



*The Hunted*

**SURROGATE**

Aria Ray & Sarina Hart

The Hunted Surrogate  
*Griffin Security & Protection, Book 1*  
Aria Ray

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## About the Book

**Willow would do anything to save her sister—even carrying someone else's child.**

The surrogacy was supposed to pay for Ivy's surgery and get them out of poverty. But then, the baby's parents are killed in an explosion and her world is blown to pieces.

As the killer sets a target on her, Willow realizes there's only one person she can turn to: Shane, a friend of the baby's father who runs a security firm.

Shane's job as the head of Griffin Security is to keep his clients safe - no strings attached. However, when his former commander and his wife are killed in an explosion, things become personal.

Tom Jenkins once saved his life. The least Shane can do is make sure his unborn baby remains unharmed – and the woman who's carrying it.

Shane vows to bring the killer to justice, but protecting Willow proves more difficult than he anticipated. The terribly stubborn woman is used to taking care of herself and her small family and challenges his every decision. Worse, she is so stunningly beautiful that keeping the line between business and pleasure soon becomes impossible.

When the danger closes in, can he set his feelings aside and keep Willow out of harm's way, or will it be the first time he fails his job?

The next book in the *Griffin Security & Protection* series is [\*\*"The Protected Secret"\*\*](#), Zac's story.

# Chapter One

## *Willow*

“Willow, you are positively glowing!” Ella Jenkins spotted me first as I paced outside the medical center. She looked as elegant as always in her crisp slacks, silk button down shirt and pointed black pumps. “Wow, I just can’t believe it.”

I smiled as she approached. Her blonde hair, a little darker than mine, was swept back in one of those elegant yet messy buns, which I could never in my life figure out how to achieve no matter how many tutorials I watched. I swear she always looked like she’d just stepped off the pages of a fashion magazine. Even though she was head chef at one of the most prominent restaurants in Seattle, she always looked more like a socialite.

“I’m not sure if that glow is pregnancy or perspiration, or a little of both.” After months of back and forth between me, the surrogacy agency, and the Jenkinses, we’d finally made it to the implantation stage and now I was carrying their baby.

Ella laughed, as I’d meant her to, and greeted me with a tight hug. “Seriously, you look beautiful and I’m totally jealous. May I?” she asked hesitantly, as her hand hovered over my still flat stomach.

“Sure. There’s nothing to feel yet, but be my guest.” Her excitement over this baby was palpable, and frankly contagious. I couldn’t help the way my lips pulled into a bigger smile at her expression.

She put her hand to my belly and looked up at me with something like reverence in her blue eyes. “How does it feel?”

“So far it just feels like a mild sickness,” I teased, but when her expression turned to concern I quickly continued, “but that’s to be expected.” Mostly it was nausea and tender nipples



and exhaustion, but that was why they were paying me so well. “Hello, Tom.”

“Willow.” Her husband gave me a nod as he approached. He was always polite yet aloof, and that was just fine with me. The surrogacy agency had warned me to follow the family’s lead when it came to forming attachments, and I just assumed he felt some kind of way about needing someone like me to help him grow his family. Whether he liked me or not he was over the moon in love with his wife, which meant this baby would have a good life, at least a better life than I ever had. “How are you?”

“I’m good, thanks for asking.” But he was already looking away before I even finished talking, and I wondered why he even bothered faking pleasantries as I turned back to Ella. “Should we go up?”

“Yes! I’m so excited I couldn’t eat a thing this morning,” she squealed, and took my arm, guiding me into the medical center towards the bank of elevators. “I never made it to this stage of any of my pregnancies, even with IVF. Thank you so much for this, Willow.”

I forced my smile to widen again for her. “I’m glad you get to be here for this.”

“Oh, I wouldn’t miss it for the world. My sous chef can handle the morning duties without me.” She threw me an excited look as we stepped inside the elevator. “I know you’re putting your whole life on hold to help, but this is life changing for us. I could never thank you enough.”

As Tom looked around the empty lobby before stepping onto the elevator, I clenched and released my fingers at my side, not wanting to show either of them any hint of remorse. The truth was, I *had* put my life on hold for this, shelved my own dreams of becoming a chef like Ella, because I needed the money. Badly.

“Not at all,” I said lightly as the doors shut before us. “I’ll take this time to get insider information from you so I’ll be ahead of the curve when I head back to culinary school.” At least that was what I told myself. It was what I hoped, anyway.

But I needed the money to pay for my sister's hospital bills. My career could wait.

“As soon as your body is ready to get back to work, come see me at Throwback and I'll find a place for you.”

Throwback was one of the best gourmet restaurants in all of Seattle, and it would be amazing if that actually happened. I didn't put my hopes on it, though. “I appreciate the offer, but let's get through this ultrasound first.” It was the first of many doctor's visits to come in the next thirty-three weeks.

“Ah, Willow, you don't know how giddy I am right now!” Ella exclaimed, grabbing my fingers for a quick squeeze as the elevator doors opened. “With your blonde hair and blue eyes and our matching complexions this baby will look like it could be your niece. You'll be like family! An unofficial aunt!”

I knew that this was just her emotions bubbling out, but the sentiment was lovely and I let myself smile at the idea as we walked.

Inside the doctor's office we were led straight to an exam room. My heart raced against my chest and I sucked in several deep breaths and let them out slowly as I sat on the exam chair. The room was nicer than any gynecologist's office I'd ever been in. It was almost luxurious, with plush chairs and a flat screen television mounted on the wall instead of one of those wheelie carts with the bubble screen.

“Fancy, right?” Ella asked, as if reading my mind.

“Yeah, a little bit.”

