll be like old times.”

The urge to cover myself was back and stronger than ever. I wasn’t used to being pursued like this and it was turning out to be difficult territory to navigate.

“I don’t think so,” I tried one more time.

“Why not?” Ethan asked again.

A nervous and squeaky chuckle fell from my lips before someone answered the question for me.

“Because she’s going home with *me*,” Declan said as he and the other band members arrived back at our table.

The urge to argue with him was strong, but something told me this wasn’t the time, so I kept my mouth shut.

“Is that true, Willow?” Ethan asked, turning hurt eyes back my way. “You’re going home with him to be the latest notch in his bedpost?”

Declan fisted his hands and took a step in Ethan’s direction, but Theo was there to block him. “Don’t do it,” he warned.

This situation was getting out of hand, and I needed to put a stop to it before Declan made a scene in front of all these important people.

I jumped out of my seat and grabbed one of Declan’s fisted hands. “Ethan, what I do and who I do it with isn’t any of your business.” I pulled and Declan took a step in my direction, his angry eyes finally meeting mine. “Let’s sit back down and eat dessert.”

Declan stared at me hard for a moment before he shook his head. “No. Let’s get out of here.”

My mouth fell open. “Before dessert?”

Declan’s lips twitched with a smile as he leaned in close. “I’ll get you any kind of dessert you want in this city if you’ll just walk out of here with me right now.”

I leaned back to eye him. “*Anything* I want?”

Now his lips spread into a smarmy smile, and I barely resisted the urge to slap it off his face. “Anything you want, baby.”

I rolled my eyes. “Fine. Let’s go.”

We'd only taken one step away from the table when her annoying voice stopped us in our tracks.

"Where are you going?" Kari asked.

Declan sighed before turning around to face her. "I'm going home, Kari. Have a good night, everyone," he said to the entire table.

He'd just turned away when she spoke again.

"Wait, you're not going to the afterparty?" Her chair legs squealed as she slid back and rushed to his side. "We always have so much fun at those," she purred as she batted her long, dark lashes at him.

Declan pulled his arm out of her hold and took a step in my direction. It was only an inch or two, but it felt massive and made my heart beat even faster.

"I'm good," he said. "You go on and have fun with your boyfriend."

Kari's eyes flashed with anger before she pulled her glossy lips into another smile. "I'd rather have fun with *you*," she said softly, her voice just barely audible, but her eyes saying more than enough as she fastened them onto Declan.

"I'm sure you would," he said with a chuckle. "But I'm unavailable tonight. Have a good one," he said before he grabbed my hand and dragged me away.

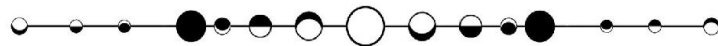
His pace was just a little too fast for me in the heels I was wearing, but I didn't complain. I wanted to be as far away

from Kari as possible, too. We were almost out of sight when I made the mistake of looking back at her.

Kari's dark eyes were full of fire as she watched us leave. The venom in her gaze was so unexpected I had to fight off a shiver. It just cemented the fact that she was a person I wanted *nothing* to do with.

In fact, after a night like this, it was pretty clear I didn't belong here. I wasn't made to be interviewed and photographed. I wasn't built to wear designer dresses and six-inch heels.

My place was back in my small town, in my even smaller house, with my nose in a book. That's how it had always been, and maybe that was how it should stay.



Declan

“Are you sure you’re ready for this?” I asked.

Willow swallowed hard, but nodded. “I’m a little nervous, but I think I’m ready.”

“We don’t have to do this,” I reminded her, even as it got harder and harder to resist. “We can stop at any time.”

She shook her head, her face lined with stubbornness. “No. Once we start, we have to finish. Those are the rules.”

“Those are *your* rules,” I pointed out.

Willow shrugged, and I knew I wasn’t getting anything else out of her. That didn’t stop me from trying one more time. “Okay. If you’re sure...”

“I’m sure,” she said right away.

I sighed and grabbed my spoon. “Okay. Ten minutes on the clock.”

She picked up her phone and tapped a few buttons before nodding. “Ready when you are.”

“Three... two... one...”

Willow smirked at me as she pressed the start button for the timer and dug into her ice cream. We were attempting this creamery’s world-famous challenge, and I had serious doubts about our abilities.

I'd seen the meal Willow had already put back tonight, and I didn't know where she thought she was going to put an additional ten scoops of ice cream. Hell, I only ate half my dinner, and I was still worried about finishing my own ten scoops.

She, of course, proved me wrong as she shoveled spoonful after spoonful into her mouth. I sat there watching her in awe as she mowed through her sundae.

"Holmes!" she yelled between bites. "Get to eating! We only have five minutes left!"

I snorted before shaking the haze from my head and digging back into my dessert.

It wasn't easy, and my entire body felt like a block of ice, but four minutes and forty-nine seconds later, we finished the entire twenty scoops of ice cream. The after-hours crowd cheered our success as Willow jumped from her seat to throw herself at me.

I caught her at the last second as she laughed and wrapped her arms around my neck. "I've always wanted to do that, but I was too scared!" she said around a laugh.

I frowned down at her. "Scared of what? Brain freeze?"

She shook her head, her smile dimming the smallest bit. "No. I was scared of having to pay if I couldn't finish it."

My heart clenched as I watched the shame swimming in her eyes. "Hey," I said as I grasped her chin and made her meet

my eyes again. “There was a time when I couldn’t afford a forty-dollar ice cream either.”

Her grin seemed a little more sincere, but her shoulders were still slumped and that shit tore me up.

“And I’m happy to buy you a Mega Sundae any time you like.”

Willow’s fair skin turned green as she shook her head. “I don’t even wanna think about ice cream for the next ten years.”

I laughed as I wrapped an arm around her shoulders and led her out to the waiting car. “Okay, fine. No ice cream.”

She climbed onto the seat and waited until I’d sat next to her to speak again. “But we can try other challenges. Like the cinnamon roll challenge or the pizza challenge,” she said with a big smile.

I laughed and shook my head. “Hell yeah. I’m down.”

Willow’s whole face lit up as she settled in her seat next to me. “Okay, that sounds like fun.”

“So, you’re saying I get another date?”

She rolled her eyes as she looked back at me. “Was this a date? Or was this a business transaction?”

I shrugged. “It could be both.”

“I’m not sure that’s how it works.”

“Okay, fine,” I said, my mind racing to find a way to spend more time with her. “Then go on a date with me. No business

involved.”

She bit her lip as her eyes darted away and I held my breath. “A movie night type date or a public type date.”

I swallowed hard and shrugged again. “Both? Either? Whichever you want. I really don’t care,” I confessed.

Willow’s hands fidgeted in her lap as she struggled to look at me. “I don’t know,” she finally said. “I’m not sure all of this is a good idea.”

“All of what?” I asked, my voice sharper than I’d intended.

“This,” Willow said with a wave of her hand, that simple gesture accounting from everything from me to her to the car we were in. When I didn’t respond, she sighed and continued. “The gowns, the tuxedos, the reporters, the photographers, all of it.”

She fell silent for a moment as she turned to stare out the window, I could see her reflection in the glass, and the sight made my stomach twist. The usually confident Willow looked so unsure of herself. So scared and anxious.

I fucking hated it.

“I just don’t think I’m cut out for this,” she finally finished as the car pulled to a stop in front of my building.

My heart quit beating for a moment as I tried to find something to say. Something that would make her *stay*. But none of my funny one-liners or dumb jokes would get me out of this situation.

This lifestyle wasn't for everyone. It wasn't even for most people. To ask Willow to give up more of her privacy for me wasn't fair at all.

If she wanted to leave, I had to let her go.

"I understand," I finally said, although it burned on the way out.

"I'm sorry," Willow responded, her voice soft as she turned to look at me again.

I held her gaze for a long moment before I shook my head. "Don't be sorry," I said as I opened the car door to get out. "I understand."

Once on the sidewalk, I held out my hand to help Willow stand. I didn't want to let go once she was on her feet, but knew I had no choice.

"Come on," I said as I waved toward the front entrance.

"Declan, I don't think—"

"Your stuff is upstairs," I cut her off.

Willow's neck turned pink with a blush, and her eyes darted away. "Oh. Right. Okay," she said before she followed me inside.

The trip up to my apartment was somber, and for the life of me, I couldn't find a way to break the tension. Everything I wanted to say involved convincing her to give me a chance, and I *knew* that wasn't the right thing to do, so I stayed silent.

The elevator ride seemed to take an eternity, but as soon as we made it to my floor, I knew something was wrong.

“What the fuck?” I muttered as I left Willow in the elevator and hurried to my apartment.

“What is it?” she asked, her voice closer than I’d expected.

I didn’t answer as I inspected the keypad next to my door. It had been ripped from the wall, exposing the wires and shit in the back. I didn’t even need to turn the handle to get inside because it was already open.

There was no way to tell if whoever did this was still inside, so I turned to Willow first. “Stay out here. I’ll be right back.”

Chapter 13

Willow

What the—” Declan yelled as he spun around. The moment his eyes met mine, his expression fell, and he let out a deep breath. “Damn it, Willow. I thought I told you to wait outside.”

I scoffed. “Right. So the person who broke in can come back and get me? I don’t think so.”

“Who said anyone broke in?” he asked as he tried but failed to lie.

I propped a hand on my hip. “I have eyes. I had no trouble seeing the fancy little sensor next to your door ripped out of the wall.”

Declan groaned before storming over to grab my hand. “Fine. Just stay close at least.”

That was not going to be a problem.

The car ride we’d just shared had been excruciating for me, and the whole time I just wanted to take it all back. I didn’t want to stay away from him. I didn’t want to go home.

But girls like me weren't meant for the limelight, and that's where Declan always was. If I wanted him, I had to take all the fame that came along with it, and I didn't think I could do that.

I thought cutting ties would be best, but with his warm hand wrapped so firmly around mine, I couldn't imagine walking away.

"Maybe maintenance was working on the panel and left it like that?" Declan said, his statement more of a question.

One that I couldn't answer.

"Maybe," I said anyway.

The apartment seemed to be quiet and still, but I didn't trust it.

"Do you recognize any scents?" I asked, my voice so soft it was almost a whisper.

Declan took a deep breath and shook his head. "There are so many mixed together because of all the people that were in here today. I can't separate them."

I nodded in agreement because I was having the same issue.

We continued to make our way through the apartment, both of us scanning every corner for danger or destruction. It wasn't until we came to the kitchen that we found what we were looking for.

The room looked nothing like how we left it hours earlier.

Now every surface was covered in trash and debris, every drawer and cupboard were open, and written along the large

wall of windows was a message.

SHE'S NOT FOR YOU

A shiver raced down my spine as I read those words over and over. It was clear they were meant for Declan, just like it was obvious they were about me.

“Fuck,” Declan spat as he pulled out his cell phone. “Fuck.”

His voice faded as white noise filled my ears. I looked around at the mess left behind and finally started to recognize the scraps.

It was my clothes.

The sweater I'd worn.

The leggings I'd had on me.

Even my sneakers had been chopped into pieces and scattered around Declan's kitchen.

I searched the mess for anything unfamiliar, but it was all mine.

My bra. My purse. My socks.

Every single thing I'd left here was cut up and destroyed.

“Mason,” Declan growled into the phone as soon as it was answered. “Someone broke into my place and trashed it. I need the cops called, and I need a place to stay tonight.”

“*What the fuck?*” Mason spat, his voice groggy, like he'd been woken up by this phone call. “*Okay. I'm on my way.*”

“I need to get out of here,” he responded. “I need to get Willow out of here.”

Hearing him say my name made the ice in my veins melt the smallest bit. It wasn't enough to get rid of the bone-deep chill, but it felt nice.

“Okay, well, you're gonna have to go to her place for tonight.”

My heart dropped as Declan's eyes darted to mine. “Why?” he said into the phone.

“Every hotel in this city is full because of the awards show tonight. You'd have to drive hours to find a room.”

Fear ate at my gut as I stared into Declan's eyes. He scanned my face over and over before speaking again.

“What about the bus? I can crash there for a couple nights.”

“It's in the shop until next week,” Mason said with a sigh. *“My mom's staying in my spare room, but you can have the couch if you want.”*

My stomach twisted harder, thinking of Declan having to sleep on a sofa tonight. Especially considering this felt like *my* fault.

“You can stay at my house,” I finally said, my voice breathy and cracking in places.

His blue eyes widened as he continued to stare. “Are you sure?”

“Yeah,” I lied. “It's fine.”

Declan didn't look convinced, but we all knew his options were limited. He sighed and turned away, but his hand never left mine.

"I'm gonna stay with Willow tonight, and hopefully there's a room open for me by tomorrow."

"I'm sure we'll be able to find something."

Declan sighed again, the sound creating tiny little cracks in the casing around my heart. "Okay, I'm grabbing some shit and leaving before the cops get here," he said as he dragged me away from my ruined belongings and the ominous message on the wall.

SHE'S NOT FOR YOU

The words felt seared into my brain, and even when I closed my eyes, I could still see them. Declan pulled me down a new hallway, and I followed him, doing my best to not let the hundreds of questions overwhelm me.

If I opened my mouth, they'd all spew out, so I kept my lips pressed together hard as we walked.

"I'm so fuckin' sorry," Declan muttered as he pushed a set of double doors open to reveal a large bedroom.

He dragged me over to the bed, and my heart beat faster for a moment before he sat me down and let go of my hand.

"Stay here for a minute while I make sure we're alone."

Before I could agree, he turned away and hurried around the room, opening doorways to a bathroom and a couple closets

before he locked the main door and returned to my side.

“I’m gonna grab something for you to wear,” he said as he worked to unravel his tie. “I should have some sandals around here you could wear with some socks too, okay?”

The reminder that I’d been left with literally nothing threatened to overwhelm me as tears gathered in my eyes. “All my stuff was ruined.”

Declan sighed before he walked over to kneel in front of me. He grabbed my hands and waited until I looked up at him to speak. “I know, gorgeous. I saw it all, and I’m *so* sorry.” He said. Declan looked away for a moment before meeting my gaze again. “I’m gonna replace all your things and then I’m gonna find out who’s responsible and make them pay, okay? I promise you that.”

I pulled my hand out of his and wrapped both arms around myself. “Who would have done this? Why would they just ruin *my* stuff?”

Declan’s blue eyes were full of emotion as he watched me. “I don’t know, but I have some theories.”

I swallowed hard as I tried to figure out if I wanted to know or not. Finally, I couldn’t take the mystery any longer. “What theories?”

He stared for another long moment before his throat bobbed with a swallow. “Well, I can think of at least two people who weren’t happy to see us leave together tonight.”

My eyes widened as I tried to read his expression. “You think Kari or Ethan did this?”

He shrugged. “Who the fuck knows? Maybe it was Kari *and* Ethan.” Declan shook his head and stood up again. “Thankfully, the building has security cameras in the halls and elevators and stairs. We’ll know soon who was in here.”

That information made me feel the tiniest bit better, and I nodded that I understood. He sat there for another minute before shaking his head again. “Let me get you some clothes,” he said as he stood and pulled his jacket off.

I did my best to keep calm, but it wasn’t easy. The panic was building behind my defenses, and I could only hold on for so much longer. It helped when Declan was holding my hand or touching me in some way, but the moment he left my side, I was a mess.

He hurried back to me with a pile of clothes and some Adidas slides. “Here. Hopefully something fits,” he said as he handed it all to me.

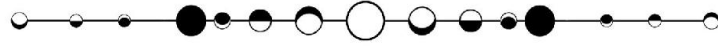
I stood with my load and gave him a grateful smile. “Bathroom?”

“Over there,” he said with a wave. “Wait!” he called before I could even turn in that direction. “Let me check it again.”

Before I could answer, Declan hurried across the room and slipped through a doorway. I only had to wait another moment or two before he was back.

“Okay,” he said with a small smile. “It’s safe.”

Those two little words gave me more comfort than I'd expected as I walked past him and into the bathroom.



Declan

“Fuck,” I muttered as I ran a hand through my hair. “Fuck, fuck, fuck.”

Before I could curse some more, my phone rang.

“Hey, Mason,” I answered as I squeezed my eyes closed. Werewolves didn’t get many ailments, but I could feel a headache brewing already. “Tell me you have news.”

“I do. But it’s not good.”

“Fuck,” I said again, louder this time.

“I called the building manager to report the break in after I called the cops, and he had his security check the tapes.”

My heart leapt in my chest. “Okay. And?”

“And all there was to see after you left for the show was your team leaving the apartment about thirty minutes later.”

My stomach cramped at the news. “That’s impossible. I’ve known all of them for years. None of them would do this.”

“That’s what I told the building manager. That’s when he mentioned the total system power outage they had tonight,” he said, an edge to his voice now.

“You’ve gotta be fucking kidding me.”

“I wish I was. Apparently, everything went dark for exactly thirty minutes, starting at eleven twenty-three and ending at eleven fifty-three.”