She laughed. “It's totally outrageous, I know, but this is the best doctor in the city and we're all lucky she had room in her schedule for one new patient. You.”

*No pressure*, I told myself. This was only Tom and Ella's future, their second to last shot at becoming biological parents, and it was up to me to stay healthy enough to carry this baby to term. Their future happiness, as well my sister's life, depended on it.

“Lucky us, then.”

The exam door opened and Dr. Samuels walked in with a big smile for all of us. “Good morning, good morning! How are we all feeling?” He looked at Tom and Ella first, before he turned a sympathetic gaze my way.

“I’m good. Nauseous and tired, but I’ve read that’s normal.”

“At this stage it is completely normal, but as the first trimester progresses, those feelings should lessen and hopefully disappear altogether. Any dizziness?”

“None.”

From the moment we found out the second implantation was successful, I’d made an effort to eat every few hours to avoid dizziness and anything beyond normal pregnancy nausea. This was too important.

“Well then, let’s meet the star of show, shall we?” I held my breath as Dr. Samuels washed his hands and slipped on a pair of gloves. He waved a hand in front of the television monitor and it flickered to life, loading up while he slipped a plastic bag over a large white wand and slathered it with gel. “This won’t hurt at all, but it will be a tad cold.”

I lifted my shirt high up my stomach. “Okay.”

From the moment the gel rolled over my belly, everything became a blur. A loud *glug-glug* sound bounced off the exam room walls and a quiet gasp fell from Ella’s lips.

“Was that... Is that...” She was so overcome with emotion she couldn’t finish the thought.

Dr. Samuels offered a nod and a smile. “That is the baby’s heartbeat.” He pointed to the flickering black spot on the monitor. “That is a strong and sturdy heartbeat. Your little one is just fine.” He jotted down a few notes. “Measurements indicate the baby is, so far, developing normally. Nothing to worry about.”

Ella’s shoulders fell in relief. “Thank goodness,” she whispered with a tremor in her voice, and Tom was right there to comfort her, but he could barely look at the screen.

His silence and lack of visible excitement today made me nervous, but who knew the worries and stresses a man like him had in his life? It was none of my business. My business was keeping this baby healthy and safe.

I pushed another smile onto my face and turned to the couple. “This is wonderful news, Ella. Congratulations, you’re gonna be a mommy.”

Ella stood and practically collapsed on top of me as she wrapped her arms around my shoulders and squeezed tight. “I don’t know how to thank you for this wonderful gift you’ve given us.”

I placed a gentle hand on her back and rubbed soothing circles. “We’re all winning here.” The money from carrying this baby to term would pay for Ivy’s medical treatments and help towards my portion of the household bills. She was doing me just as big a favor as I was for her. “Congrats.”

Ella cried against me for several minutes and I let her. This was a big moment for her. At forty-two years old this was close to her last chance to have a biological child. I understood that she must be feeling overwhelmed with hope right now.

“I’m sorry, Willow,” she mumbled as she pulled back, dabbing under her eyes to avoid smudging makeup as she tried to compose herself again. “It’s just, I wasn’t sure this day would ever come and here we are, listening to our child’s heartbeat.”

“Tears of joy are exactly what this moment calls for, Ella.”

“My thought exactly,” Dr. Samuels said as he removed his gloves and stood. “I’ll see you back here in four weeks, sooner if anything feels off to you. Okay?”

I agreed and the doctor left the room, Ella and Tom behind him. I was a surrogate, pregnant with another couple’s baby, and it was a surreal experience. But my sister, along with my little niece, were my only family. There was nothing I wouldn’t do for Ivy, including being a human incubator for a well-off couple who desperately wanted a child.

Pushing away fears of complications and the images of childbirth I'd been Googling just before coming here today, I stood up.

*Okay. You can do this, Willow. You have to.* A quick pep talk and I opened the door to find Ella and Tom holding one another. "Everything all right?"

"Everything's great." Ella's smile brightened as she lunged forward and hugged me again. "I'm going to go sign us up for pre-natal care and exercise and birthing classes, and baby care classes for me!"

I couldn't help but watch Tom as he watched Ella rush off excitedly, and I knew in my gut that something was wrong. He was always aloof, sure, but there was a tension around his mouth and shoulders that seemed off today. He'd shown up to other appointments with lists of questions and concerns about his role in this process and my dedication to his child's healthy growth. He'd grilled me every other time we'd met up, to be frank, but today he was quiet and subdued. He was barely even talking to Ella, and he refused all eye contact with me, which was also odd. Reserved, yes, but shy? Tom had never seemed withdrawn like that, or avoidant of my gaze as if with fear or guilt or something.

"Tom? I don't want to pry, but is something wrong?" I couldn't help but ask, and then held my breath and waited for him to tell me to mind my own damned business. It was probably just a work thing for him, or a family issue, but...

"Yes, something is very wrong." His tone was hard, and it stopped my thoughts in their tracks. Oh, God, was he mad at me? Had I done something? I *really* needed this, I couldn't have him pull me out of this now.

As anxiety flashed through my body and I tried to think of what to say, he grabbed my arm and pulled me into the hallway. Then with a furtive look around, he stepped us into the little alcove in front of a storage closet.

"Uh, Tom..."

“I’ve received some threats lately,” he said in a harsh whisper, his fingers still tight on my forearm. “They’re probably nothing but the rantings of a crazy person, but I can’t ignore the timing of this. I haven’t shared the existence or the nature of the threats with Ella because I don’t want to worry her unnecessarily.”

I swallowed past a lump in my throat. Threats? Tom was getting death threats, and I was now carrying his baby... “Should... Should I be worried?” I asked shakily, my eyes wide as I stared at him. Why would he be getting threatened? What kind of danger was he in?

“You’re carrying my baby, so I just need you to know what’s going on and to understand that you might be in danger.” I gulped so hard at this I was sure he could hear it, and my heart picked up its pace even more. His expression softened, and he finally pulled back and let go of me as if just realizing how much he was scaring me.

“You probably aren’t,” he said in a softer voice before running a hand over his eyes wearily, “and this is probably like all the other threats, but I need you to be safe. To exercise precaution in all things.”

*Like all the other threats?* I practically squeaked out the thought as I stared at him before clearing my throat. “Of course,” I said, trying to project calm that I definitely wasn’t feeling. “That was always part of our deal. I won’t do anything that will put the life of this baby in danger. You have my word.”

He flashed an appreciative smile. “I know you are a woman of your word, Willow.”

“Okay, good. So, what now?”

He produced a card from inside his sports jacket and placed it in my palm. “Keep this with you at all times.”

I looked down and frowned. *Shane Stone. CEO of Griffin Security and Protection.* “I can’t afford personal security, Tom, not even with what you’re paying me.”

“If anything feels off, call him. If anything happens to me or Ella, call him. Don’t worry about expenses. Got it?”

I nodded faster than I’ve ever nodded in my life. “Yes. I understand.”

“Thank you. And don’t say anything to Ella. Please.”

“I won’t,” I told him.

When we returned to the waiting area Ella was just coming back too. She was enthusiastic as she told me about everything she had just accomplished while she was gone.

“That’s awesome, Ella,” I told her. “But right now I need to go and meet my sister, all right? Why don’t you go ahead and email me all the details and when I get home I’ll put everything into my calendar?”

With a quick wave I took that chance to rush from the medical center out to the car lot just as my sister pulled into a parking spot. I paced up to them.

Her daughter Lottie was sitting in her car seat waving her little arms and grinning toothily at me as if we hadn’t just seen each other a few hours ago. It immediately made me feel better seeing her face.

“Hey, Auntie Will!”

“Hi, baby girl!” I replied, crossing my eyes at her through the car window before yanking open the front door.

“So, how did it go?” Ivy looked pale as I hopped into the passenger seat beside her, but she was always pale these days. The smile on her face looked relaxed, and that was a good sign.

As soon as my heart stopped galloping in my chest, I managed to return her expression. “Good. The baby has a strong heartbeat and normal development. The payments will be automatically deposited each month.”

Her frail shoulders sank in relief. “I’m sorry you have to do this to help me.”

“Don’t be. I’d do a hell of a lot more for you, Ivy, you know that.”

“I know, and I love you for it, even if it all feels wrong.” A flash of regret showed but Ivy covered it with a smile. “I found fresh cherries at the farmer’s market on sale because they’re a little bruised. And lamb that expires tomorrow, plus some other great finds so you can work your culinary magic. I’ll even help without messing things up this time.”

My forced smile faded into a real expression of happiness at her enthusiasm today. It wasn’t every day she had the energy to be happy anymore. “Sounds like we’ll be having a feast tonight.”

“I’mma help too!” Lottie shouted from the backseat, and I turned to face her, trying my hardest to frown instead of grin at her chubby cheeks.

“No knives,” I told her sternly, or as sternly as I could manage while my lips twitched trying to get into a smile as she stuck her tongue out. “You can be my sous chef.”

As we pulled out and headed home, I let the sound of my niece’s half-incoherent little girl chatter distract me from Tom’s warning. After all, he said it was probably nothing...



# Chapter Two

## *Shane*

“That’s not how it works, Dewey.” Shoving a hand into the pocket of my suit pants, I stopped outside the four-story office building I’d purchased in San Francisco the moment my company, Griffin Security & Protection Services, was in the black. I sighed and looked up at the sky, trying to keep my patience as I talked to one of the newest members of my team. “If you find the location of a security threat, we reassess and put our foot down or provide a larger security team.” Owning my own building meant I could make upgrades without anyone’s permission, which was exactly what I did. I used the biometric scanner to enter before crossing the gleaming black-and-white marble floor. “Does the client require a bigger team?”

“No.” Dewey mumbled, and my stomach clenched because I knew this wasn’t the right job for him, but my brother Adrian, the charmer of the Stone brothers, convinced me he was ready. “She doesn’t want to come off as pretentious,” he said. “But she is insisting on visiting the Louvre with everyone else. Like a *normal* person.”

I smiled at his frustrated tone. “Then tell her if she insists on going against your advice the contract is void, and come home.” Owning my own security firm was a natural career progression after leaving the SEALs, and most days I didn’t regret it. What I did sometimes regret was the difficult celebrity clients who had no regard for their safety or that of their entourage or my men. Why hire my team if they didn’t want to listen?

“Do you understand?”

“Yeah, I got it. If you don’t hear from me by evening, then the pop princess has probably killed me. Or died. Either way...”

“You’ll do fine, Dewey. Your job is safety, not babysitting.”

I ended the call and stepped inside the pristine stainless-steel elevator car. My office was on the fourth floor, along with my brothers’ and a large conference room for planning and client meetings. The other teams took up the second and third floors, while I rented the basement floor to a friend who owned an exclusive gym, which was the perfect supplement for the exercise room provided for all OSP employees.

It was early morning so the gym wasn’t open, and even the security guards hadn’t arrived yet. The building was quiet, just how I liked to start my day before all the chaos began.

Difficult clients, secret investigations, cybersecurity, off-book protection services...it never ended. Each day was a new challenge and a new adventure, not unlike my years in the Navy.