My mind raced as I tried to put the pieces together. “We left the show at about ten thirty, and there were a couple people who weren’t happy to see us go.”

“I need their names.”

I gave him Kari’s information first. “The other one’s name is Ethan. I don’t have his last name yet, but I can ask Willow. He’s an old boyfriend of hers,” I spat.

Mason sighed, the sound of his pen scratching the paper faint in the background. *“Okay, I’ll get this info to my P.I. and have him start researching. I need this Ethan guy’s last name as soon as you can get it.”*

I pulled the phone away from my face to stare at it a moment. “You have a P.I?”

He sighed again. *“Just get me Ethan’s last name and text me when you get to Willow’s place.”*

I heard a click and knew he’d hung up on me, so I shook my head and stuffed my phone back in my pocket. The sink was still running in the bathroom, so I figured I had time to get changed and pack a bag.

A few minutes later, Willow pulled open the door and stepped out. Her eyes found me immediately, and I took a moment to study her.

My clothes hung from her small frame, making her look fragile in a way that stirred a deep protectiveness in me. To my surprise, she hadn’t twisted her ginger hair into the braid I was used to seeing and dark makeup still lined her bright eyes.

“I’m just gonna take all this off at home,” she explained with a wave at her face. “I wish I could tie my hair back though,” she said as she tucked some copper strands behind her ear. “I saw my scrunchie cut in half on your kitchen island.”

There was no emotion in her voice, but she couldn’t hide the sadness in her eyes.

Whoever had done this hadn’t just ruined Willow’s belongings. They’d taken something deeper from her. Hell, they’d taken everything.

“Wait a second,” I said as an idea came to me, and I darted past her into the bathroom. When I came back out, I had a little black elastic in my hand.

I tried to give it to Willow, but she eyed it with suspicion. Finally, I understood the problem and laughed.

“This was from one of my sisters,” I explained. “They left it in my bathroom last time they visited.”

“Oh,” Willow said before she took it from me with a small, grateful smile. “Okay, thanks.”

I watched in awe as her graceful fingers quickly braided her silky hair. When she was done, she looked much more like the Willow I’d come to know, and it settled some of the nerves inside me.

“Are you sure it’s okay I stay at your place? I can always sleep in the car.”

Willow frowned as she shook her head. “No. I’m not letting you sleep outside. You’ll be fine in my house, we just have to be quiet because everyone will be sleeping.”

“Who’s everyone?”

“Just my mom and brother.”

I nodded. “Okay, cool. Moms love me.”

She snorted. “I bet big brothers don’t.”

“Don’t worry,” I said as I grabbed her hand. “I’ll win him over too.”

A small chuckle fell from her lips, and I counted that as a win. It dried up quickly though as we approached the door. We stood in front of it silently as I strained my ears as far as they would go.

“I don’t hear anyone else in here, so I think we should be safe.”

Willow nodded. “I didn’t hear anyone else on the way in either.”

“Okay, then let’s go,” I said as I reached for the lock and pulled on the handle.

Despite agreeing the place was empty, we both walked quickly as we made it to the front door and out into the hallway. I called for the elevator, and it showed up almost right away. We got in and watched the doors shut before we both breathed a loud sigh of relief.

I met her gaze out of the corner of my eye and smiled.
“What a night, huh?”

She shook her head and snorted. “Does trouble always follow you this closely?”

I had to laugh at her question, my body automatically moving closer to her. “No. It just seems to find me when I’m with you.”

Willow’s heart started to race, and she swallowed hard before answering me. “Then maybe we need to spend some time apart,” she whispered.

I shook my head and wrapped my arm around her waist.
“That’s not an option.”

“Why not?”

With a smile, I dipped my head, stopping just before my lips met hers. “Because I like you too much. You’re stuck with me now.”

Willow giggled, but she didn’t move, so I leaned in closer, ready to finally kiss her again after all this time.

But before I could, the elevator doors opened, and she pulled away with a laugh. “Let’s go, Romeo.”

Chapter 14

Declan

What the fuck is this?”

Willow frowned as she stared at the little silver car she was trying to unlock. “This is Betsy.”

I rolled my eyes as I stared at the thing again. “What is a *Betsy*?”

“A 1998 Honda Civic?”

My eyes bugged out of my head as I reached for my phone. “This car is over twenty years old?” I yelled and pressed a few buttons on my screen. “I’m calling us a car. This thing isn’t safe.”

It was Willow’s turn to roll her eyes as she wrenched the front door open, causing it to squeal in protest. “Relax. I just had a tune up a couple months ago. She runs great.”

The phone was still ringing as I shook my head back and forth.

“Oh, stop being a brat,” Willow said as she sat on the driver’s seat. “Let’s go.”

With a sigh, I hung up and stuffed the cell back in my pocket. I watched as Willow reached across the car to unlock my door and barely held back the eye roll as I got in.

“Do we need to use our feet to power this thing, or does it at least take fuel?”

Willow shot me a narrow-eyed look as she shoved the key in the ignition and twisted it to start. The engine fired up with a loud roar that rattled the windows. “Lovely,” I muttered.

She shook her head, but the irritation on her face didn’t last long as a huge yawn overtook her. I watched her turn bleary eyes toward the windshield and knew I needed to speak up.

“Okay,” I said as I threw my door open and got out again. “If you’re forcing me to ride in this tin can, at least let me drive.”

“Why?” she asked as she ducked her head to see me.

I stormed around to the driver’s side and pulled on the handle. The door creaked open loudly, and I had to hold back a grimace. “Because you’re too tired to drive.”

She shook her head like she was going to argue, but another yawn interrupted her. Willow gave me a sheepish smile as she climbed out. “Okay. Fine.”

I readjusted her seat to my height as she got in next to me. “Where are we going?” I asked.

Willow pulled her seat belt over her chest as she answered. “Do you know where Bell Buckle is?”

I chuckled and adjusted the rearview mirror. “Yeah. I played at the Bell Buckle Café once, actually.”

She turned in her seat to look at me as I pulled the car away from the curb and onto the city street. “Wow really? I didn’t know Phase performed there.”

I shook my head, doing my best to not react to the creaky car or the loud ass engine as I navigated us out of the city. “No, it was before we made the band. I was still playing solo.” She was quiet for so long I had to glance her way. “What?”

“I thought Vicki said you were a guitarist. Do you sing too?”

“A real fan would know the answer to that,” I said with a smile as I merged onto the highway.

Willow scoffed. “I never claimed to be a fan.”

“Ouch.”

“Just answer the question.”

I shrugged. “I do a little backup vocals sometimes, but no, I usually don’t sing. Not anymore.”

She was quiet for a long time again before she spoke. “Why not?”

I shifted in my seat and clutched the steering wheel tighter. “My voice isn’t the same as it used to be.”

“What happened to it?”

I shot her a small look before focusing on the road again and letting out a large sigh. “I got in a fight with my old man

one day, and he punched me in the throat. It fucked up my larynx, and I couldn't even talk for days. When I finally got my voice back, it was different, and I stopped singing after that."

The silence in the car was deafening until Willow's small hand landed on my arm and instantly warmed my entire body. "I'm so sorry."

Her sweet words shot straight to my gut. "Thanks gorgeous," I said as I reached over to pat her hand. "I'm okay."

"But you're not. You can't sing anymore."

"Don't worry about me," I said, forcing a smile onto my face and shooting her a wink. "I already have the ladies lining up to be with me. Imagine if I sang too? I'd be unstoppable. *No one* would be able to resist me."

She laughed and smacked my shoulder before settling in her seat again. "You're so conceited."

I shrugged. "I'm just stating facts, Will."

We fell into a comfortable silence after that, the quiet only broken by one of Willow's occasional yawns.

"You know," she said as she shifted in her seat and rested her head on the window. "You don't have to pretend all the time." She paused to yawn again. "Not with me," she added with a sigh.

Everything inside me froze like she'd just shined a spotlight on the deepest parts of my fucking soul. My mind raced with

things to say, but nothing felt right. Nothing worked in that moment.

Before I could come up with something, I heard a soft snore, and my eyes darted to Willow again. Her lids were closed, and her red lips were partially open as another little snort fell out.

A smile tugged at my lips as I divided my time between watching the road and watching her sleep. When I narrowly avoided sideswiping another car, I shook my head and kept my eyes on the traffic instead.

The ride to Bell Buckle was only going to take about forty-five minutes, but that felt like forever when I wasn't allowed to look at her. Smelling her and hearing her soft snores wasn't enough. I wanted to see her. I wanted to touch her. Fuck, I wanted to taste her so goddamn bad I thought I'd lose my mind.

That moment in the elevator had just left me wanting more, and now that was all I could think about. Knowing I'd be spending tonight with her made no difference, either. It wasn't like I could fuck her with an older brother just down the hall.

I shifted in my seat and tried to calm my dick down, but it was almost impossible with Willow's floral scent filling the car like this. My hands clutched the wheel as I fought with the urge to touch her, even just to stroke the back of her hand.

Before I could do anything creepy, my phone rang.

I turned the ringer off before it could wake Willow and answered as quietly as I could. “Hey, Mason. What’s up?”

“The cops are still processing the scene, but I’ve answered all the questions I could, so they let me go. They want you in their precinct tomorrow to talk to them.”

I sighed and ran a hand down my face. “Yeah. I figured that was coming.”

“I’ll have to push some things around, but we’ll make it work.”

My job was the very last thing I’d been thinking about but leave it to Mason to bring it up. “Okay, thanks.”

My manager sighed. *“Is there anything else you need tonight, or can I go back to bed?”*

“Go get some sleep, Masey.”

He growled at the nickname but didn’t bother to comment. *“Don’t forget, we have the studio booked for tomorrow morning.”*

“What time?”

“Ten.”

I winced. It was already a late night, and I’d be sleeping about an hour away from the recording studio. “Okay,” I said, because I didn’t have a choice. “I’ll see you then.”

“Do you need a car to pick you up in the morning?”

I glanced at Willow. “I’m not sure. I’ll let you know.”

We said our goodbyes before I stuffed the phone back in my pocket. We'd made it to the Bell Buckle exit by then, and I turned on my blinker. When I got off the highway, I realized I had the perfect excuse to finally touch Willow.

With a quick glance her way to make sure she was still sleeping, I reached over and wrapped my hand around her thigh. My mind flashed back to a few hours ago when I'd had both her legs wrapped around my head, but I shook those thoughts out.

"Willow," I said softly as I maneuvered us into an open gas station. "Wake up, gorgeous."

She let out another soft snort before she twitched awake. "Huh? Where are we?"

"Bell Buckle. I just need to know where to go now."

"Oh, shit," she muttered as she rubbed her face and sat up again. "Oh, shit," she said again when she saw the smeared makeup on her hands. Willow shook her head like she needed to clear it before she said, "I'm on Fifth avenue. Right off Main street."

I nodded and pulled back onto the road without a word.

"Sorry," she said as she ran a hand over her hair. "I didn't mean to sleep the whole ride."

I shrugged. "That's okay. You must've needed it."

We fell into another comfortable silence. Well, I thought it was comfortable, but the closer we got to Main street, the faster her heart beat.

“Is everything—”

“Listen,” Willow interrupted. “I know it’s awkward, but we *cannot* wake up my family. Colton works really early in the morning, and Mom always gets up to make him breakfast before he leaves. When we get inside, we need to be quiet.”

“I’ll be as silent as a church mouse,” I promised.

“Be quieter than that.”

I laughed, but the look on her face said she wasn’t joking.

Willow swallowed hard as I made the left onto Fifth per her instructions.

“And listen,” she said again. “My family isn’t rich, and my house isn’t nice, okay? It’s old and worn and falling apart in places. We’ve tried to fix it up when we can afford it, but we’re just able to keep the lights on most months.”

“Hey,” I said when she finally paused to take a breath. “I did *not* grow up in that penthouse apartment, okay? My mom raised three kids on one salary, so I know what it’s like to not have much.”

She breathed a small sigh of relief until she looked up, and her eyes widened. “That’s me up there,” she said as she pointed to a little yellow house.

The paint was peeling, and the driveway was cracked, but it was clean and the grass was cut. Most of the other houses on the block were much larger and clearly renovated. It seemed that Willow’s family’s home had been grandfathered into the nice neighborhood and not able to keep up with the times.

I pulled to a stop out front and turned the car off. “Okay. Now what,” I said as I handed the keys to her.

Willow bit her lip as her eyes darted around the car. “Um. I think I’m gonna have you climb through the window,” she muttered as she studied the house.

I laughed. “Really?”

Her eyes widened, and I braced myself for the explosion. “Yes! Really! I can’t just bring a random rockstar home in the middle of the night and expect everyone to be okay with it!”

“You said they were all asleep,” I reminded her.

“But they’ll smell you when they get up!” she yelled. “I can’t take that chance,” she said with a shake of her head. “No way. You’ll have to go through the window.”

I sighed. It’s not like this was the first window I’d had to creep through in my life. I guess I just wanted to do things differently this time.

“Okay. Which window is yours?”

Willow unbuckled her seatbelt and reached for the handle. “Third one back on the left side of the house. I’ll go in first and open it for you. Give me like three minutes,” she said as she pushed the door open and got out.

My dick stirred as I watched her walk away, still wearing my clothes, but I ignored it as best I could. I’d already promised myself I wouldn’t fuck her in her mom’s house. I needed to try my best to keep that.

I waited about two minutes before I got out of the car and stretched. With a glance around me to make sure no neighbors were watching, I hurried into the shadows surrounding Willow's house. Carefully counting, I made it to the third window and waited.

Seconds later, Willow appeared and slid it open before pushing the screen out so I could climb in. I handed her my bag before I jumped to reach the windowsill. It was a little awkward without my feet on the ground, but I was able to pull myself into her room without looking too stupid.

That was a win in my book.

Willow closed the window and blinds behind me, leaving us in her small, dark room. My hands shook with the need to reach for her, but I kept them fisted at my sides.

"I need to go clean up," she said, her voice so soft I could barely hear her.

"Could I take a leak first?"

Willow's eyes filled with fear before they darted away from me. "Um."

"I'll be fast."

She sighed. "That's not the problem," she muttered as she looked around the room again. Her eyes widened before she hurried away from me. "I'm worried about them smelling you in the morning," she explained as she walked back. "Here. Put on my bathrobe. That should help cover your scent."

I looked at the fluffy pink thing skeptically before shrugging and pulling it on. It was way too short and wouldn't close in the front, but whatever. Hopefully, it would do what she wanted it to do.

Willow giggled, and I shot her a look.

“Okay, it's this way,” she whispered, ignoring me. “Just don't talk in the hallway, okay?”

I nodded as I grabbed my bag and followed her out of the room. The bathroom was only a few doors down, but we had to pass both her mom and brother's bedroom on the way there. I stayed quiet, like she asked even behind the closed door. I also hurried through, taking a leak and brushing my teeth.

I did not want my first encounter with her family to be in the bathroom at one in the morning.

When I was done, I crept back to her room and slipped inside. Willow wasted no time squeezing past me into the hall.

“I'll be back,” she whispered before she was gone.

I let out a deep breath and looked around the room. It was clear she'd lived here for years judging by the younger pictures of her and the little league trophies in the corner. My lips curled with a smile as I picked up a framed picture of her with a guy that looked so similar, I knew it had to be her brother.

A few minutes later, Willow slid back into the room so silently I almost missed it. When I turned to face her, my heart

slammed against my ribcage while my stomach twisted violently deep inside me.

I'd almost forgotten how fucking beautiful she was without all that shit on her face.

My feet moved without my permission, carrying me closer to her like she was a magnet, and I was unable to resist her force. When I was just inches away, I came to a stop and met her eyes.

“Am I finally allowed to kiss you?” I breathed, my hands shaking with anticipation.

Willow's eyes went wide with both fear and lust.

It was all the confirmation I needed.

I wrapped an arm around her waist and cupped her face with my free hand. “You have three seconds to tell me no. Three... two... one...”

Chapter 15

Willow

One,” Declan whispered before he lowered his lips to mine.

I closed my eyes and tried to hold still as I let him kiss me. Declan’s mouth was warm and inviting, but I did my best to not move. I knew if I even twitched in his direction, this kiss was going to become more, and I couldn’t chance that.

Sensing my hesitation, Declan kissed me harder, his hands finding my hips. My heart pounded so fast it almost hurt, and my whole body trembled with need, but still, I didn’t move.

Of course, I should have known Declan wouldn’t quit that easily.

A low growl rumbled out of his chest before he gripped my hips harder and bit down on my bottom lip. The sensation was so unexpected, I gasped, and that was all the opening Declan needed.

He gripped the back of my head with one hand and deepened the kiss in a way that broke through all my defenses.

I was absolutely helpless to my own lust as I wrapped my arms around his neck and pulled him closer.

Declan chuckled against my lips as his hands began to wander. “Why weren’t you kissing me before?” he muttered against my mouth before he kissed me again.