My office was my favorite room in the whole building. It overlooked the San Francisco Bay, which provided the perfect amount of calm when it was needed and strength when it was necessary. The floor-to-ceiling windows bathed sunlight across the room until the sky was filled with darkness, which came in handy on those increasingly long work days. I dropped down onto my oversized black leather chair and pushed up to the expansive glass desk where several large computer monitors sat, eager to provide me with a rundown of everything I missed since last night.

I clicked the button that turned my office from a dark cavernous room into a sun-filled box of warmth and efficiency. The office was neat and tidy, without any stacks of paper or clutter that made it hard to think and focus on the jobs at hand. OPS required there to be a lot of balls in the air at once, and I couldn’t afford to drop any of them. The place was as pristine as my barracks, a fact that would have made my drill sergeant and commanding officer proud.

After a quick check of my email and my daily schedule, I made my way to the company break room that served as an informal gathering spot, with all the comforts to go with it.

“Isn’t it a bit early for you to be in?” My oldest brother, Jace, turned his green eyes away from the large television mounted before several plush sofas where he sat with four others, throwing me a mischievous grin as he spoke.

“Isn’t it a bit too early for *you*?” I countered.

“Nah. My job with Senator Harrington ended about three hours ago. I was too wound up to go to bed, so I came here to watch last night’s football game.”

I turned to the four men relaxing on the sofas with him. “What’s your excuse?”

Adrian, my youngest brother, shrugged. “Jace asked me to come and keep him company since I’m his favorite brother.” He winked a hazel eye at me, and I rolled my own in response.

“You wish.”

Alec Harrington, who served with me in the SEALs, shook his currently shaggy head at me. “The Reese job starts in two hours and I came in early to get a workout in to help keep me all Zen and shit. I’ve heard the rumors about the hours he keeps.” The rockstar was known to go days without sleeping, which made keeping him safe a nightmare, especially in foreign lands.

“I hope you’re going to brush that fucking hair of yours before you start,” I told him firmly, eyeing the dirty blond mop currently falling into his gray eyes. “This company has a professional reputation to upkeep.”

Adrian snorted, before turning back to the game with a lopsided grin. “I always look good.”

Zac Prescott, who also served in the SEALs with us, lounged on the sofa beside Alec in a pair of gray sweats and a black Griffin Security t-shirt. “Alec needed a sparring partner, and I was just leaving the bed of a lovely lady friend, so I agreed.”

With his black hair and green eyes, he could easily pass as one of the Stone brothers, and has often been mistaken for one since working here. But we aren’t related; we met in training, and he’s been one of my closest friends since then.

“Alright, alright,” I mutter, turning to make myself a coffee. “You’re all here with solid reasons. Guess I can’t complain that you’re in early.”

“What are *you* doing here before security has arrived?” Jace asked me.

“Busy schedule today,” I answered nonchalantly as I pulled a mug from the cupboard and set about switching on our state of the art coffee machine. “Plus, Tom is flying in this evening, so I want to get shit done on time.” Tom Jenkins had been our commander, and had saved each of our lives many times over on missions all around the world.

“Awesome,” Zac crowed. “I haven’t seen Tom in forever.”

“Or that beautiful wife of his,” Alec added with a teasing grin. “Is Ella coming too?”

“Nope, she’s working.”

“What’s he doing in San Francisco? Isn’t his business in Seattle?” Jace, as the oldest, was suspicious of everything and everyone, sometimes even old friends.

“He has business to discuss, and a surprise for us, apparently. We’re all having dinner tonight at Les Fleurs. I sent a message to Caleb just in case he finds himself free tonight.” Caleb was our field medic and had a close relationship with Tom during our service together.

Adrian’s brows dipped in confusion. “Do I know this Tim guy?”

“His name is Tom.” I sighed at my youngest brother. “We were in the SEALs together. He saved my life a time or two, but there was one time in particular where I came closer to death than I ever have before or since.” Even the quickest version of the story got me all wound up, and I knew there was a headache in my near future. Fucking head injury caused headaches anytime my stress levels got too high, and the image of the Afghani woman that flashed in my mind was a guaranteed stressor. “Anyway, whoever wants to come is invited.”

“Count me in,” Adrian laughed. “Been trying to get into Les Fleurs for months. Can I bring a date?”

“Absolutely not,” I growled. “I’ll meet up with him for an hour to discuss business, and the reservation is at eight thirty.” I glanced down at my watch and headed back towards the door with my coffee.

“Don’t be late,” Zac shouted to my back as I walked out of the break room, and I rolled my eyes.

“I’m never late.”

A second later, the entire break room erupted in laughter.

“Hey, boss, got a minute?”

I smiled at Kiley, another new member in the cybersecurity department. “Sure. What’s up?”

“We have a week long job with Senator Brown starting next week, and there are some things he hasn’t shared with us.”

“Such as?”

She sighed, pushing messy hair out of her face as she took a step closer to show me her tablet’s screen. “Looks like the danger he’s in is his own fault.”

“We still have to protect him, Kiley, that’s the job.”

“I know. What I’m saying is that two team members might not be enough. He’s pissed off locals who have cartel ties. This isn’t just some labor dispute.”

“Shit.” I resisted the urge to roll my eyes directly at her, since this wasn’t her fault, and ran a hand through my mid-cropped hair. A black strand fell immediately back onto my forehead, which I puffed away with annoyance. Things could never just be easy, could they? “Thanks for letting me know. I’ll get back to you.”

I strode back to my desk and spent the morning. I always did my due diligence, but like I’d told Kiley, our job was to keep the client safe whether it was a celebrity, diplomat, or even a damned warlord. But Brown’s lie could cost the lives of my people, and that shit wouldn’t stand. Period.

I was certain he must have known the caliber of people he pissed off, and downplayed it in an attempt to lower costs. But I didn't care about his rumored emptying bank accounts, I was not risking my people's safety for his coin. He could either pay for more backup for the safety of all of us, or he could find another team.

By the time the end of the day arrived I was wound up tight and my head had started to throb. I kicked off my shoes and shrugged out of my jacket for a few stretches the doctor said would help stop a headache in its tracks, followed by a breathing exercise. It worked enough to stop my vision from blurring and my stomach from turning, so I considered it a win.

Tom would be there soon, and a relaxing evening with an old friend would help get rid of thoughts of the Afghani woman that wouldn't stop invading my brain. That day had been an entire shit show and thinking about it never ended well.

I glanced down at my watch and frowned.

Seven forty-five. He was supposed to arrive at the office by seven-thirty.

Tom was late. Tom was never late.

With a frown, I dialed his number and got sent immediately to voicemail. If the phone was still off, maybe his flight was delayed? But after scanning my email for his flight info, worry kicked in again. The flight was on time and had landed more than an hour ago, and still there was no word from Tom.

I knew it would probably be fruitless, but I called the airline to see if I could find any information on Tom or his flight. Forty minutes later, I still had fucking nothing.

"What?" I barked into the phone when it rang in my hand.

"Shit, man, what's up?" Zac asked. "We're outside the venue with no sight of you. It's eight-twenty, just a few minutes before the booking, and you're normally early. Alec and I were wondering if you guys blew us off."

"No," I sighed. "Tom isn't here yet."

“What? That’s not like him.”

I ran a hand through my hair again, trying to soften my frown so it wouldn’t aggravate the pounding in my skull. “Yeah, I know. I’m looking into it. Go ahead and order without us, I’ll keep you posted.”

“Call if you need anything. Tom is important to us too.”

“Of course.” I ended the call and stared blankly into space as my mind whirled with possibilities. I scrolled through my phone and called Ella. Chances were she wouldn’t answer the phone during dinner service, but it was worth a try.

*You’ve reached Ella Jenkins, please leave a message.*

“Ella, it’s me, Shane. Tom was supposed to be here over an hour ago. Call me back when you get this.” I ended the call more worried than before.

My head throbbed and I stood, pacing the length of my office to get my blood flowing.

Grabbing my phone from my pocket again, I dialed Zac back.

“Shane?”

“Listen,” I said, doing my best not to snap, “I’m not coming to dinner. I’ll wait for Tom here, see if I can find anything that explains what happened to him.”

“Oh.” Zac’s voice mirrored the worry that was beginning to build through me. “Shit. Is it that bad?”

“I don’t know,” I said, stopping before my desk. “I don’t know, Zac, but I’ve got a shit feeling about this.”

“Yeah,” he replied. “Alright. Keep us posted.”

“Sure.”

I hung up, and sat heavily before my computer. I tried emailing, more calls, contacting mutual friends, even checked back with my brothers to see if he’d gone to the restaurant instead, but the mystery remained unsolved.

The phone rang just after midnight and I leapt towards it. “This is Shane.”

The other end of the call was silent for several long moments, and then I heard snuffles. Crying.

“Hello?” I repeated, hearing the sharpness in my voice but not being able to remove it.

“Oh, God! I’m sorry,” a quiet feminine voice sobbed into the phone. “Is this Shane Stone?”

“Yes, ma’am, this is Shane.” I frowned at the phone and waited for the woman to get her emotions under control. Another minute passed and she was still crying. “Miss? What can I do for you?” The woman knew my name, but I wasn’t exactly a private figure thanks to the success of OSP.

Another heartbreaking sob escaped before I heard several deep inhaleds and exhaleds. “Yes, I’m sorry. My name is Willow, and I am the surrogate for Tom and Ella Jenkins. You served with Tom?”

“I did.” This conversation wasn’t just weird, it was worrisome. “What can I help you with, Willow?”

“Well,” she said, on the verge of tears again, “there was an explosion at their house here in Seattle on Bridgeview Lane. Tom and Ella were both inside and th-th-they didn’t make it.” Another cry tore from the woman. “TV,” she managed to get out around her sobs. “I was there. I was just about to enter when... when...”

Immediately, I turned to face the bank of screens across one of my walls and turned one on. The cable news station had a local reporter on the ground and my heart sank at the sight of the Bridgeview Lane house Jace and I had made sure was safe and secure. I couldn’t say anything. A numbness swept over me, enough to dull even the feeling of pain in my head momentarily.

Tom and Ella. Dead.

*What the fuck?*



Willows tears were still present, but with a shaky voice she managed to speak again. “I... I don’t think this was an accident.”

At those words I sat up straight and put the call on speaker so I could pull up some info on the computer. “Why do you say that, Willow?” I used her name to keep her calm and engaged in the conversation.

“Because,” she sighed and sucked in another breath, “at the first ultrasound a few days ago, Tom was behaving strangely. Not as involved and focused as he has been throughout this process. When the appointment was over, he pulled me aside and gave me your business card. He was worried, and... and...” She started crying again.

I called on my patience and reminded myself that this woman was a civilian, apparently pregnant, and not used to the realities of this level of violence.

“Tom said I should call you if anything happened to him. He’d been receiving threats and he hid it from Ella because he wanted her to be happy they were finally going to have the family they always wanted.”

“Dammit,” I whispered, not able to hold it in. Tom and Ella had gone through more miscarriages than any couple should be able to endure. Were they really so close to having their dreams come true?