My stomach twisted at the hurt in his tone, and I hurried to explain. “I knew this would lead to more,” I said as I pulled my mouth away and fought to catch my breath.

Declan continued to kiss and suck on my neck while I tried to control my reaction to him.

“We can’t do this with my mom and brother right down the hall,” I whispered, hoping to convince the both of us.

Declan groaned against my collarbone before pulling away to meet my eyes. “I could still make you come if you can be quiet.”

My heart leapt to the back of my throat and I knew I’d be anything but quiet. “That’s a really nice offer, but I don’t think I can accept,” I said as I ripped myself away from him.

The distance was painful, but I knew it was necessary.

Instead of looking upset, Declan smirked in my direction. “How about a raincheck?”

My belly twisted so tight it almost hurt. “How does that work in this situation?”

“You let me take you out tomorrow and then you spend the night at my place,” he said, his smile growing. “Then I can

make you come as many times as I can, and you can be as loud as you want.”

My heart stuttered, tripping over itself at his dirty words. I bit my lip and tried to think past the lust in my brain. “I really do have to study.”

“Okay, then let me take you to the library and help you study. Then we can go back to my place,” he added.

Like I could forget that part of the plan.

“You really want to take me to hang out in a library and help me study?” I asked, the doubt clear in my voice.

Declan closed the distance between us again and reached for my chin. He tipped my face up to meet his eyes, and all I could read there was sincerity.

“I wanna be with you. I don’t care where it is or what we’re doing. As long as you’re there, I’m good.”

My chest ached in such a delicious way as I stretched up on my tiptoes to kiss him. I pulled away before it could turn into something more, and Declan blinked down at me.

“What was that for?” he asked, his lips curling with another smile.

I shrugged before I grabbed his hand and led him to my bed. “That was for being so sweet.”

“Is that all it takes to get a kiss outta’ you?”

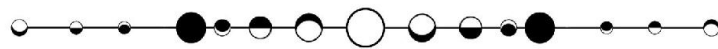
I laughed as I pulled the blankets down and crawled onto my sheets. “That’s one way.”

“Noted,” Declan said as he climbed in after me. He wasted no time wrapping a thick arm around my waist and pulling me close. “I’m gonna find out every way there is to get a kiss from you and memorize that shit. That way I can get you to kiss me anytime I want.”

I giggled at his antics before a big yawn took over. “I’m not sure if that’s cute or creepy,” I said with a sleepy sigh as I wiggled into a more comfortable spot.

“It’s cute,” he said before he kissed the top of my head. “Trust me.”

I laughed again before the haze of sleep fell and slowly everything turned dark.



“Willow!”

My name sounded muffled and far away as the last sliver of my dream slipped through my fingers. It had something to do with unicorns and burritos, but I couldn’t remember exactly what now. All I knew was Declan was there.

Declan was everywhere.

“Willow!”

This time I recognized my mom’s voice and shot up in bed as the knob on my door rattled.

“Why is your door locked?” Mom called from the hall.

“Sorry, Mom, I forgot to unlock it last night. What’s up?”

Declan huffed out an annoyed breath before his big arms tightened around me and pulled my body closer to his. My heart raced at his possessive actions, but I shook my head before it could distract me.

“I wanted to see if you were gonna eat some waffles!” she said next.

I turned to look at my alarm clock to see the numbers said it was only six fifteen in the morning. “Ma. It’s early. I don’t want waffles.”

She was quiet for a minute before she spoke again. “Well, I already made a bunch. I don’t want to waste them.”

My stomach pinched, knowing we couldn’t *afford* to waste food, and if I wanted breakfast, this was probably my only shot. “Okay,” I finally said, as I tried to wiggle away from Declan. “I’m coming. Just give me a minute.”

Mom was quiet for a moment before she added. “What about your friend? Does he want waffles too?”

I froze with one foot off the bed, my eyes darting to Declan, who looked just as shocked. Before I could answer, Mom spoke again.

“Or is it a she? I can’t tell from here, dear. Just let whoever it is know that breakfast is ready. Don’t let it get cold.”

My mouth fell open as I stared at the door, but she didn’t say anything else. When I was finally certain she was gone, I turned back to Declan.

Who laughed.

Loudly.

“Holy shit,” he said around another chuckle as he climbed out of bed. “I need to meet her. Let’s go eat some waffles.”

Declan reached for my hand, and I was so shocked, I let him do it. He wasted no time dragging us toward my door and pulling me into the hallway. Despite not having a tour of the house, he had no trouble following the scents of breakfast to our kitchen.

My heart leapt to the back of my throat as we stepped in, and the room fell silent. I looked at first my mom and then my brother, saving the scariest for last.

“Morning, Willow,” Mom said, her voice full of cheer. “Who’s this you have with you?”

I gripped his hand harder as I kept my eyes on her and ignored my brother. “This is Declan. Declan, this is my mom.”

“Ms. Greene,” he said as he let me go and walked right over to my mom. My mouth fell open again as he picked up her hand and kissed the back of it. “Thank you so much for inviting me for breakfast. It smells delicious.”

My mom giggled like a little girl before Colton cleared his throat, and all eyes swung his way. “Where the hell did you come from?” he asked, his gaze locked on Declan.

“Colton Greene, that is not how we talk to guests!” Mom hissed, but he didn’t look at her.

“Guests are invited, Ma,” he sneered.

“I invited him, obviously,” I said, taking a step in my brother’s direction.

“Yeah, and who the hell is he, Willow? I’ve never even heard of this guy, and you brought him *home*?”

“I met him at work a few days ago,” I tried to explain, but he just kept talking.

“And now you’re wearing his clothes?”

His voice was rising, and I really wasn’t appreciating his tone. I understood he was being protective, but he was dangerously close to crossing the line.

“Who is he?” Colton continued. “Some asshole waiter you worked with once?”

My hackles were up instantly, but Declan answered before I could.

“Actually, I was one of the assholes she was serving.”

Colton’s eyes jumped to Declan before they narrowed. “What did you say your name was again?”

Declan smiled before he approached my brother with an outstretched hand. I bit my tongue and watched, ready to jump in between them if this went sideways.

“I’m Declan Holmes,” he said. “It’s nice to meet you.”

Colton only frowned harder as he shook his hand. “Declan Holmes? Where do I know that name?”

Declan shrugged. “I grew up around here.”

My brother continued to study him until I finally sighed and said, “He’s in the band Phase.”

Colton’s green eyes went wide before a big smile stretched across his face. “Holy shit! That’s it! You’re the rhythm guitarist! Man, I fuckin’ love your band!”

I had to bite my lips to hold back a laugh as my brother showered Declan in praise.

“I’ve been to your last two Nashville shows, and I have all your records! I even have your poster in my room, do you wanna go see?”

That time I couldn’t hold back the chuckle, but it was Mom who intervened.

“Colton, we’re about to eat breakfast. You can show him your poster later.”

My brother didn’t look happy, but he didn’t argue as he took a seat at the table. “You can sit here,” he said as he pushed a chair out for Declan. The one right next to himself, obviously.

I rolled my eyes as I sat on the opposite side. “You know, he’s *my* friend, right?” I asked as I sat down and started loading waffles onto my plate.

Colton turned to glare at me. “Yeah, and I’m sure you’ve had tons of time with him. Now it’s my turn.”

That began a Q & A session that felt like it would never end. Colton asked about songwriting and making videos and touring and guitars. It was like he was a never-ending fountain of questions, and Declan answered every single one.

Each time I expected him to roll his eyes or shoot me an irritated glance, but it never came. Declan was attentive and patient and friendly, like he was with all his fans.

Which only made me like him more.

“Don’t you need to leave for work?” I said, finally tired of being ignored.

Colton glanced at the clock on the wall and grimaced. “Shit. Yeah. I gotta go.” He turned to Declan with a longing glance. “Are you gonna come back?”

“Colton,” I said, the exasperation clear in my tone.

My brother shot me a glare before turning back to Declan, who just laughed.

“I’m not sure if I’ll have time to come back out here, but I can give you my number. We can text any time you want.”

Colton’s expression cleared as he yanked his phone out of his pocket and exchanged information with Declan. I pursed my lips and watched my brother fawn over him some more before he finally stood up.

“It was really nice to meet you, man,” Colton said as he reached out to shake Declan’s hand. “I’m sorry I have to go.”

Declan shook his head. “I need to get back to Nashville soon, anyway. We’re supposed to be at the studio by ten.”

Colton’s eyes lit up. “You guys workin’ on some new material?”

Declan grinned. “Always.”

“Hell yeah,” my brother said with a laugh. “I can’t wait to hear it.”

“I’ll send you a signed album as soon as it’s released.”

“Really?”

Declan nodded. “Of course.”

“Thanks, man!” he said before he leaned in to hug him. “I’ll talk to you soon,” he said as he backed his way out of the kitchen, never once taking his eyes off Declan.

“Goodbye,” I called with a wave, irritated that I was still being ignored.

“Yeah, bye,” Colton said to me and Mom before he finally turned around and left.

I huffed in irritation, and Declan laughed as he stood with his plate. “Your brother was nice.”

“Yeah,” I said with a scoff. “To *you*.”

Declan chuckled again as he walked over to the sink and turned the water on. Mom frowned my way before looking at him again. “What are you doing?” she asked.

He shot us a small smile over his shoulder. “My Mama always taught me to do my own dishes when I’m invited to eat somewhere. I’m happy to do yours, too, if you get them over here.”

Mom turned back to stare at me, and I just shrugged because I had no answers for her. I couldn’t explain Declan. I’m not sure anyone could.

We hurried to clean up the table while Declan washed and stacked all the dishes in the drying rack. It felt weird letting him do so much of the work as a guest, but each time I offered to take over, he shooed me away.

Finally, Mom conceded and thanked him for his help before returning to her bedroom for a nap. It served to remind me she was getting older, and I hated that.

When she was gone, Declan cleared his throat, and I turned to him. “You wanna dry this stuff so we can get it put away?”

My lips twitched with a smile as I walked over to help. “I can do that.”

We worked in silence for a few minutes before he broke it again. “What do you have planned for today?” he asked, his voice sounding unsure for once.

I shrugged. “Well, I don’t have to work anymore, but I should probably start looking for another job. And of course, study.”

“Do you think you could drive me back to Nashville?” Declan’s words were so hopeful my whole chest ached.

“Yeah, that shouldn’t be a problem.” Then I remembered the sorry state of my bank account. “I just need to check and make sure I have money for gas. I’m sure it’s pretty close to empty by now.”

Declan frowned. “I’ll fill your tank.” Before I could argue, he added, “And I have your money in my bag.” He turned off

the water and dried his hands. “Come on,” he said as he grabbed my arm and led me back toward my room.

He stopped next to the bed and before I could say anything, Declan reached for his backpack and pulled out a stack of hundred-dollar bills. “Here,” he said as he shoved it into my hands.

My eyes felt like they’d pop as I stared at the large amount of money he’d just given me. “I honestly forgot about this,” I said, my voice shaking. I cleared my throat and tried to hand it back. “I don’t feel right taking it now.”

“Oh no,” he said as he backed away, out of my reach. “We had an agreement.”

“Yeah, but—”

“Nope,” he interrupted before I could finish. “You lost your job, had to stand in heels all night, and gave up your privacy for me. The least I can do is pay you for your hassle.”

My eyes narrowed as they met his again. “I thought you said your manager was hiring me for the night?”

Declan smiled and shrugged, but before I could say anything else, a loud bang sounded through the house, and we both heard Colton yell, “Willow! You need to come out here and see this!”

Chapter 16

Declan

What is it, Colton?" Willow yelled to her brother, but my feet were already moving.

The tone of his voice left a bad feeling in my gut, and an even worse hunch it involved me.

I heard Willow following as I hurried toward where I'd heard Colton. We made it to the open front door and found him standing on the stoop. His back was to us, but I could see how tense his shoulders were and the hands fisted at his sides.

Seconds later, I found the reason why.

Willow's little silver car was still parked against the curb where we'd left it, but it was almost unrecognizable.

The windows were smashed, the doors had been keyed, the tires were all flat, and on the hood of the car was something written in red paint. My stomach churned as I walked closer, dreading what I'd see.

HE'S NOT FOR YOU

I swallowed hard as I stared at the message, letting each word imprint on my brain. My hands shook as I reached for my phone.

“What...” Willow whispered from behind me, and I spun to face her.

“Willow, you should go back inside,” I said as I walked toward her.

She shook her head and ducked to look around me. “Who did this? *Why* would someone do this?” Her voice was creaking with unshed tears, and each syllable was like another punch to my gut.

I finally reached her and wrapped an arm around her shoulders, so I could lead her back inside. “I don’t know, but I’m gonna find out.” I ground my teeth and cursed myself silently because those words weren’t enough.

I’d promised the same goddamn thing last night and look what happened.

I’d brought this fucking problem to her.

I snapped my mouth closed to control the anger bubbling in my gut, but it wasn’t easy.

“What am I gonna do?” Willow continued, the tears more prominent in her voice now. “I’ll have to use that money for a

new car,” she answered herself with a sniff. “Then I’ll be screwed on bills because I just lost my job.”

“You lost your job?” her mom asked as she entered the living room.

I took a deep breath and worked to calm my rage because it was so close to the surface I could taste it. “Just let me call my manager, okay? We’ll figure all this out.”

“Figure what out?” Willow cried. “Figure out why someone has it out for me now that I started hanging out with *you*?”

That last word was shot my way like a bullet from a gun. I winced at the implication in her tone but didn’t deny it.

She was right. This was my fault.

“No one ever noticed me before,” she continued, her voice growing louder. “I had a quiet life. I had a job. I had a *car*,” she yelled. “Now, I have *nothing*.”

“I’m sorry—”

“I know you’re sorry, Declan,” she spoke over me. “But this,” she said with a wave between us, “and that,” she said with a gesture toward her wrecked car out front, “I can’t do anymore.”

Those words settled like a lead ball in my gut, threatening to drag me to the ground with it.

“What are you saying?” I asked, my voice barely above a whisper.

I held completely still, not even willing to blink as I waited for her answer.

Willow tried to meet my eyes but eventually gave up and stared at her feet instead. “I’m saying I’m not going to Nashville with you tonight.” She finally looked up and speared me with a quick look. “I’m saying I can’t do this with you anymore.” Before I could answer, she added, “I gotta go.”

I watched as she turned around and hurried out of the room, wondering if they’d try to stop me from following her. My feet itched to move, but I held still.

Even though it was the hardest thing I’d ever done, I respected her wishes.

I let her go.

“Hey, you want a ride into town?” Colton said from behind me, pity dripping from each of his words.

I cleared my throat and turned to face him. “Yeah. That would be great. Thanks.”

We said our subdued goodbyes to Ms. Greene before I followed him out to his pickup truck. I climbed in silently, knowing he was going to try to talk to me about what just happened.

That was not a conversation I could have right now without losing my shit, so before he could open his mouth, I spoke.

“Do you mind if I make a couple phone calls?”

Colton shook his head as he pulled away from the curb.
“No. Go ahead.”

With a sigh of relief, I tapped a few buttons and listened to the other line ring. I’m not even sure what they said when they answered because I was already talking.

“Hey, I need a car as soon as possible.”

“Address?”

I turned to Colton, and he rattled off the information which I relayed to the guy on the phone. He assured me they’d be there as soon as possible, and I hung up.

The next call was to my manager.

“Mason,” I said with a growl as the anger started to resurface. “I need your P.I. out here in Bell Buckle *now*.”

“What the fuck is Bell Buckle?”

I might have laughed at that another day, but not right now. “It’s a little town forty-five minutes outside of Nashville. I’ll send you the address. I need him to get there now,” I repeated.

“Why?” Mason asked with a sigh. “What the fuck happened?”

“Willow’s car was vandalized.”

He was silent for a long moment before he started cursing.

“Are you fucking kidding me? How the fuck did they find you there?”

“My best guess is we were followed, but who the fuck knows?”

Mason let loose another long stream of curses. “I’m sure Larry’s gonna wanna check you for bugs,” he finally said.

My heart dropped at the thought of someone planting something on me or Willow. But when could that have happened? When would Kari or Ethan have had an opportunity to do that?

Now that I was thinking about it, we got changed at my place before we left for Bell Buckle. The tuxedo and gown were left behind, so what could have been bugged?

“Tell him to check her car,” I finally said. “It’s the only place they could have planted something.”

But *how* did they find her car? It was parked in front of my place all night. Did that mean Kari came here and guessed that was her car? Or was it Ethan who figured out where I lived and recognized the Honda Civic as Willow’s?

None of it was adding up the way it was supposed to, and I felt like I had more questions than answers.

“Has your guy found any information on the two names I gave you?”

“A little,” Mason said with a sigh. “Easy things like address and place of work, which we knew already. Larry said the deeper shit takes longer.”

I sighed and ran a hand through my hair. “We don’t have *longer*. They’ve struck twice in less than twelve hours now!”

“I know,” Mason growled again. “Believe me, I’m not happy either.”

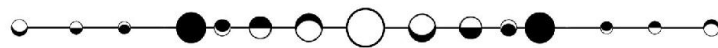
I laughed hard. “*You’re* not happy?” I yelled into the phone. “How do you think I feel, Mason? I just lost my fucking—”

My words dried up and turned to dust on my tongue. I swallowed once and shook my head, ignoring the looks I could feel coming from Colton.

“I just need you to help me fix this,” I said through my teeth.

Mason sighed. “I get it. I’m on it.”

“Okay, thanks,” I said before I hung up.



“What the fuck is wrong with you?”

I turned heavy-lidded eyes toward Roman and frowned. “What?”

The lead singer of our band scoffed as he stood up straight and waved at me. “You look like fucking shit, Holmes. When’s the last time you slept?” His lip curled in disgust as he took a deep inhale. “When’s the last time you fuckin’ showered?”

I shrugged as I lifted an arm to smell my pit. “I dunno. What’s today?”

He scoffed again, but it was Theo who spoke this time. “It’s Tuesday. And he’s right. You really don’t look good, dude. What’s goin’ on?”

Tuesday.

That meant it had been eight days since I'd seen her. Eight days since I'd even been able to think her name.

My legs shook as I fought to keep standing there and not collapse. "I dunno, man. I got a lot goin' on, and I've been staying at a hotel while my place gets fixed. You know how hard it is to sleep like that."

With our enhanced hearing, being around that many people when you were trying to sleep was almost impossible. While on the road, we usually chose to stay on the bus whenever we could because it was quieter.

Theo didn't look convinced as he studied me. "I've seen you stay up for three days straight and look better than this." His hazel eyes narrowed as he tilted his head to the side. "Have you been eating?"

Just the thought of food turned my stomach, and I closed my eyes to get past the nausea. "Not really."

Theo laughed, and my lids snapped back open. "You know what this means, don't you?" he asked.

I frowned as I tried to make sense of his words, but it wasn't easy with my brain this fuzzy. "Um. No?"

Theo chuckled again as he wrapped an arm around my shoulders and led me off set. "It means you found your mate, man. Congratulations."

Everything inside me froze as I brought us both to an abrupt stop. My heart thumped once, and I turned to look at Theo. I

needed to see his face. I needed to know if he was fucking with me or not.

But all I saw was sincerity.

“What?” I asked anyway, because I was still feeling like an idiot.

Theo’s smile was wide as he began walking me through the long hallway and toward the exit. “It must be that girl you brought to the show. Willow, right?”

Just hearing her name sent sharp spikes of pain through my chest. But hope was a tentative spark in my gut, just waiting to ignite.

“Hey, where are you two going?” Mason asked as he met us at the door.

“I need to get Declan to his mate,” Theo explained as we passed him.

“No,” Mason said slowly as he turned to watch us. “You need to get in there and do the photo shoot.”

Theo slowed down and spun me around to face our manager. “You really wanna take a picture of this?” he asked with a wave at my face.

I frowned at my best friend but didn’t bother to argue. I hadn’t seen in a mirror in days, so I really had no way to know how bad I looked.

Mason grimaced as he looked me up and down. “What the hell is wrong with him?” he asked Theo, like I wasn’t right

here.

“He’s going through fated mate withdrawals. We’ve got to get him and Willow back together.”

Mason’s head fell back with a loud sigh. “Another one? Are you fucking kidding me?”

Theo shrugged as he turned me back around and started walking us toward the exit again. “You know what they say, Masey,” he said, using my annoying nickname for our manager. “The original werewolf’s magic is rubbing off on us, and more people are finding their mates now. You should have seen this coming.”

Mason growled instead of answering as Theo pushed the front door open and led me outside.

“I don’t even know if she wants anything to do with me,” I admitted to Theo. “I didn’t leave on the best of terms.”

He nodded. “I heard Mason talking to the P.I. about it. They still don’t know who trashed her car and your apartment?”

I clenched my jaw and shook my head. “No. Ethan has a loose alibi, and he hasn’t been able to find Kari to question her.”

Just like I’d summoned her myself, the door opened behind us, and Kari stepped out. I was so shocked I stood there for a moment staring before I shook off the stupor.

A surge of energy blasted through my veins as I stormed toward her. She still hadn’t noticed me, so I had the element of

surprise, and I knew it would give me more information than she'd like.

“Kari,” I barked when I was only a couple feet away. “Where the fuck have you been?”

She jumped and spun to face me before her lips curled with a smile. “Hey, Dec. I didn't know you were looking for me,” she purred.

I shuffled out of her reach before she could touch me. “I wasn't looking for you. My private investigator was.”

Kari jerked back like I'd smacked her. “What? Why?”

“Why don't you tell me?” I sneered as I leaned closer. “Where did you go after the awards show last week? What did you do?”

I didn't give her a chance to answer before more of that simmering rage spewed out of my mouth.

“If I find out you were in my apartment, I'll have you fucking arrested.” I inched closer and lowered my voice, so she knew how serious I was. “And if I find out you followed us to Willow's place, I will make you pay in ways you've never even imagined.”

Fear filled Kari's eyes for a split second before she blinked and flicked some hair over her shoulder. “I don't know what you're talking about, Dec. I was in Atlanta last week.”

I straightened back up and tried to read her expression for the truth. “Why should I believe that?”

She shrugged. “It’s all over my Instagram feed. Don’t you follow me?” she asked with a pout.

I stared at her for another moment as I ground my teeth. Finally, I huffed and turned toward Theo. “Let’s go,” I snarled.

My best friend struggled to keep up with me as I stormed through the parking lot. “Where the hell are you going?” he said as he finally caught up.

“I’m sick of leaving this shit up to the P.I. I’m going to find Ethan and ask him some questions myself.”

“Do you really think that’s a good idea in your condition? Maybe we should get you back with Willow first.”

Every atom of my body yearned for her, but I shook my head. “No. I need some answers.” The turmoil in my gut threatened to overwhelm me, but I shook my head and pressed on. “I can’t face her again until I know what’s going on. First we find Ethan, and then we go to Willow,” I said, my words like a promise.

For the first time in days, I felt like there might actually be a light at the end of this tunnel.

Chapter 17

Declan

You're sure about this?" Theo asked as he stared out the window at the Nashville Auditorium.

I tried to hide my wince as I pulled myself out of the car. "The P.I. confirmed he worked here," I said as I shut my door.

Theo climbed out of his side with a sigh. "That's not what I was talkin' about. Are you sure you wanna come here and confront the guy like this?" he said with a wave at me.

"You know, the comments about my appearance are starting to hurt," I said as I pushed past him.

Theo sighed again. "I'm not talking about your looks, you drama queen. I'm talking about the fact that you can barely stand up."

Before I could argue with him, I stumbled over my own feet, and he had to catch me before I landed on the concrete. He helped me get steady on my shaky legs with a glare.

"I just wanna talk to him," I promised.

Theo huffed but didn't stop me when I tried to walk away again. The trek to the front doors was torturous, but I made it

inside and found a nearby wall to rest against.

“I’m tellin’ you, Declan,” Theo muttered as his eyes darted around us. “I know what this is like. You’re not in any condition to *talk* to this guy.” He lowered his voice and added, “Even if he *is* a human.”

I shook my head and stepped away from him. “I’m fine,” I insisted as I walked away, doing my best to not drag my feet.

Theo sighed again, but I heard him following as I searched for that asshole Ethan. Thankfully for me and my weak knees, it didn’t take long.

“Ethan,” I called, using all the power I had left to deepen my voice.

The man froze, his shoulders tensing, before he slowly turned to face me.

Theo sidled up close and began whispering furiously in my ear. “That was not the best way to start a polite conversation.”

I brushed my him off as I saw Ethan approaching. The goal was to meet him halfway, but with my limbs shaking so bad, I only made it a couple steps.

“What are you doing here?” Ethan asked, as he stopped a few feet away from me.

“I wanna know how you got into my apartment and why you vandalized Willow’s car,” I said with a growl, hoping he didn’t notice the tremor in my voice.

“I already told some private investigator that I’m not answering shit. Now, go away.”

Adrenaline zipped through my veins, and I took a step closer to him. “You’re gonna look me in the eye and tell me how you broke into my place and destroyed all of Willow’s shit,” I snarled.

Ethan frowned. “Why would I ruin *her* shit? I was trying to get her to go out with me.”

“Yeah, and she went home with me instead. I know that pissed you off.”

Ethan’s dark eyes flashed in my direction and shrugged, but I could see the barely contained rage beneath his surface. “Yeah, but I know how you people are. You’ll be gone in a week, and she’ll be back on the market again.”

My hands twitched with the urge to swing, but I held myself back.

Just barely.

“I haven’t been with Willow in a week. Has she called you?”

Ethan’s expression fell for a moment before he was back to smirking in my direction. “Not yet. But I’ve got time. That pussy is worth the wait.”

This time, there was no stopping me.

My fist soared towards his face before I could even think it through. There was no time to react before it collided with his

nose and blood started pouring from his mouth.

“Declan!” Theo yelled.

Before I could answer, Ethan’s meaty hand came flying towards me. Because there was nothing wrong with my senses, I could see with great detail the fist that was about to hit me. But because I was so weak and slow, I wasn’t able to dodge it.

Ethan’s knuckles collided with my eye socket, and I felt the bone crunch beneath them. The force knocked me to the floor, and the asshole wasted no time jumping on top of me.

His ass landed on my chest, knocking the air out of my lungs before he started pummeling my face. Mouth, cheek, eye, nose. He seemed to punch every inch from hairline to chin before I finally pushed him off me.

I spat out a mouthful of blood before I rolled over onto my stomach. Ethan’s heavy steps were heading my way as I continued to struggle to stand. My legs were shaking so bad I kept falling back to my knees, and I knew I was about to get my ass beat again when Theo jumped between us.

“Back the fuck off,” he said, the threat clear in his tone.

Ethan huffed and stood there glaring at me as I slowly got to my feet. “Watch yourself, Holmes,” he spat. “Just because you’ve got money and a fancy penthouse apartment doesn’t mean shit. Next time you come here, I’ll make sure you don’t get back up.”

I wiped at the blood pouring from my nose and snarled. “I’m good. Let’s go again.”

“Abso-fucking-lutely not,” Theo snarled before he grabbed my arm and dragged me back a step. “We’re leaving,” he announced, his glare still on Ethan.

I tried to pull out of his hold, but there was no winning against an angry werewolf at full strength. Especially when I was so weak, a fucking human got the best of me.

Theo didn’t stop storming through the auditorium until we made it to the front doors again and he shoved them open.

“I knew this was a bad fucking idea,” he muttered as he pulled me toward the black car still waiting in the lot. “But *you* didn’t wanna fucking listen. *You* just wanted to talk,” he sneered.

“Did you hear what he said?” I gasped as the pain finally started to seep past the adrenaline in my system. “He knows where I live. It had to be him.”

Theo yanked open the back door and tossed me onto the seat. I tumbled off the leather and onto the floor where I lie moaning into the rug.

“We’ll let the P.I. handle it from now on,” he growled before he turned toward the driver. “Excuse me. Do you have a first aid kit somewhere?”

“Right here, sir,” the man said before his seat creaked with movement.

“Thanks,” Theo said as he grabbed me by the back of the shirt and hauled me onto the seat next to him. “Can you take us to Belt Buckle please?”

“It’s *Bell* Buckle,” I muttered.

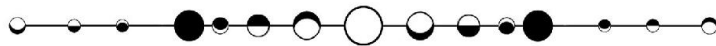
“Whatever,” he shot back at me. “Can you take us to Bell Buckle, please?”

“Of course,” the driver said as the car started to move.

“Now,” Theo said as he turned to me. “Let’s see if we can fix your face so you don’t scare your mate when you go get her back.”

I swallowed hard as he pulled out an alcohol wipe and dabbed it on my cheek. “Do you think she’ll take me back?” I asked, my voice soft and cracking in places.

Theo sighed and shook his head. “Of course she will. Y’all are fated. I’m sure she’s missed you as much as you’ve missed her.”



Willow

“Can I borrow your truck?”

I felt Mom’s eyes land on me as my brother looked up from his breakfast and frowned. “For what?”

“I have an interview in Nashville today.”

His familiar green eyes looked me up and down before he turned back to his eggs. “Why don’t you take *your* car?”

I grit my teeth as my belly flipped deep inside me. “My car was totaled,” I reminded him through gritted teeth.

Colton rolled his eyes. “Yeah. No kidding. I’m talking about the brand new Civic that Declan had delivered here last week. Why don’t you drive *that*?”

I shook my head, but my throat was too tight to allow me to speak.

The car had shown up exactly two days after mine had been vandalized, and I hadn’t been able to look at it since. I knew it was a Civic, and I knew it was silver like my old car, but other than that, I knew nothing.

I’d tried to give it back to the person who delivered it here, but they wouldn’t take it.

I’d tried to sell it online, but both Mom and Colton got on my case so bad, I finally deleted the listing.

The only thing I could do now was borrow Colton’s truck until I could stomach looking at the new one. I just didn’t see

that happening anytime soon.

“Are you gonna lend me your truck or what?”

Colton stared at me for a long moment before he sighed and shook his head. “Fine, Willow. You can take my truck.” He shoveled a bite into his mouth before he added under his breath, “I still think you should call to thank him.”

The thought of dialing his number sent my blood pressure sky rocketing.

The thought of hearing his voice again made my whole body tremble.

There was no way I could get through even a simple conversation with him without breaking down and begging him to come back.

I took a deep breath and turned back to my own plate. There were reasons why I couldn't be with Declan, and it was clear I needed to remind myself of them again.

1. *The limelight was no place for me. That was made abundantly clear.*
2. *He'll be on the road most of the time, and I don't want a long-distance relationship.*
3. *And most importantly, nothing bad has happened to me since he drove away eight days ago.*

No vandalism. No break-ins. No cryptic messages.

My life had returned to its blissfully boring state in an instant.

Every single one of those reasons were true. Every single one was valid. But none of them made a difference.

I still wanted Declan so bad I could barely breathe.

His loss was one I knew I'd never get over. I couldn't sleep at night, I couldn't eat without getting nauseous, and I was weaker every day.

It honestly felt like I was dying without him.

Their stares finally broke through the downward spiral my thoughts were on, and I let out a shaky breath. I knew they'd been watching how much I was or really *wasn't* eating, and if I was going to avoid questions, I needed to keep up pretenses.

I lifted my fork, doing my best to ignore how bad my hand shook as I stabbed a piece of egg. It was almost to my lips when a tremor ran through my body, and I dropped the utensil. The clang of the metal was like the starting bell of a boxing match, and my mother was ready to go.

“Willow, we need to talk.”

I let out a deep breath and reached for my fork. “About what?”

“Honey, there's clearly something going on with you,” she said with a wave toward me. “And I think we need to talk about it.”

I shrugged. “There's nothing to talk about. I've just been stressed about finding a job and not sleeping that great.”

My stomach turned as I looked for another bite to take, but finally I decided to push the plate away.

“What about this?” Mom asked, gesturing at the meal I hadn’t even made a dent in. “You’re not eating either. This is more than just stress about a job.”

My heart pounded in my ears so loud I almost couldn’t hear her. “I don’t know what to tell you, Mom. I’m just having a rough week.”

She was quiet for a while as I focused on the condensation sliding down my orange juice glass. When she finally spoke again, it was so unexpected I almost laughed.

“Willow, are you pregnant?”

“What?” I barked, my eyes going wide as I stared at her.

Colton dipped his head and acted like he’d never seen a more interesting plate of eggs while Mom fidgeted in her seat, clearly uncomfortable with the conversation.

Which made three of us.

“You’ve certainly got some of the symptoms, dear,” she finally said. “Have you taken a test?”

This time, I did laugh. “No. I don’t need to take a test.”

“Honey, this is serious, and it isn’t going away. You need to know one way or another.”

I shook my head. “I *know* I’m not pregnant, Mom.”

“Willow, I don’t see how—”

“We never had sex!” I blurted.

The entire room froze, the silence so loud it was almost deafening.

I cleared my throat and stood with my full plate. “Excuse me,” I said before I placed my dish in the sink and left the kitchen.

My feet itched to run, but my legs were shaking too hard to move any faster. When I finally made it to my room, I shut the door and collapsed against it. I squeezed my eyes closed and tried to stop the questions from circling my head, but it was no use.

I knew I wasn’t pregnant like my mom suggested, but that didn’t mean I knew what was actually wrong with me. That didn’t mean I knew why I was suddenly so weak or why everything I tried to eat tasted awful.

Nothing I’d ever heard of would explain this.

Werewolves didn’t get sick. We didn’t fall ill.

So, then what the hell was wrong with me?