*Well, not anymore. Jesus.*

“I wasn’t going to call you because, I mean, I’m nobody, right? But then I went home and a brick flew through my window with the words ‘You are next’ written on it! I don’t know what to do. It looked like there was blood on it, but I didn’t look at it long enough to be sure.” A nervous laugh escaped but I knew it was an attempt to cover her fear in front of a stranger. “I know you don’t know me, and I can’t pay you, and you probably don’t trust me, but...but I think I need help, and Tom said you were the one to help me.” She sobbed again. “I can’t believe they’re gone! They were wonderful people,” she cried.

“Willow, listen to me.” I slipped into my shoes, grabbed my keys, and left my office as I formed a to-do list in my head. “Call the police. Tell them what you’ve just told me and find somewhere safe to stay.”

She sighed. “I will call the police, but Mr. Stone, you don’t understand, my sister and I share a home with her three-year-old daughter. I’m not the only one in danger here.”

Shit and double shit. “Are they home?”

“Thankfully, no. Lottie had a sleepover but she got fussy and wouldn’t sleep so the parents called Ivy. She’s just on her way to pick her up now. But she’ll be home any minute, I’m sure.”

I got to the elevator and rode it down to the lobby as we spoke. “Tell her to take her daughter somewhere safe. I need you to go somewhere else too. Call a friend, a parent, wake someone up, I don’t care. Just stay away from your house.”

Her breathing changed and I knew my orders had distracted her just enough to mobilize her into action. “And then what?”

“Text me your location and I’ll see you in about two hours.” I ended the call abruptly, possibly too abruptly given her emotional state, but it was done. I dialed Finn first.

“Shane,” he said with a smile in his tone. “This is a fine surprise. How are ya?”

“Not good. I can’t explain now but I need one of your jets.” Finn had served with us and became a billionaire after leaving the Navy.

“Jeez, alright. You don’t have to ask. The San Francisco jet is at your disposal whenever you need it. Can I help?”

“Not sure yet. I’ll let you know.” I ended the call, and immediately dialed Zac.

“Yo, Shane. Did you get ahold of Tom yet? Alec and I moved from the restaurant into the bar, but it’s been hours since we heard from you.”

“Tom’s dead, and so is Ella.”

Absolute silence followed my statement.

“There was an explosion at their house.” It was surreal to even say those fucking words, but somehow I’d gotten them past my lips. “I’m headed to Seattle right now on Finn’s jet. Put together a team and meet me there ASAP.”

“On it,” Zac said, his voice faint with shock, but sturdy and reliable. I heard him snap his fingers at Alec. “From your reaction I’m guessing this isn’t an accident?”

“Nope. And it’s worse, their surrogate called me. She’s pregnant and worried. Tom told her to call me if anything happened to him.”

“He had a surrogate? Shit. We’ll catch the next commercial flight out. I’ll let you know our ETA as soon as it’s booked.”

My shoulders relaxed but I still couldn’t get the reality of the situation out of my head. Tom Jenkins was dead, in all likelihood murdered.

It was up to me and my guys to figure it out.

# Chapter Three

## *Willow*

“How do you know we can trust this Shane guy?” Ivy whispered as we hid out in the basement of the small three-bedroom house we rented, careful not to wake Lottie in Ivy’s arms. “I mean, what if *he’s* the killer?”

“Ivy,” I snapped. “Right now, Shane is my only hope, and he is who Tom trusted to keep me and his baby safe. What choice do I have? The police barely asked any questions when they responded to my call, and since this neighborhood isn’t filled with the rich and powerful, they don’t give a damn about us.” I sighed as my frustration grew. “They wouldn’t even assign a patrol unit to watch the house. Just said someone would swing by once in a while to make sure the streets were clear.”

My disdain was on full display over the useless cops I’d only called at Shane’s request. But as far as going somewhere else until he arrived, we hadn’t been able to do that. There was really nowhere else to go, so we just decided to dig in and hold down the fort.

Was it a bit cowardly when I decided not to text the guy and let him know? Well, maybe, but I’d heard that cell phone use during a flight might cause trouble, and the last thing I wanted to do was make my salvation crash before he ever managed to arrive.

“But, Willow,” she insisted. “You don’t know what kind of things Tom was into or who could be involved.”

“I am aware of that, Ivy, but I doubt he would have told me to go to Shane if he didn’t trust him.” It wouldn’t make sense to send me toward the danger, and Shane’s reaction told me he was genuinely shocked by the news. “Look, my one concession to safety was to hide down here with you and Lottie and Cornflake.” My ginger cat was curled up on the air

mattress with Lottie, keeping her safe since she could sense the tension in the air. “This is a risk, staying here at all, but one I had to take. What if you and Lottie had been home when that brick came through the window? What if they went after you, thinking you were the surrogate? As much as I wish we had the luxury of *not* trusting Shane, we have to. He’ll be here in a couple of hours.”

I hoped.

My sister’s shoulders sank in defeat and she nodded her acquiescence. “Well, since we’re down here in the dark with nothing but water and granola for sustenance, let’s Google this Shane Stone and see what we can find.”

“Go right ahead, but I did that the day Tom gave me his card.” And the man was handsome and successful, an impressive combination.

Ivy looked up. “What? When?” she hissed quietly. “You didn’t say anything!”

“I didn’t want to worry you.” Ivy and I didn’t keep secrets from one another, but this was different. It just...hadn’t felt real. And Tom had said he had crazy people sending him death threats on the regular? Just what was this man into? I shook these thoughts from my head and turned back to Ivy. “He opened Griffin Security and Protection Services eight years ago, fresh from his honorable discharge from the Navy SEALs.”

“A SEAL? Holy hell!”

I managed a brief smile at Ivy’s reaction and her love of military men. “He was injured on his last mission, but not so much that he couldn’t start a successful security company that protects world leaders, celebrities, and the rich and powerful. His company does it all, cybersecurity, investigations, home and office security, pretty much anything you need to stay safe. If you can afford him.”