Panic began to brew in my stomach, making it twist and turn deep within me. The pain was almost unfamiliar. Like an echo or a memory. It ticked at something in the back of my head, but I couldn’t put my finger on what.

Until the doorbell rang.

“I’ll get it,” Colton hollered.

My heart leapt to the back of my throat as my belly flipped harder.

I knew exactly who was at the door.

My stomach churned so violently I thought I'd be sick as my wide eyes darted around the room.

What was he doing here?

Why now?

What did he want?

I took a deep breath and let it out in small, shaky bursts as I tried to think straight. Maybe he was actually here for Colton. My brother had dropped hints this past week that he and Declan were still in contact, but I'd done my best to ignore him.

That's probably what this was.

"Willow!" Colton called, dashing all my hopes of hiding in here until Declan left. "You've got a visitor!"

My eyes darted to the window as I wondered if I was strong enough to climb out of it. But where would I go then? I wouldn't get very far on foot, and I didn't have a single set of keys in my room.

I was trapped.

"If you don't come out, I'm sending him in!" my brother called next.

I cursed his traitorous ass as I spun around in a circle, looking for an exit. Praying for an escape. Because I knew in that moment I was *not* ready to face Declan Holmes. Not even a little.

“He’s coming!” Colton yelled, his ominous words echoing through the house as my heart stopped beating all together.

I held my breath as I listened for his steps. When they finally reached my door, he paused, and I froze too as I waited for what came next.

When the knock came, it was so unexpected I jumped, a small squeak slipping out of me as I worked to regain my footing again.

“*Willow?*” Declan said, his voice drifting into my room and instantly bringing tears to my eyes. “*Can I come in and talk?*”

I stood there with my hands clenched into fists as I warded with what to do. Every single part of me wanted to see him again, but I knew I couldn’t go back. I couldn’t make it work with him. His world was not made for people like me. That fact was painfully obvious.

But the hope in his voice was impossible to resist, and I really was a sucker for punishment.

“Okay,” I called and held my breath as the opened my door.

Chapter 18

Willow

Hey,” Declan said as he stepped inside my room. “Sorry. I probably should have called first.”

I opened my mouth to tell him a heads up would have been nice, but I swallowed those words when I finally had the courage to meet his eyes.

“Oh my God, Declan! What happened?” I asked as I hurried toward him.

Any thoughts of self-preservation flew right out the window as I reached up to trace a jagged cut on his cheekbone.

Declan closed his eyes and took a deep, shaky breath. “I wrote a check my ass couldn’t cash,” he muttered.

I froze in shock before a creaky chuckle fell from my lips. “What the hell does that mean?”

He sighed and opened his lids to stare at me. “It means your boy, Ethan, has a nice right hook.”

My eyes widened further as I catalogued all the injuries on his face. “Ethan did this?” I whispered as I reached up to touch a purple bruise on his chin.

Declan shrugged. “Yeah, but to be fair, I started it.”

My hand fell, and I took a step back to frown at him. “You started a fight with Ethan? Why?”

He held my gaze for a long moment before he blew out a breath and looked away. “Because I was trying to get him to tell me how he broke into my apartment.” His eyes darted to mine again. “I wanted to know why he fucked up your car.”

My stomach twisted just thinking about Betsy. She didn’t deserve to go out like that.

I shook my head to clear it, but nothing was making sense yet. “Wait. How do you know it was Ethan? What about Kari?”

“She’s been in Atlanta since the night of the show. It’s all over her Instagram feed.”

My mind raced to put the pieces together. “She could have taken those pictures at any time and posted them whenever she wanted.”

Declan shook his head. “She had other people tagged, and their feeds were full of pics from Atlanta, too. Believe me, I went deep into this research, and I couldn’t find a single flaw in her story. It wasn’t her.”

I ripped my gaze away from him to stare at the floor. “I just can’t imagine Ethan doing something like that,” I said with a shake of my head. “And how did he find where you live?”

Declan blew out another deep breath. “I have no fucking idea, but he mentioned my penthouse today. He knows where I

live. It had to be him.”

I finally looked back up at Declan. His face was swollen and discolored, but he was still so damn handsome he took my breath away. I turned away before I could make an idiot out of myself.

“Maybe it was Ethan. Maybe it was someone else entirely. All I know is nothing has happened since you left,” I said, the words threatening to clog my throat on their way out. “I think that tells us all we need to know.”

“No,” Declan insisted as he took a step closer to me. “Maybe nothing bad has happened since we’ve been apart, but nothing good has come of it either.”

“What do you mean?” I whispered, my heart hammering in my throat.

Declan closed the distance between us and wrapped his big hands around my biceps. I stared at his chest and waited for him to speak, but nothing came. Finally, I looked up and found his blue eyes full of fear.

He licked his lips and finally said, “You feel it too, don’t you?”

My heart thundered behind my ribcage as all the air in my lungs froze. “What?” I breathed.

Declan pulled me closer until his body was pressed against mine, and the ache in my belly finally went away. I felt stronger in that moment. Healthier. Better.

I took what felt like my first real breath in days.

“You’ve been sick, right?” he asked, his voice still shaking like he was nervous. “Can’t eat, can’t sleep, can hardly fucking function.”

I inhaled sharply, the breath catching in my lungs as I stared at him. How would he know all this?

“Did Colton tell you that?” I asked, my voice stronger now as the anger started to bubble in my gut.

“No,” Declan said with a shake of his head. “I know you were sick because I was sick, too.”

I frowned as I scanned him again and noticed for the first time the bags under his bruised eyes and the way his cheekbones stuck out more than usual. It looked like he hadn’t been eating or sleeping either.

“But... why?” I finally said when no other words came to me.

Declan’s blue eyes watched me carefully as he licked his lips again. “It’s withdrawal symptoms.”

My frown deepened as I stared at him. “Withdrawal from what?” I finally asked when he didn’t explain any further.

He let out a deep breath and said, “After you find your fated mate, you can’t be apart from them. If you are, you both get sicker and weaker until you’re back together again.”

Every single muscle in my body turned to stone as I scanned his features for the truth, but it was already written all over his face.

“What?” I finally whispered when I could get my mouth to work again.

Declan dipped his head until it rested on mine. I closed my eyes and breathed him into my lungs, willing myself to memorize this feeling while it lasted.

“We’re fated mates,” Declan said, his voice barely audible over our pounding hearts. “We can’t be apart.”

All of the blood in my system drained from my limbs to pool in my cheeks. I fought to keep my breaths even as my mind raced.

It was like I’d just had every one of my dreams come true, only for them to turn out to be nightmares.

“Declan,” I croaked as I ripped myself away from him. “I can’t.”

“Can’t what?” he asked, the hurt clear in his voice.

Tears filled my eyes as I shook my head. “I can’t do *this*. I can’t be on newspaper covers and television shows. I can’t walk red carpets and dress up in designer evening gowns. I’m just a normal person.”

Declan eliminated the space between us again to wrap his arms around my waist. “Then I’ll be a normal person, too.”

“What?” I said with a gasp as I pulled away to stare at him.

He held my gaze tightly as he spoke. “I’ll quit the band. I’ll get a normal job. I don’t give a fuck.” Declan blew out a shaky

breath and squeezed me tighter. “I can live without all that shit, but I can’t live without *you*.”

My heart shattered in my chest as every word he said rang through my brain over and over. The tears I’d been desperately holding onto raced down my cheeks as I shook my head.

“You can’t quit the band,” I cried. “You can’t just give all that up for me.”

“I can and I will if that’s what you want.”

“That’s not what I want,” I said with a shake of my head as the sobs claimed the rest of my words.

Declan sighed and cupped the back of my neck as my tears soaked his shirt. His fingers were gentle as they massaged my scalp, which only made me cry harder.

“Willow, please,” he whispered in my ear. “Stop crying, and you can have whatever you want.”

I shook my head and told the truth for the first time in more than eight days. “All I want is you.”

Declan’s heart stuttered before it took off, racing even faster than before. He pushed me away from his chest so he could meet my eyes. “Are you sure?”

I sniffed hard as I nodded. “It’s probably the only thing I’m sure of.”

Declan laughed as he pulled me close again. “We’ll figure everything else out, okay?” He dipped his head to meet my eyes. “Just please don’t ask me to leave you again.”

More tears fell as I read the pain and hurt on his face. When it finally became too much, I squeezed my lids closed and shook my head. “I missed you every second you were gone,” I whispered.

Declan was quiet for a moment before his warm lips met mine. The sensation was so unexpected, I gasped against his mouth. He just chuckled as he pressed gentle kiss after gentle kiss on my face.

“I missed you too, gorgeous,” he finally said, his voice breaking with emotion.

Hearing the usually loud and entertaining Declan this somber was enough to fill my eyes with tears again. I wrapped my arms around his waist and squeezed tight as a soft sob fell from my lips.

Declan dug a hand into my messy hair and stroked my head again. “Please, Willow. Don’t cry. We’re gonna figure this out, okay?”

“It’s not that,” I wailed as I shook my head against his chest. “I’m so sorry I hurt you. I didn’t mean to. I was just trying to make things go back to normal.”

Declan finally lifted my face and pressed his lips against mine again. I was thankful because I don’t know how else I would have ever shut up.

“Stop,” he whispered. “It’s okay. It’s over now.”

“But I hurt you,” I wailed even louder.

Declan chuckled as he kissed my wet cheeks. “You got hurt first, gorgeous.”

“But—”

He kissed me again, and this time I gave up. His lips were so warm and familiar, I let myself go and got lost in the feeling of having Declan close again.

What started out as slow and sweet gained momentum until we were both left breathless. Thankfully, Declan found some self-control because I couldn't.

“Come with me back to Nashville,” he whispered against my mouth.

My heart jumped to the back of my throat again, where it threatened to choke me. “I don't want to go back there,” I said, my words so soft I was surprised he heard.

Declan understood what I meant right away and shook his head. “I'm in a hotel. My place is still being fixed up.”

The reminder of his ruined kitchen and all the little pieces of my things was enough to make me feel sick again.

“If you don't wanna sleep in the hotel, I think the bus is out of the shop. We can stay there.”

I shook my head and met his eyes again. He looked tired, and his face was still busted up from the fight he'd been in, but I knew what I was really seeing.

Declan was my fated mate.

He was my present and my future and everything else in between.

He was the one person on this earth who was born to be with me, and somehow, we found each other.

As unbelievable as it sounded, it made no sense to deny when it was so clear now. There was no arguing when the answer made so much damn sense.

“I don’t care,” I finally said. “I don’t care where we go as long as we’re safe,” I amended.

Declan’s eyes turned dark for a moment before he shook his head. “I’m not gonna let anything happen to you, okay? No one but Mason even knows what hotel I’m at.”

I let out a deep breath and nodded. “Okay. Let’s go.”

His smile was blinding as he grabbed my hand without a word and dragged me into the hall. Surprisingly, the living room was empty as Declan pulled me through it and out the front door.

Where he came to such an abrupt stop, I almost plowed into his back.

“What is it?” I asked as I looked around him, my stomach already cramping with fear.

“My car is gone,” he muttered as he pulled out his phone.

Before he could place a call or send a text, my brother stepped out of the house behind us. “I can’t believe I just met Theo Moore,” he gushed, the smile on his face wide. “Are

there any more of you coming by? I wanna get some more things signed.”

Declan laughed. “I’m not expecting anyone else at the moment.” He frowned and stretched to look over Colton’s shoulder. “Where *is* Theo?”

“He left a little while ago after I told him y’all could take Willow’s new car back to Nashville.”

Declan spun around to spear me with a wide-eyed look. “You got the car?”

I bit my lip and looked away. “Yeah. I got it last week.”

“How do you like it?”

I shrugged as my mind raced with a way to answer him. Before I could, Colton piped up.

“She hasn’t even driven it yet, but I *love* it. I’m not usually one for a compact car, but that thing’s got some good pickup.”

I could feel Declan still looking at me as I avoided his gaze. When I’d gathered enough courage to peek up at him, his brows were bunched with a frown.

“Do you not like it?” he asked, his voice soft. “We can return it for whatever you want.”

I shook my head and sighed. “It’s not that I don’t like it, and no, we don’t have to return it.”

“Then why don’t you drive it?”

I chewed on my bottom lip as I studied the front stoop and wished for the house to fall on me. Finally, I let out another

deep breath and told him the truth again.

“It had too many bad memories attached to it,” I admitted. “It reminded me about the stuff that was ruined at your house. It reminded me that I lost Betsy.” I swallowed hard before I forced those last few words out. “But worst of all, it reminded me that you were gone.”

Declan was only still and silent for a moment before he wrapped me in his arms and kissed the top of my head. “I’m sorry, gorgeous. I should have known it would make you sad. I was just trying to help.”

My heart squeezed so hard at his sweet words that I winced. “It wasn’t your fault,” I said with a sniff as I pulled out of his hold. “It just came with a lot of bad memories, so I’ve been avoiding it.”

I could feel Declan’s stare on me as I studied my feet again. “Where are the keys?” he asked.

My answer was a shrug, but of course, Colton was there to *help*. “Right here,” he said as he yanked them out of his pocket and jingled them in the air.

Declan took them from my brother before he wrapped an arm around my shoulders. “Come on, sweetheart. Let’s go make some good memories in that car.”

Chapter 19

Declan

So,” Willow said, her heart racing and her hands fidgeting in her lap.

I laughed as I reached for her hips and dragged her across the car and onto my lap. “First of all,” I said before I planted my lips on hers.

Willow sat there frozen with shock for a long moment before she finally kissed me back. I’d been worried I’d gone too far too soon, but the way she was responding to me put all those fears to rest.

My dick grew in my pants as Willow wrapped her arms around my neck and dug her fingers into my hair. She gripped the strands tight, and I groaned against her mouth.

“You better stop before I fuck you right here in front of your Mama’s house,” I muttered, my lips brushing against her jaw.

Willow shivered on my lap, and my cock grew even harder. “We can’t have sex here,” she panted.

I dropped my head to her chest and tried to catch my breath as I listened to her heart dance. With all the willpower I had

left, I picked her back up and turned to sit her on the seat again. Her green eyes met mine, their depths filled with so much fire and need, I almost caved.

“Here,” I grunted as I yanked off my leather coat and tossed it on her lap.

Willow sat there quietly as I turned the car on and pulled away from the curb. My hands clutched the steering wheel tight as I waited for the opportunity to touch her again.

“What’s this for?” she breathed, her racing heart sounding like a fucking melody in my head.

I reached over and spread the leather across her lap, so she was covered from the waist down. “This is so people can’t see what I’m about to do to you.”

Her heart thumped loudly as my hand slid under the jacket to grip her thigh. I could feel her leg trembling beneath my touch, and I hope she wanted this as much as I did because I didn’t want to stop.

“What are you about to do?” she whispered, her words so breathy I could barely hear them over the sound of both our pulses.

I pulled onto the highway and sped up as my fingers found the waistband of her leggings. “I’m going to see how many times I can make you come before we get to Nashville.”

Willow’s sharp gasp was like a lightning bolt to my dick. “Declan,” she muttered as she squirmed beneath my wandering hand. “I don’t think...”

“If you really want me to stop, I will, but I promise no one will see if you keep this jacket on top of you.” I glanced toward Willow in time to see her clutch the leather tight. “Good. Now spread your legs.”

I held my breath and waited to see if she would go along with this or tell me to go to hell.

Willow shifted in her seat before she pulled her thighs apart, and my cock *ached* with anticipation. “Good,” I said again, unable to force any more words past my lips.

I kept my eyes glued to the road as I slid my hand beneath her panties and found her slit. Willow gasped again, and I breathed in the scent of her arousal as it filled the car.

“I can’t wait,” I muttered before I plunged two fingers deep inside her.

Willow’s back arched as she dragged in a deep breath and held it. I pulled out of her and trailed her wetness up to her clit, where I pressed down hard.

Without warning, Willow’s whole body began to tremble as she moaned and twitched beneath my hand. I kept massaging her as she slowly relaxed and finally slumped against the seat.

“Holy shit,” I said with a chuckle. “That was unexpected, but that’s one.”

The smell of her blush filled my nose as she squirmed beneath me. “Sorry.”

I laughed again. “Don’t be sorry, that was fuckin’ hot.” I shoved my fingers inside her again. “Now let’s see how long it

takes for the next one.”

Willow shook her head, even as her hips bucked against my hand. “Declan, I don’t think—”

“Fuck, Willow,” I muttered as I pulled out of her. “Do you feel how fuckin’ wet you are?” I couldn’t resist sliding into her again. “Is this all for me, gorgeous?”

I ground my palm against her clit while I fucked her with my fingers.

“I need your help, Willow.”

She shook her head, but I knew she was listening, so I continued.

“I need you to slide one of your hands under your shirt and touch your tits for me.”

Willow gasped loudly and shook her head harder. I pulled my fingers out, and she whimpered.

“If you want me to make you come again, I need you to touch your tits.”

She blew out a deep, shaky breath as one of her hands dipped beneath her sweatshirt. Her body trembled beneath me as I slid back into her.

“That’s it, gorgeous, now find one of your hard little nipples,” I said, my voice so rough I’m surprised she understood.

But even with her hand covered, I knew she did what I asked because she shivered beneath me again.

“Good,” I grunted. “Now pinch them.”

Willow gasped, and I finger fucked her faster.

“Harder, Willow.”

She whined as she bucked her hips against me.

When I knew she was close, I slid out of her and stretched my hand wide. I pressed my thumb against her clit and slid my pinky between her firm ass cheeks.

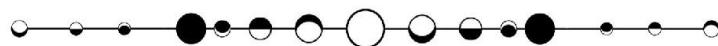
Willow threw her head back and moaned as she came again, her whole body twitching beneath my hand for so long as my cock leaked in my pants. When she was finally done, she let out a deep breath and slumped deeper against the seat.

“I don’t think I can—”

“That was only two,” I interrupted as I gathered her wetness and rubbed it on her sensitive clit. “We’ve still got thirty minutes until Nashville. I’m confident I can make you come two more times before we get there.”

Willow shook her head, eyes wide. “And I’m confident I won’t survive that.”

I shrugged. “We’ll go out together then,” I said as I surged inside her again.



Willow

“Sorry for the mess,” Declan said as he walked around me into the hotel room he’d been staying in.

I let the door swing closed behind me as I watched him hurry around the room to pick up discarded clothes and takeout containers and even a guitar. My body was still humming with energy, even though Declan had finally quit fingering me once we reached city limits.

Somehow he’d wrung five orgasms out of me, and I honestly didn’t know how I was going to take any more.

But the big king bed in the middle of the room promised we weren’t done yet.

I swallowed hard and followed him inside. There was no reason to be nervous or scared. This was my fated mate. I was *supposed* to be with him.

“Come sit down,” Declan called as he patted a clean place on the bed.

I took a steadying breath as I crossed the room to sit where he’d suggested. My hands were clenched into fists in my lap as I waited to see what happened next.

When Declan turned to face me again, he had a small leather book in his hands and a smile on his face. “If you’ve been eating as shitty as I have, you’re probably starving right now.”

Just like my body had obeyed him in the past, my stomach rumbled, and he laughed.

“I thought so,” he said as he handed me the book. “Take a look at the menu and we can order from room service.”

I frowned as I looked down at the laminated pages, but he didn't seem to notice.

“I think they have HBO on here, so we should be able to stream Lord of the Rings if you want,” he said as he picked up the remote and pointed it at the TV.

The last of the nerves melted from my system and I let out a deep breath. “Yeah. Let's start from where I fell asleep.”

“So the beginning,” Declan deadpanned.

I giggled as I flipped through the menu. “Hush up.”

Our room service order was obscene, but Declan didn't seem to care, he just made me promise he could have a bite of everything I ordered.

Declan disappeared for a little while to shower the blood off him and when he came back out of the steam-filled bathroom, even some of the bruises seemed to have faded.

“You look better already. How are you feeling?” I asked from where I sat curled into a ball at the head of the bed.

Declan tossed his bloody clothes into a pile on the floor before turning to me with a smile. “I've felt better since I got to your house.”

My lips curled with a grin as my belly flipped deep inside me. “I’ve felt better, too.”

Declan sighed as he sat on the bed and dragged me closer. “You know what that means, don’t you?”

“What?” I wheezed as he squeezed me tight.

“You’re stuck with me forever now,” he said with a sigh.

I laughed as I reached up to kiss his cheek. “I think I’m okay with that.”

Declan’s face turned serious as his blue eyes met mine. “I don’t wanna ever miss you like that again,” he said, his voice the most serious I’d ever heard it.

I swallowed hard as I fought to hold his gaze. “I don’t want that either,” I admitted.

“Willow—”

Before he could finish his sentence, there was a knock. His expression turned cautious as he gently pried himself away from me.

“Stay here,” he whispered as he hurried toward the door.

I watched him check the peephole before sighing and unlocking the deadbolt. “It’s just the food,” he said as he pulled it open.

I let out a deep sigh of relief as I slumped on the bed. How long were we going to have to live like this? We’d already agreed we couldn’t be apart, so that meant we needed to figure out who was behind the vandalism.

Especially before they found us again.

“Thanks, sweetheart,” Declan said as he pulled the cart of food into the room. “Have a nice day,” he said as he handed the woman a folded-up bill.

She stared at her hand and then back up at Declan as he let the door close behind him. I glanced her way just in time to see her face fall before she was gone. I wondered if she was a fan that recognized Declan, but thoughts of the hotel employee were gone the moment he started uncovering dishes of food.

My stomach protested loudly, and Declan laughed. “Come eat,” he called with a wave of his hand.

I wasted no time climbing off the bed and hurrying over to the food cart.

I’m not sure if they had a great chef at this Marriott or if I was just extra hungry, but I couldn’t remember food ever smelling this good before. I piled chicken tenders, and fries, and pizza, and pasta, and salad onto my plate before I dug in.

Declan laughed around a bite of burger. “Maybe we should have ordered more.”

I shrugged as I chewed. “We can always get dessert next.”

His mouth fell open, food suspended in midair. “Wow,” he finally said. “Beauty *and* brains.” Declan shook his head before taking another bite of his burger. “How did I get so fuckin’ lucky?”

I laughed, my face heating with his compliment, but didn’t answer. Especially because I was pretty sure I was the lucky

one.

We somehow finished all the food we'd had delivered and then found room for dessert. This time, he used a delivery service to order from a local bakery. The Lord of the Rings played on the TV while we gorged ourselves on eclairs, and apple pie, and cookies, and cake.

Altogether, we'd probably consumed enough food to feed an entire football team, but we still finished everything he'd ordered. When it was all gone, I threw myself back onto the pillows and groaned.

"I'll never eat again," I promised him.

Declan laughed as he eased himself onto his back, too. "I think even my eyeballs are full."

I giggled, but that soon turned into a yawn I couldn't hide.

Declan rolled over and wrapped his arm around my hips, careful to avoid my bloated stomach. "I really wanna fuck you," he said as he yawned too. "But the food coma is hitting hard."

I giggled as I snuggled closer. "Okay. I'll take a raincheck."

I'm not sure if he answered because I lost the fight to stay awake after that. I slept more soundly than I had in over a week, and when I woke up again, I knew hours had passed because it was dark outside.

"I told you Dennis, I'm not doing this with you!"

Someone slammed a door nearby, and it was so loud it sounded like it was ours. Declan jumped and sat up straight.

“What?” he called, his voice gritty with sleep.

I wrapped a hand around his arm. “It’s just someone down the hall,” I said as I pulled him back onto the pillows.

Declan sighed as he pulled me close again. “I usually opt for a suite when I have to stay in a hotel because it’s quieter, but most places were still booked from the awards show,” he explained. “I hadn’t been able to sleep in the past week anyway, so I didn’t really mind.”

My stomach cramped with pain as I listened to the sad resignation in his voice. I slid my arm around his waist and held him tight. “It’s okay,” I said around a yawn. “I’m sure they’ll stop soon.”

But they didn’t.

And if it wasn’t *Dennis* and his loud wife *Nicole*, it was the baby crying a few rooms away.

Or the teenagers above us playing rap music.

Or the man snoring so loud it sounded like he was sleeping in our bathroom.

The sounds were coming at us from all angles, and I knew I wouldn’t be able to sleep like this.

“Do you wanna go stay on the bus?” Declan asked as he turned to me. “We can use the big bed in the back room.”

I raised a brow at him. “Won’t it be loud outside of the bus too?”

He shook his head as he climbed out of bed and grabbed my hand. “No. Mason has it parked in a covered lot downtown. It’ll be closed this time of night, so it should be quiet.”

“I’m sold,” I said as I took his hand and let him lead me to the door.

I wish I’d known then that a sleepless night in a hotel room was far better than what awaited us on that bus.

Chapter 20

Willow

Willow

“Wow! This thing is a lot bigger than I thought it would be,” I said as I spun around Phase’s tour bus. “And if there’s time, we need to get Colton on this thing. He would lose his mind.”

Declan laughed as he shut the door behind us and climbed up the stairs to join me. “Yeah, we upgraded a few years ago.” He looked around and snorted. “We actually started touring in a Chrysler minivan, so this is a huge step up.”

Before I could answer, he grabbed my hand and started dragging me through the bus.

“But there’ll be time to give you a tour tomorrow when the sun is up. Let’s go to bed.”

My heart leapt in my chest at his words, but we both ignored it as he slid a pocket door open and pulled me into a small room. The queen-sized bed in the middle took up most of the space, and the sight made my pulse race even faster.

Declan was silent as he pulled the borrowed leather jacket off my shoulders. “We don’t have to do anything but sleep,” he said as he bent to take off my shoes. “There’s no rush,” he promised as he looked up and met my gaze.

I read the truth in his sky-blue eyes and knew I’d never have to worry with him. I’d never have to be afraid or nervous. Declan already seemed to know me better than I knew myself.

With a deep breath, I shook my head. “I’m not tired right now.”

Before he could respond, I dropped to my knees in front of him and wrapped my arms around his neck. Declan wasted no time gripping my hips and dragging me closer.

“I’ve never wanted anything as much as I want you,” he whispered in my ear.

A shiver raced down my spine as Declan’s hands slid to my ass. He lifted me up and sat me on the edge of the mattress before squeezing between my thighs.

Declan held my gaze as he pulled my sweatshirt and tank top over my head. He tossed the clothes behind his back and reached for the waistband of my leggings.

Soon, I was completely naked and covered in goosebumps. Declan’s gaze was like a physical caress, and my body reacted wherever he looked.

The fire in his gaze made me feel bolder, so I reached for his shirt and pulled it off him. I took a moment to stare at his chiseled chest and thick arms before he grabbed my face and kissed me.

“You can’t look at me like that and expect me not to react,” he muttered against my lips.

I chuckled, and he kissed me harder.

“I can’t help it,” I gasped when he finally let me back up for air. “You’re so hot.”

He laughed again as he grabbed my hips. “How do you think it feels trying to control myself around *you*?” he whispered against my throat. “How do you think it feels to stare at this ass and not be able to touch it?”

My heart leapt to the back of my throat, where it pounded out of control. “You can touch it *now*.”

Declan only growled before he filled both hands with my ass cheeks. He squeezed tight and a lightning bolt of desire struck right between my legs.

“That’s it,” Declan said as he let go of me and stood up.

The questions were on the tip of my tongue, but they dried up when I saw him grab his belt. He unbuckled it and unbuttoned his pants before pausing to reach into his back pocket. I watched him pull out a condom and toss it on the bed before reaching for his jeans again.

My mouth went completely dry as I watched him yank his pants and boxers to the floor. I stared at his feet as he kicked the clothes aside, almost too scared to look at what I really wanted to see.

Almost.

When Declan’s big hand wrapped around his even bigger dick, I couldn’t help but watch. I swallowed hard as he stroked himself slowly from tip to base.

“You wanna grab the condom?” he asked, his voice so gritty it sent another shiver down my spine.

I glanced at the little foil wrapper next to me before I fixated on his dick again. “Can I?” I asked, before I paused to lick my lips.

Declan ripped his hand off his hardness. “Fuck yeah. You can do whatever you want.”

A small, breathy giggle burst out of me as I reached for him. My hand shook, but I hoped he wouldn't notice in the dark room.

Declan's dick was so thick I had trouble fitting my whole hand around, but it was so smooth. Like satin. I couldn't help but rub my thumb over the tip.

“Fuck,” Declan groaned.

Filled with more confidence than ever before, I leaned forward and put the head of his dick in my mouth. I only had time to lick him once before he grabbed my shoulders and ripped me away from him.

Hurt and embarrassment filled my stomach as I met his eyes. “Did I do something wrong?” I whispered.

Declan laughed as he shook his head and pushed me back onto the bed. “Fuck no, gorgeous. But I wanna come inside you right now, and that mouth of yours was about to make me erupt.”

Heat covered every inch of my skin as Declan ripped open the condom and rolled it on. He then grabbed my thighs and inched closer. The tip of his hardness pressed against my clit, and I moaned.

“Yeah,” Declan said with a growl. “You’re ready.”

I nodded in response and seconds later, I felt him slowly push into me. Declan stretched my insides so beautifully as he slid inside, and I squeezed my eyes closed when he finally bottomed out. I felt so full in such a delicious way, I could have stayed like that for hours.

But what came next was even better.

Declan slid almost all the way out of me before surging inside again. My head fell back with a gasp as he did it again.

And again.

He shifted his hips and pumped into me again, hitting something deep within me that made my toes curl. We continued like that as Declan set the pace, and I just tried to keep up. With an unexpected growl, he lifted my legs onto his shoulders and fucked me even harder.

I gripped the sheets beneath me and shook my head back and forth as I panted and moaned. Declan’s hips pounded against mine, but still it wasn’t enough. Still, I wanted more.

The pleasure built inside of me like a pressure cooker, and I knew it was only a matter of time before I exploded. Just like I knew when I did, I’d drag him down with me.

Declan swiveled his hips and lifted my ass a little higher before he slammed back inside, and I started shaking in his arms.

“That’s it, gorgeous,” he said between gritted teeth. “Let me feel you come all over my cock. Let me feel you lose control

with me deep inside you.”

I shook my head back and forth, but there was no stopping the orgasm racing my way, and when it finally struck, I arched my back and screamed.

“Fuck. Yes,” Declan grunted as he pumped into me a few more times before he was finally still. His hands tightened on my hips as he came, too.

Time seemed to stop meaning anything as we both slowly came down from our highs. I could feel his pleasure almost as acutely as my own, and I knew that was our fated mate bond at work.

Declan finally sighed and lowered my legs back to the floor before he fell on top of me. I laughed as his big body almost crushed mine. Instead of pushing him away though, I wrapped my arms around him and squeezed tighter.

He chuckled as he pulled away to look at me. “Aren’t I hurting you?”

I shrugged as I fought for a deep breath. “I’m okay with dying beneath a hot, naked man.”

Declan laughed harder as he stood up and pulled me with him. The humor slowly faded, leaving a soft smile on his handsome face. “I can’t believe it’s taken me this long to tell you how much I fuckin’ love you.”

The air froze in my lungs as my heart came to a standstill. The whole world seemed to stop as I stared into his eyes and read the truth for myself.

My heart started beating again as the warmth of his love seeped through me. If I was being honest, his devotion had been obvious from the start. I was just too scared to believe it.

But this was my *fated* mate. There was nothing to fear anymore.

I reached up to kiss his smiling lips. “I love you, too.”

Declan’s grin grew three sizes as he stared down at me. Without warning, he ducked his head and kissed me with so much emotion, I was left dizzy.

When he finally pulled away, he had to steady me with a chuckle. “Wow. I must have kissed you senseless,” he said as he handed me my clothes.

I rolled my eyes as I watched him pull off the condom and wrap it in a tissue. “You know what? I’ll let you have that one. You earned it tonight.”

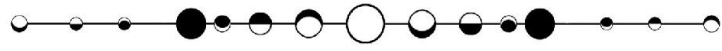
His head fell back with a laugh as he pulled on his boxers and joined me on the bed. “I did, huh?”

I yawned as I nodded and snuggled into his hold. “Yep. That was easily the best orgasm of my life.”

He chuckled again. “That’s a lot to live up to.”

I shook my head as another yawn almost broke my jaw. “If anyone is up for the challenge, you are.”

Declan kissed my cheek with a snort. “Goodnight, gorgeous,” he whispered before everything went dark.



Declan

“Willow?” I croaked as I reached for her in the dark room, but the bed was empty.

I sat up and looked around before flopping back onto the pillow, figuring she’d gone to the bathroom.

My eyes felt gritty, and I knew I hadn’t slept long enough. Especially after the complete exhaustion of the last week of my life. I struggled to stay awake long enough for Willow to come back, but the gentle sway of the bus was threatening to lull me back to sleep.

Until I remembered the bus was supposed to be parked.

I jumped out of the bed and stood there for a moment, not trusting my senses when my brain was still so fuzzy. With a shake of my head, I listened as carefully as I could, but all I could hear was the engine of the bus, and the sounds of cars passing outside.

I ran to the window and ripped open the shades and sure as shit, we were on the highway. With a curse, I yanked on my jeans and hurried out of the bedroom.

The only explanation I could come up with was Willow had decided to get up and drive us somewhere. But where? And why didn’t she wake me first?

I raced through the bus, only coming to a stop when I caught a flash of red in the driver’s seat. The hair color wasn’t

my mate's familiar copper color, but it was close enough that I stopped to stare for a moment.

A soft squeak had me turning to the stairs that led to the door. That was where I found that shade of red I loved so much. But as I stared, my smile slowly fell.