“Wow. With all you know, maybe there’s a spot for you on his team,” she joked.

I rolled my eyes. “I’m carrying the baby of a man who was being threatened, I needed to know everything I could.”

“Even though you didn’t think you were really in danger?”

“Not until the explosion.” With Ella and Tom gone, it was up to me to keep their baby safe. Not to mention, myself. It was all I could do now.

“Okay, fine, we’ll trust this—*holy shit, this is him?*” Lottie stirred in her arms, and Ivy immediately lowered her voice and brought the phone up around her daughter’s head so she could see better. “He’s gorgeous, Will.” Ivy scrolled her thumb across the phone, and her eyebrows rose even higher. “And these are his brothers? His whole team is hot. This family has some amazing genes.”

“And all three of them were in the Navy. The cops don’t care about people in this neighborhood, so we have to hope Shane cares about this baby enough to keep us safe.”

“What if he tells you to get rid of the baby?” Ivy’s voice was shaky and scared, and I knew what she was thinking.

“He won’t,” I replied immediately, not even knowing why or where this sudden surge of protectiveness had even come from. But for some reason, my hand immediately flattened protectively over my stomach, as if this was *my* kid somehow.

Ivy opened her mouth, probably to ask another question I didn’t have a concrete answer for right now, but the floor above us squeaked and she clapped a hand over her mouth.

I put a finger to my lips and motioned for her to stay put.

Ivy shook her head and shuffled back towards the shelving unit against the wall beneath the small square basement windows. Putting Lottie down, she grabbed two things I couldn’t see in the darkness before standing and returning to me. “You take Dad’s old rifle, since you’ve always been a better shot,” she whispered.

I snorted quietly. “Except I haven’t shot a gun in years.”

“Better than me.” She smacked the bat against her palm with her gaze fixed on the rifle. “At least dad will finally have

come through for us in some way.”

Our absent father was the last thing I wanted to think about now, with possible intruders in our home. I looked up at the ceiling as the floor squeaked down the hall where the bedrooms were located. I could hear the intruder opening each door and retracing their steps to the front of the house. I let out a breath when they avoided the kitchen, because it meant they wouldn't find the door to the basement.

Soon enough, the front door closed and Ivy and I watched through the small window as a single pair of feet ran away into the night. “That was close.”

“Too close,” Ivy agreed.

Even though Ivy was the older sister, I'd been watching out for her since we were kids. At sixteen years old, Ivy was diagnosed with Long QT Syndrome, which meant she had to worry about having a faulty heart on top of taking care of me after our mother died in an auto accident. She was the caregiver and I was the bossy one, it was a combination that worked well for us.

“There's been too much excitement today, Ivy. You need to get some rest. Please.”

She agreed, and I spent the rest of the wait staying alert for any sign of danger while she laid on the bed. Ivy and I had fought too hard to die at the hands of some unknown killer. We survived our father's abandonment, our mother's alcoholism and untimely death, and years of neglect with our junkie aunt, Tammy. This couldn't be how things ended.

I wouldn't let it be.

By the time the first rays of sun began to brighten the sky, I was exhausted and worried, a nervous wreck. My heart thudded against my chest, and even though I knew it wasn't good for the baby, I couldn't ease my worry.

“Hey, why didn't you wake me?” Ivy asked when she woke up to the pale light filtering into the basement.

“You looked peaceful, and I couldn't sleep anyway. That Shane guy should have called me by now.” I pushed off the

sofa pillow I sat on and stood, stretching my stiff muscles. “I’m going upstairs to check things out.”

“Not alone, you’re not.”

“I am. You have to think about Lottie. There’s no way we can leave her alone. Stay here. I’ll be back.”

Ivy folded her arms to let me know she was unhappy with my bossy ways. “Fine. But call out so I know you’re all right.”

“Fine.”

“And take the rifle.”

I picked up the rusty old gun and bit my bottom lip. “Hope it still works if I actually need it,” I said to myself, and slowly climbed the steps.

The kitchen was fine. The living room and the bedrooms were untouched, which should have made me feel better, but it only confirmed that it wasn’t a random thief, but that the intruder was probably looking for me. To kill the baby, presumably. Nothing in the house had been touched, and when I went back to the kitchen, I froze.

He was back.

A tall man in sunglasses and a baseball cap crept across the backyard like he wanted to go unnoticed, which immediately put me on edge. I kept an eye on the stranger as he stopped at the lone window in the basement that faced the backyard. He had to crouch down low to see inside, and I took advantage of his attempt to move quietly and opened the kitchen door to take aim at him. I didn’t have a shot from the angle of the steps, so I crept down slowly. A twig snapped beneath my foot and I aimed the gun. “Step away from the window and I won’t put a bullet in your brain, asshole.” My voice shook, but I would see my threat through if I needed to.

Anything for Ivy and Lottie.



# Chapter Four

## *Shane*

I heard the twig as it snapped and my years in the Navy kicked in, or maybe it was just my instinct to fight, but I stood and turned in one smooth move, gun in my hand and aimed at the threat. But it wasn't some big burly burglar or murderer. It was a petite, almost frail-looking blond with the biggest, most terrified blue eyes I had ever seen.

"You don't want to do that, lady."

Even though her hands shook, the woman hiked the rifle up higher and aimed at my chest. Center mass. Smart and capable. "Yeah, and why is that?"

"For starters, I'm quicker and a better shot," I told her, and inched towards her.

"Stay right where you are! Who the hell are you and why are you lurking around my property?"