Willow's mouth was covered in a silver piece of duct tape, her hands bound in front of her. I wondered why she hadn't broken out of her bindings when I got a whiff of the driver.

She was a human.

Things became even clearer when I caught sight of the gun on her lap.

"Declan!"

My eyes snapped to the back of the driver's head as soon as she called my name.

"You're finally up!" she chirped, her voice so cheery I had to do a double take.

No. Yeah. That was still my mate, gagged and tied up on the floor of the tour bus.

"What the fuck is going on?" I asked as I continued in their direction.

The driver picked up the gun, and I froze.

"That's close enough for now, Declan."

I didn't like the way she said my name. It sent chills down my spine.

“Where are we going?” I asked, hoping to get an answer to even one of the hundreds of questions in my mind.

The woman waved the gun my way, and I ducked as she pointed it at my head. “I’m driving us back to Memphis!” she said, like that should be obvious.

I stared at the back of her head some more as the feeling in the pit of my stomach started to turn sour. “What’s in Memphis?”

The woman giggled as she waved the pistol some more. “Our new life together!” she sang. “I thought we could stop by my mom’s first, so y’all could be introduced. She’d probably let us stay on her land for a few weeks while we decide where we’re gonna live. I was thinking a nice little suburb outside of the city, but of course, I wanna hear what you think.”

I frowned at her before I turned to look at Willow. Her eyes were full of fear before they darted away from me. My feet itched to go to her, but that gun made me stay right where I was.

My gut churned with acid and fire as I turned back toward the driver. “What the hell *is* this?” I asked, my voice rising without my permission. “Do I know you?”

The woman shook her head, red hair flying as she did. “Of course, you don’t recognize me. I changed my hair for you,” she said with a little giggle. “I thought you’d realize it was me last night, but you didn’t.”

My frown deepened as a picture slowly started to form in my head. “Are you the one who delivered our room service?”

The woman gasped and wrenched the bus an inch to the right before she drove back into the middle of the lane again. “I knew it! I knew you saw me! I knew you knew it was me!”

I shook my head as the anger pulsed through my veins. “No. I don’t know who the fuck you are or what you think you’re doing!” I yelled before I could stop myself.

The driver’s shoulders hunched as she laid the gun on her lap again. “Of course,” she muttered. “I’m so *stupid*,” she spat. “Of course, you didn’t see me. Of course, you didn’t notice me. I’ve been invisible my whole life!” she yelled, her voice ricocheting off the walls in the bus and making me wince.

She dragged in a deep breath and gripped the pistol tighter. “But I served you food. I waited outside the radio station for you. I camped in my car outside your hotel. I dyed my fucking hair for you,” she continued, her voice getting louder.

“But I know you saw me that day on the red carpet,” she said as she looked over her shoulder to wink at me. “You saw me. You touched me. You can’t fake a connection like that.”

A soft growl rumbled out of my chest as I fought to put all the pieces together. “I don’t know—”

“I was there with my sister,” she talked over me. “We took a picture together. I *know* you remember me.”

My stomach twisted hard as I watched her grip the gun tighter. She pulled it off her lap, and I blurted the first name I

could think of from that night. “Jasmine? Is that it?”

The woman froze for a minute before she screamed, “No!”

She lifted the pistol in the air and pulled the trigger, blasting a hole into the roof. I covered my ears as the sound echoed through the bus, threatening to overwhelm me.

“My name is *Tammie!*”

Chapter 21

Declan

Woah!” I yelled as I threw my hands in the air. “Calm down! There’s no need for the gun.”

“No one listens to me otherwise!” she screamed as she swung the pistol around wildly. “No one notices me unless I start making threats!”

“Hey,” I called as I took a step closer. “I noticed you. On the red carpet, remember? We took that picture together. You looked great that night.”

Tammie froze for a moment before I heard her heart start to race. “I knew it,” she sang. “I knew we had a connection.”

“Yes,” I said as I took another step. “You were great. Your sister, too. You ladies were lovely, and I appreciate your support more than you’ll ever know.”

“I have all your albums, I have posters of you all over my walls, I go to every Memphis show. I’m your *biggest* fan,” she gushed.

I inched closer, working to make my voice even. “I get it. You’ve been supporting me for years. I’m lucky to have you.”

Tammie sniffed loudly and used the hand holding the gun to wipe at her nose. “No one understands my dedication. No one understands why I care about you so much.”

“I get it,” I said again. “No one has been as loyal as you’ve been.”

She shot a smile over her shoulder and almost sideswiped the van next to us. “Oops,” she said with a giggle as she righted the bus.

My heart was beating so hard I almost couldn’t speak. The sleep in my brain was long gone, and I understood very clearly what was happening here.

And more importantly, what was at stake.

Werewolves weren’t easy to kill, but a bullet to the head would have no problem taking one of us out. And with Willow tied up right next to Tammie, she could end her life before I got to them.

Which was unacceptable.

I could *not* let that happen.

I’d *just* found my fated mate. I wasn’t going to lose her like this.

“Tammie, why don’t you hand me the pistol while you’re driving?” I said as I got a little closer.

She spun around to glare at me. “No. It’s mine, and I’m not letting it go,” Tammie said as she swung it toward Willow.

My heart fell to the pit of my stomach, where it churned so painfully it took my breath away. “Tammie,” I gasped. “There’s no need to point the gun at Willow. She’s already tied up.”

“She’s lucky that’s all I’ve done to her,” Tammie snarled. “I just figured you’d like to have a chance to say goodbye first.”

My gut twisted tighter. “Goodbye?”

Tammie nodded, the barrel still aimed at Willow’s head. “Well, she’s *not* coming to Memphis with us, obviously.”

The venom was back in Tammie’s voice, and I knew I had to tread carefully. “Okay, then let’s pull over at the next rest stop and let her out.”

Tammie shook her head this time. “No. That won’t work. I need to eliminate all traces of her from your life.”

A few more pieces clicked together in my mind. “Tammie, were you the one who broke into my apartment?”

She turned around to shoot me a smile. “I knew you’d know it was me,” she said with a giggle. “I knew you’d appreciate me taking out the *trash*,” she said with a snarl toward Willow.

My eyes stayed glued to the gun as I licked my dry lips. “You must be really smart if you were able to get past all that security.”

Tammie threw her shoulders back and lifted her chin with pride. “It wasn’t hard to hack your building’s systems and shut down the power. Then I just walked up the stairs to your place,

disabled your door lock, and let myself right in. It was easy,” she said with a laugh.

“Wow.” I tried to put genuine enthusiasm into that word, but I’d never been more terrified in my life. Tammie still had her weapon pointed at Willow’s head, and I was having trouble even forming sentences with the fear numbing my body. “You’re a hacker? That’s so cool.”

“How do you think I got the job at the hotel you were staying at?” she asked next, her tone full of confidence now. “I got into their back office and added myself as an employee.” Tammie stopped to giggle at her own cleverness. “No one even asked who I was.”

I had a feeling another rant about being invisible was on the horizon, so I started talking again. “What about Willow’s car? Did you do that, too?”

The mood in the bus shifted as Tammie’s shoulders hunched. “Of course. I thought she’d get the message when I ruined all her stuff at your place, but *no*,” she sneered as she jabbed the gun toward Willow. “So, I left her *another* message, hoping she was smart enough to get that one.”

“How did you find her place?”

Tammie shrugged. “I waited outside your building and followed you.”

I ground my teeth together as her flippant tone made the rage sizzle in my veins. “Okay, well, I think Willow’s learned

her lesson. Let's get the tape off her wrists and let her out somewhere," I tried again.

Tammie shook her head. "No. That's not enough. I need to know you're done with her."

"She's just another piece of ass," I lied. "I'm already over it."

"Really?" Tammie fired back. "Because I just heard her moaning like a whore in here a few hours ago. Didn't seem like you were over her then."

"Okay, Tammie, that's enough," I yelled, finally at the end of my rope. "You've gone too far."

"I knew it," Tammie muttered as the bus's engine revved. "I knew you weren't done with her. I knew we were gonna have to do this the hard way."

I stood there frozen in place as all the hairs on my body stood straight up.

Tammie looked over her shoulder to point the barrel my way. "*You're* gonna throw her off this bus."

My stomach sank as my eyes darted to Willow. "What?" I breathed.

Tammie threw her head back and laughed. "Oh, this is perfect. Once you throw her out and she fucks up her pretty little face, you definitely won't want her anymore."

I ground my teeth again as I reminded myself that Willow was a werewolf. If I were to go through with Tammie's plan,

she'd survive the fall.

Probably.

My stomach churned, and I knew that wasn't good enough odds for me.

"No," I said with a shake of my head. "Tammie, I'm not throwing someone off a fucking moving vehicle."

"Then I'll shoot her," she screamed as she swung the gun back towards Willow's head.

A growl worked its way up my throat as I racked my brain for a way out of this.

"Tammie, listen, I lied to you, okay? Willow isn't just some random hookup. She's..." I almost said *mate*, but I knew that word wouldn't mean anything to Tammie. "She's my fiancé," I finally finished, the word feeling weird on its way out.

The bus was silent except for all three of our racing hearts.

"What?" Tammie finally said, her voice deep enough to send shivers racing down my spine.

I swallowed hard and hoped this was the right move to make. "We're getting married."

Tammie was silent for another long moment before she spoke again. "Where's the ring?"

"Huh?" I said like an idiot as I searched for a good excuse.

"The ring!" she screamed, her voice echoing in my head. "I didn't see a fucking ring when I tied her up!"

“We, uh, we’re still trying to keep this a secret,” I said as a story started to form in my head. “We don’t want it to leak to the media yet, so she’s not wearing the ring. I know I can trust you with this information though,” I added, hoping flattery would get me somewhere with her.

Tammie sat frozen for a minute before she started shaking her head back and forth. “I don’t believe you. There’s no way she’s that important. There’s no way you want to *marry* her.”

“Why would you say that?” I asked as I frowned at the back of her head.

Tammie laid the weapon on her lap as she reached for a crumpled-up tissue on the dashboard. “Because you left me *this*.”

I swallowed hard as a layer of ice coated my insides. “What is that?”

Tammie shook her head as she pulled the paper back to reveal a used condom. “If you were serious about this bitch, you wouldn’t be using a condom. You’d want to spread your seed, not throw it away,” she explained as she examined the latex.

My stomach turned like I’d be sick. “Why do you have that?”

She turned to wink over her shoulder at me. “Now, no matter what you decide, I’ll always have a piece of you.”

Bile rose in my throat as I asked the next question, although I wasn’t sure I wanted the answer. “What are you going to do

with that?”

Tammie shrugged as she turned back to the road. “I’ll probably keep some in a vial or something around my neck, but I was really hoping there’d be enough little guys still alive in there to inseminate myself.”

A soft gasp came from Willow’s direction, but I didn’t want to take the risk and look at her. I was playing a very difficult and strategic game with this woman, and one false move could get us all killed.

I swallowed hard past the vomit in my throat. “Why would you want old cum when you could have the real thing?”

Willow’s gaze felt heavy as she stared, but I still wouldn’t look at her. If I saw the fear in her eyes that I could feel blasting through our bond, I’d lose my shit.

The acrid scent of Tammie’s blush filled the bus, and my stomach cramped. “Well, this is more like a plan B,” she explained as she waved the dirty condom between us.

“What’s plan A?”

I knew I didn’t want the answer to this question, but I still had to ask it.

“Plan A is you get rid of this whore, and then we live happily ever after in Memphis.”

I nodded as I rubbed my shaking hands together. “Okay, cool. I love Memphis. Have you been to Graceland?”

“Yes, of course I’ve been!”

“Great. Let’s take a trip there, just you and me.”

Tammie’s heart thundered so loud it turned my stomach. “I would love that,” she gushed.

I swallowed hard. “Okay, then let’s drop Willow off at this McDonald’s comin’ up so we can focus on us instead.”

Tammie was so quiet, I could almost hear the gears turning in her brain. Finally, she shook her head. “No. I need to know you’re done with her. I need to know you’re all mine.”

“Listen, I’ve only known Willow for a couple weeks. *You’ve* been coming to my shows for *years*. There’s really no competition.”

Tammie turned to Willow and then to me, her dark eyes full of indecision. Finally, she shook her head again.

“No. I’ve proved my loyalty, now it’s your turn.” She grabbed the gun again and pointed it at Willow’s head. “Throw her off the bus or I’ll shoot her.”

The engine roared again as we picked up speed, and my gut churned so hard I thought I’d be sick. I glanced from Tammie to Willow to the window to watch the cars zipping past us.

This was an impossible decision, and as I stood there, I honestly had no idea what to do.

“Come on, Tammie,” I tried one more time. “Let’s do things the easy way and just drop her off.”

Tammie shook her head, cocked the gun, and pulled the trigger.

This shot was somehow louder than the last one, the sound so deafening all I could hear was a ringing in my ears. My throat ached as I screamed and lunged for Willow.

“That was just a leg shot,” Tammie said, her voice so calm it chilled me to my fucking core. “Next time it’ll be her pretty face that I shoot.”

I shook my head as my hands uselessly fluttered above Willow’s wound. Her pain echoed in my own leg, but I knew it paled in comparison to what she was feeling.

Willow’s rosy cheeks were a stark contrast to her pale face as she sat there trying to staunch the blood flowing from her thigh.

I knew I needed to put an end to this.

I knew I needed to get Willow help before it was too late.

But most of all, I knew I needed to get us the fuck off this bus.

“Okay,” I said as I held my hands in the air. “Okay. Don’t shoot her again. The blood stains really don’t match the neutral décor in here.”

Tammie froze before she slowly lowered the gun. “You’re going to throw her off the bus?”

I shot her a look like she was stupid. “Well, now that you’ve shot her, she’s making a fucking mess. Of course, I’m gonna throw her off the bus.”

Tammie's eyes widened with hope before I turned away to pick up Willow. She whimpered as I pulled her into my arms, even though I was as gentle as I could be.

When I had a good grip on her, I stood up again and turned toward Tammie. "Get into the right lane."

She shook her head. "No. Throw her into traffic."

I snorted. "So, someone can *immediately* call the cops on us? We wouldn't make it out of the county, Tammie." I pressed my lips together and let my words sink in for a moment before adding, "Get in the right lane so I can throw her into the ditch. No one will even notice her."

Tammie pursed her mouth to the side as she tapped the gun on the steering wheel. Finally, she sighed and switched on the blinker. "Fine. I guess you have a point."

I let out a discreet breath of relief as Tammie changed lanes. My heart slammed against my ribcage as I hoped like hell I was making the right decision.

"Okay," I said as I walked down the steps to the exit. I had to clear my throat before I could speak again. "Okay, open it."

Tammie nodded with a wide smile as she reached for the lever. The hinges squeaked as the door slid open to reveal the scenery racing past us. My pulse raced so fast I knew it couldn't be healthy, but in my arms, Willow's heart was slowing.

Which meant I was running out of time.

I swallowed hard but didn't look back before I leapt off the bottom step. Tammie screeched as we fell to the gravel-packed dirt and started rolling. I did my best to take the brunt of the fall, but I knew Willow got at least a few bumps in the process.

We finally came to a dusty stop as I heard Tammie scream. I looked up just in time to watch the bus tilt to the right. Time seemed to slow as the speeding hunk of steel finally tipped over with a loud crash. It continued to slide along the shoulder of the highway, leaving glass and twisted pieces of metal in its wake.

I didn't wait for the bus to come to a stop before I yanked my cell out of my pocket. Willow's breaths were shallow now and I could feel my own heart slowing in my chest. "Mason!" I screamed as soon as he answered. "I need to get Willow to a doctor now!"

Chapter 22

Declan

Come on, Willow,” I muttered as I pressed hard against the hole in her leg. “Stay with me.”

“Do you have a tourniquet?” Mason asked through the phone I still had wedged between my shoulder and ear.

I’d spared a few seconds to explain that Willow had been shot, but now Mason was asking me shit I didn’t understand.

“What the fuck is that?” I spat.

“You can use a belt if you have one.”

I looked down at myself, honestly not remembering what I was or wasn’t wearing. My black leather belt was still around my waist, although not buckled, so I yanked it from the loops.

“Okay, I have my belt. What do I do now?”

Willow moaned softly as her hands fluttered around her wound, and my heart hurt so fucking bad it felt like it would actually break.

“Wrap the belt around her leg above the bullet hole and pull it tight. You want to stop as much blood flow as possible,

so she has time to heal.”

None of his words were assuring, but I nodded anyway and did as he asked. Willow hissed when I pulled the leather tight around her leg, and I apologized immediately.

“I’m sorry, sweetheart,” I muttered as I grabbed her hand and squeezed it. “This is supposed to help you.”

“It hurts,” she whimpered as her eyes fluttered closed.

“Hey,” I called and her lids snapped back open. “I need you to stay awake, okay? You need to keep those pretty green eyes open until we get help.”

“*Where are you?*” Mason asked.

“I have no fuckin’ idea,” I said as I looked around. Cars were starting to stop along the highway, but thankfully, it seemed like no one had noticed us yet. They were all focused on the giant tour bus on its side. “She said she was takin’ us to Memphis.”

“*Who is she?*”

The anger bubbled in my system again, threatening to spill over. “I’ll explain later. I just need you to get someone here now. Can you trace my phone?”

“*Already on it.*”

I let out a small sigh of relief that there was at least one thing going right. “How long till someone gets here?”

Mason was quiet for a moment before he cursed. “*You’re already over an hour outside the city.*” His voice got distant,

and I guessed he'd pulled the phone away from his face. *"I'm gonna see if there's anyone closer to you that can get there fast,"* Mason said, his words loud again and meant for me. *"Have the cops shown up yet?"*

I paused for a moment and listened before I squeezed my eyes closed and cursed. "I can hear sirens in the distance."

"Then you need to hide her somewhere. She can't be brought to a human hospital."

"I know, Mason," I seethed as I looked around.

We were on the side of a major highway and the only thing around were cars and trees. The sparse woods were our best shot.

"I'm gonna try to find some cover," I said into the phone as I stood up and looked around.

Thankfully, we were still going unnoticed, but I knew that wouldn't last once the police got here.

"I gotta go," I said before I hung up on Mason and shoved the phone in my pocket. "I'm sorry, gorgeous," I muttered as I lifted Willow into my arms again.

She whined, but her protests were weaker than before, and I knew that wasn't a good sign. I gritted my teeth and ignored that as I limped my way toward the tree line. There weren't many big trunks to choose from, but thankfully, I found an old oak that should conceal us from the road.

I crouched down and laid Willow on the soft dirt before reluctantly pulling my hands away. Her face was so pale it was

almost green, and the color made my gut twist. I could tell how much weaker she was getting because so was I. My descent wasn't as sharp as hers, but I could feel the strength seeping from my body with each passing second.

"Declan."

My name was just a whisper, but I had no trouble hearing it.

And it was coming from the bus.

"Declan."

I glanced between Willow and the twisted pile of glass and steel before I turned back to my mate. Not a single part of me wanted to leave her, but I needed to know what was happening with Tammie.

I needed to know if this was over or just beginning.

"Listen, Willow," I whispered as I leaned close. "I'm going to leave my phone here with you," I said as I yanked it out of my pocket. "I need to go check on Tammie in the bus."

Willow's eyes snapped open, their depths so full of fear I felt it physically. "No," she gasped. "The gun."

She shook her head as the rest of her words were swept away by the pain now radiating through her body. I could feel it reaching my chest now, and I knew we were running out of time.

"Just stay here," I said before I kissed her head. "And call Mason if you need something. I'll be right back."

Before she could protest again, I stood up and limped away from her. Every single atom in my body screamed for me to go back, but I didn't. I couldn't. I needed to know if the threat against my mate had been eliminated or not.

I picked up the pace as I heard my name being called from inside the bus again. The other curious drivers were starting to get out of their cars, and it would only be a matter of time before they approached the wreck. I needed to get to Tammie and find out what kind of shape she was in before anyone saw me.

The door was crushed against the pavement, but the windshield was smashed, and I could enter that way. Inside, the driver's seat was empty, the safety belt hanging uselessly beside it.

Every one of my senses were on full alert as I climbed into the dark interior and looked around. I cocked my head to the side so I could see things the way they were intended, but it didn't help. The whole place was a wreck.

Cabinets were thrown open and emptied, chairs and cushions were tossed about, even the refrigerator had been ripped from its spot and flung across the bus.

Everything was in disarray, and I didn't even know where to start until I heard the soft thumping of a heartbeat. I carefully picked my way through the debris until I came to a stop beside the fridge. With a more careful look, I found one of Tammie's legs sticking out from underneath it.

Calling on my waning strength, I lifted the appliance off her and tossed it aside. Beneath it, she was in worse shape than I thought.

Tammie's back was cocked in an unnatural position, her limbs twisted in ways they were never meant to go. I was sure her spine was broken, but that wasn't even her biggest problem.

One of Roman's favorite pool sticks had been broken in half and one of the jagged pieces had impaled her through the chest. Blood ran from the wound in a steady stream, and I honestly didn't know how she was still alive.

"Declan?"

My heart leapt to the back of my throat as I looked down and found Tammie staring right at me. Her dark brown eyes were full of tears and even though she was broken beyond repair, she smiled.

"I knew you'd come back for me."

My gut twisted at the hope in her voice, but I nodded. "The police are on their way. They'll help you," I said, although I was sure she'd be dead before they could get here.

"It hurts," Tammie whimpered, and my stomach churned even more painfully.

"I know," I said like an idiot. "I'm sure the ambulance is right behind the police," I said as I took a step away.

The urge to get back to Willow was so strong, it was almost impossible to resist.

“Wait,” Tammie called, as she stretched out her bloody hand. “Will you stay with me?”

My heart stopped dead in my chest before it jump-started again, so painfully I winced. “I really have to—”

“Please,” Tammie whispered before she closed her eyes.

I licked my dry lips and let out a deep breath before I carefully climbed back over and picked up her hand. She wrapped her fingers around mine and gave a little squeeze.

“Thank you,” she said with a sigh.

I swallowed hard past the lump in my throat. “You’re welcome.”

I’m not sure how long I sat there holding onto this dying woman. It could have been only seconds, but it felt like hours before I heard her take a deep breath and then go quiet. Her heart stopped beating as her hand went limp in mine.

I listened quietly for her pulse to start again, but it never did. When I was sure she was gone, I let go of her hand and watched it fall to her side. I stood up and stared at her artificially dyed hair, wondering how the fuck this all went so sideways.

Like a bubble had popped, the sirens were deafening all of a sudden as they closed in on the wreck. I gave Tammie’s lifeless body one more glance before I hurried back through the bus and out the front windshield. With a glance toward the highway, I saw the police cars beginning to arrive and made a mad dash toward the trees.

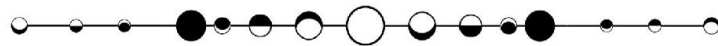
The trip back to Willow seemed to take twice as long as I called on every ounce of energy I had left. When I finally made it to her side, I collapsed onto the wet ground next to her.

This didn't feel like regular exhaustion. This felt deeper. Darker.

This was the kind of sleep you didn't wake up from.

I knew that meant Willow was slowly dying beside me, and in that moment, I accepted our fate. My hand found hers, and I interlocked our fingers as the blackness crept around the edges of my vision.

"I love you," I whispered before everything went dark.



Willow

“Are you really gonna sleep another whole day? You already missed like six meals yesterday. You gotta be starving.”

My lips twitched before I could pull my heavy eyelids open. “For once in my life, I don’t feel hungry,” I croaked, my voice cracking like I hadn’t used it in weeks.

Declan was quiet for a moment before he spoke again. “I’ll call the doctor back in. Something must be wrong.”

I giggled, but it was cut short when his words finally sunk in. “Doctor?”

Declan sighed as he took a seat next to me and I finally got my lids open to look at him.

“Yeah. We’ve been at the Nashville pack doctor’s house since yesterday morning. Mason sent a car to pick us up.”

I frowned as I let that information swirl around my head. It ticked at something in the back of my mind, but I couldn’t quite remember what.

With a look down at myself, I found a hospital gown and a thin white sheet pulled up to my waist. The room I was in looked like a hospital, but I couldn’t remember how I got here.

I shook my head as I turned back to Declan. “Pick us up from where?”

Declan licked his lips as he watched me carefully. “From near the crash site.”

“Crash?” I asked, irritation lining my voice as I tried to make this all make sense.

He sighed as he grabbed my hands and held them tight. “Yes. You were shot last night by a fan of mine, and after we both jumped off the bus she’d stolen, she crashed it. I was able to get us hidden in the woods before the police came, and I passed out, too.”

I searched his face and body for injury but couldn’t find any. “Why did you pass out? Were you hurt too?”

Declan shook his head as he squeezed my fingers tighter. “It was the fated mates’ connection,” he said, his voice deep with emotion. “You were dying, and so was I.”

My eyes filled with tears as I realized how close we’d both come to death.

The memories from that night and the next morning on the bus slowly resurfaced, filling in the gaps in my memory and making this all make sense. I ripped the sheet off my legs and found my left thigh wrapped in a bandage.

“The doctor said she nicked an artery. That’s why you were bleeding so much,” he explained.

I looked back up at him as I heard his voice waver.

“You almost bled out,” he added, his words no louder than a whisper.

It was my turn to squeeze his fingers until he clutched me back.

“How did she find us on the bus?” I asked the question that had run through my head over and over since the moment Tammie woke me up with a gun pointed to my forehead.

Declan’s teeth ground together so hard his jaw ticked. “The P.I. searched our hotel room. Turns out she bugged the food cart she delivered to our room that night. She heard we were leaving and where we were going.”

My stomach twisted as I realized how deep this really went. And how far this woman had been willing to go just to get to Declan.

“But don’t worry,” he rushed to add, almost as if he sensed the direction my thoughts had taken. “I’ve hired a full-time security detail for us from now on. Nothing like this will *ever* happen again,” he promised.

I stared into his eyes and wondered if he could really keep an oath like that. Not that it mattered. I knew I wasn’t strong enough to be without him, and this is what his life was like. I’d just have to learn to adjust.

Declan shook his head like he could physically remove those thoughts. “And the doctor said you could leave here as soon as you woke up, and that you’ll probably only need crutches for a couple days.”

“Crutches?” I whined.

Declan chuckled. “Or I could just carry you everywhere you wanna go.”

My heart thumped to life at his offer. It didn't matter that I'd almost died yesterday. It didn't matter that my leg ached so bad I was ready to cut it off.

When Declan looked at me with that smile, there was no stopping my reaction to him. There was no denying this connection we had.

A smile pulled at my lips. "So, you'll be like my own personal chairlift?"

Declan grinned as he bent low to whisper in my ear. "You can ride me anytime you want, baby."

My heart beat wildly as a breathy giggle burst out of me. "Save that energy for when I can use all my limbs again."

Declan kissed my cheek before nuzzling his nose into the crook of my neck and taking a deep breath. "I'll wait as long as it takes, gorgeous."

Epilogue

Willow

Shut the fuck up! Is that Roman Shaw walking across our front lawn?" Colton whispered, his words ending with a high-pitched squeal.

I rolled my eyes, but Declan clapped him on the shoulder and led him toward the front of the house. "Come on. I'll introduce you."

Colton squeaked again as Declan pulled open the door to reveal a handful of muscled, tattooed, and leather-clad werewolves. My brother was officially in all his glory.

"Oh my god," he gasped.

Declan chuckled and waved at the large blond man scowling at the front of the group. "This is Roman, you've already met Theo, and in the back are Walker and Sawyer." He turned toward his band and smiled. "Thanks for coming, guys."

Roman grunted before he let himself into the house. "Just show me where the shit is so we can get this over with."

I'd spent a little time with the surly lead singer this past week while I'd recovered from the bullet wound in my leg, so I knew by now to ignore his attitude. Everyone else did.

"My room is at the end of this hall," I said with a point. "The boxes are stacked up along the wall."

Roman nodded before he stalked past me.

"Thank you," I called after him, but all I got was a wave of his inked hand.

Theo was next, and he gave me a pat on the back as he passed. Walker and Sawyer were close behind him, and each one of them chose to rub my already messy hair as they followed the others down the hall.

I turned to give Declan an exasperated look, but he just laughed.

"I can't believe they all touched you," my brother said softly from the other side of the room.

"It's getting creepy, Colt," I said as I hurried to open the front door again for Roman.

He stormed past with a stack of boxes, and I watched from the stoop as he walked up the ramp to our little moving truck and set them down. Theo, Sawyer, and Walker were next and with Declan and Colton's help, soon my entire bedroom was completely packed and loaded onto the truck.

I stood in the middle of the empty space and felt a suspicious lump forming in the back of my throat. Declan,

always quick to sense my emotions, was there seconds later to wrap an arm around my shoulders.

“Hey, gorgeous, what’s up?”

I sniffed back the tears and turned toward him. “I didn’t think I’d be sad about leaving.”

He squeezed me tighter and kissed the top of my head. “We don’t have to go anywhere if you don’t want. I can have them unload the truck right now.”

“*Fuck that!*” Roman yelled from the other side of the house, and I chuckled.

“No,” I said with a shake of my head. “I’ve wanted to get out of Bell Buckle for as long as I can remember. This town is so small you can’t do anything without everyone knowing, and I’m tired of it,” I seethed. “I’m sick of being the poor girl whose dad gambled away their money and left the family with a mountain of debt before he died.”

Declan was quiet as I struggled to put into words the feelings I’d had for so long.

“I just want to be anonymous,” I finally said. “I want a fresh start. I want to be the one to decide what I’m known for.”

He smiled as he leaned down to nuzzle my neck. “You mean like the new graphic illustrator for the biggest video game developer in the country?”

I couldn’t help the grin that spread across my face next. “Yeah. Exactly like that.”

Declan laughed as he kissed my head again and led me out of my empty childhood bedroom. The band was waiting for us in the living room, some looking more annoyed than others at my brother's incessant questions.

"Okay, I think we're good," I said to them, eliciting a few sighs of relief.

"Thank fuck," Roman said as he stormed toward the door.

He flung it open to reveal their manager walking up the driveway toward us. "Hey guys, glad I caught you."

"That makes one of us," Roman muttered before he stepped back into the house.

Mason ignored him like always as he came to a stop just inside the door. "I've got some news on the bus situation."

My heart raced, and my belly clenched even at the mention of it. I'd spent the scariest hour of my life on that damn thing.

"Unfortunately, it's totaled," Mason announced.

I breathed a small sigh of relief and even felt Declan relax next to me.

"We also lost all the equipment stored on board," Mason continued.

"Sounds like a conversation for you to have with the insurance company and not us," Roman grumbled as he pushed off the wall he'd been leaning against. "Can I go?"

Mason turned to glare at the singer. "I'm not done."

Roman rolled his eyes but knew better than to ask to leave again.

“Due to the time it’s going to take to get a new bus ready and rescheduling issues, we’re going to have to push the tour back six months.”

The room was silent for a moment before Roman broke it. “Okay. Now can I go?”

“Actually,” Declan spoke up from next to me. “This is probably a good time for me to speak up, too.”

Roman sighed loudly. “What is it now?”

Declan swallowed hard before he looked down at me. I shook my head, letting him know for the dozenth time that he didn’t have to do this, but like always, he kissed me and did it, anyway.

“I need to take a step away from the band.”

This time, the silence was so loaded, it felt like it would explode at any minute.

“What does that mean?” Sawyer finally spoke up.

“I just... need some time,” Declan finished. “*We* need some time,” he added as he squeezed my shoulders again. “We’re gonna take a few months and get settled in Chicago before we decide anything else.”

“So, what?” Theo said as he pushed his way to the front of the group. “You’re fucking quitting?”

Declan let me go as he walked toward his best friend. “No. I’m not quitting. I just need some time away from it all, so I can get my head on straight again. I plan on coming back. I *want* to come back.”

Theo’s hazel eyes studied Declan for a long time before he finally sighed. “I get it, brother,” he said, his voice just a rumble. He shook his head and pulled him into his arms. “You do what you need to do.”

My eyes filled with tears as I watched my mate give up the thing he loved most. I’d tried to tell him that exact sentiment many times, but his response was always the same.

You’re the thing I love most.

We said our goodbyes to Mason and the band before it was time for my family. Mom’s eyes were watery as she pulled me into an extra strong hug.

“I’m gonna have Colton drive me up there as soon as you two are settled,” she promised, as she kissed my cheek and let me go.

“I can’t wait, Mama,” I said with a sniff as I turned toward my brother.

“Take care of him,” he said as he engulfed me in a giant hug.

I laughed as I embraced him back. “Aren’t you supposed to be telling *him* to take care of *me*?”

Colton shrugged as he pulled away with a smile. “I already know he’ll take care of you.”

The tears finally fell as I gave them both one last hug and let Declan lead me out of the house. We climbed into the truck, and he messed with the settings while I dried my eyes.

I took a deep breath and let it out slowly before turning to him. “Okay. I’m ready.”

Declan smiled wide as he grabbed my hand. “Let’s go.”

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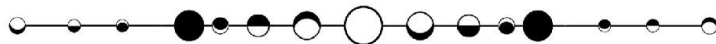
Trying

About the Author

Heather MacKinnon is a USA Today Bestselling Romance Author living in North Carolina with her husband, adorable son, and three trouble making dogs. She grew up on Long Island and spent her young adult years in various states in New England. This led to her subsequent addiction to Dunkin' Donuts lattes and her gratuitous use of the word "wicked". After a lifetime of enjoying other people's words, she decided to write down some of her own. You can get up-to-date information about Heather MacKinnon's books at

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