I removed my sunglasses and took another step forward just as the woman squeezed the trigger. Her action stopped me briefly in shock – I hadn't thought she'd actually do it until that moment. But we realized at the same time she'd forgotten to pull the hammer back. I leapt forward and grabbed the barrel of the gun and aimed it towards the ground, before she could react.

"Stop. It's me, Shane." I grabbed the gun from her and emptied the bullets. "Shane Stone."

She took a step back and frowned, and I watched in fascination as the little pulse in her throat pounded faster than a hummingbird's wings. "Take off your hat."

I did as she asked and removed my hat as she looked her fill. I did the same, taking in the wildly beautiful creature before me. Slightly above average height, she wore her curves perfectly, and I admired her shapely, sculpted legs, slim

stature, and what seemed like ample breasts beneath the oversized shirt she wore. But it was her face that was the stunner. Long blond hair hung in waves down her back and big almond-shaped blue eyes were topped with a strong brow line and long lashes. Her lips were full with a natural pout even as she eyed me with suspicion.

“Didn’t I tell you not to stay here overnight?” I murmured with a raised brow when I’d deemed the silence had stretched on long enough.

She glowered, but her shoulders relaxed at the tidbit of personal information I’d dropped. “Why were you skulking around my house?”

I didn’t want to tell her that her neighborhood was shit and I drove around for over an hour to make sure no one had followed me, and another thirty making sure no one was watching the house.

“The front door looks like it was kicked in, so I circled the place to make sure nobody got hurt or worse.”

“And the gun?”

I frowned. “I came here to protect you, Willow, after one of my closest friends was murdered. How did you think that would happen? Of course I brought a gun.”

She bit her lip. “You were close with Tom? Sorry, but... I was expecting you last night.”

It was my turn to stare at her. “Yes, and I thought I told you to go somewhere safe and then text me your location,. Yet here you are, at home, and I assume your sister and niece are hiding downstairs?”

She shook her head and looked away. “Yeah. It’s just us three. And Cornflake.”

“Cornflake?”

“My cat. I rescued her after she was abandoned by her mother.”

“And *why* are you, your sister, niece and cat still here?” I could feel my nerves begin to rise again, and it was all I could

do to keep my expression blank. Why did clients never want to *listen*?

Her hands came up to fidget with her shirt. “I didn’t have anywhere else to go.”

“No family?” I huffed as she shook her head. “No friends?”

With a bright blush she looked away, remaining silent. But that didn’t garner any emotion from me. *There are still things she could have done.*

I took a step towards her. “Miss Willow, if we’re going to work together, I need you to follow my instructions. *Always.*”

“We don’t have anywhere to go!”

“You could have gotten a hotel room,” I snapped.

“I can’t afford it,” she mumbled so quietly, I almost didn’t hear her.

“Something cheap would be fine,” I growled, but her blush only deepened, and I stopped. If she was that strapped for cash, she should have told me and I would have... I sighed and raked a hand through my hair. But of course, she doesn’t know I would have paid for a room to keep her and Tom’s child alive. She doesn’t know me.

“All right,” I say, deciding to move on. “And the break-in?”

Willow finally relaxed and gestured for me to follow her inside.

“Last night, or rather around two o’clock this morning. They didn’t take or disturb anything, so I assume they were looking for me, or rather this little bundle.” She put both hands on her belly in a protective gesture.

I tried like hell to ignore the sway of her hips as she climbed the cement stairs into the house, the shy smile she sent me over her shoulder to hide her nerves. As of right this moment, Willow was a client, which meant her safety was my first priority, not her lovely body or silky blond hair.

I didn’t hook up with clients. I kept them safe and sent them on their way.

Plain and simple.

Unfortunately.

# Chapter Five

## *Willow*

Holy shit, Shane Stone was even hotter in person than his professional photo on his website, even better than he looked in all those fancy magazine photo spreads. In print he looked big and tall, imposing even. But in person, the man somehow took up all the space. Everything about him screamed competent and lethal, something about the way he carried himself.

“Sorry about my reaction,” I mumbled as we walked in. I’d felt all out of sorts from the intruder earlier, lack of sleep, nearly shooting my protector square in the chest, and not to mention distracted by how very green Shane Stone’s eyes were.

Green and warm and bright, they pierced right through me even hidden in the shadows of his cap in the barely-there light of the early morning.

“No problem. I understand.” He looked around the kitchen, and without asking he began walking around my house. In the brighter lights indoors, I could see that he had a deep scar on his chin that ran a little along his sharp, chiseled jawline before scooping down under his chin, and I couldn’t help but wonder how he’d gotten that.

“What are you doing?”

“Making sure the house is clear,” he said, and hooked a left out of the kitchen down to the bedrooms.

“I already did that. No one is here.”

Shane grunted. “Good, but I’d like to do it myself. Put my mind at ease. No offense.”

I bit my lip. “None taken.” Of course the professional wants to do his job. I sighed helplessly and leaned against the wall

while he checked all the rooms, hugging myself around the midsection as I waited. “Find anything?”

“No, but I have a team coming and they’ll do a sweep of fingerprints to see if the intruder left anything behind.”

“Oh,” I murmur, feeling somehow more anxious at seeing him treat this house like a crime scene. “Is that necessary?”

Shane gave a curt nod. “It is. Someone blew up Tom and Ella’s house, Willow. You do get that, right?”

“Of course I do,” I snapped, but I shook my head, fear immediately replacing my burst of annoyance. “I just didn’t think it was going to require an entire team.”

Shane smiled. “You won’t be surrounded by a team, but we need to figure out who did this and why, while also keeping you safe.”

He was everything Tom promised, everything the articles written about him had said, and a hell of a lot more.

“It’s more than the police offered, so thank you.”

He gave another short nod and motioned for me to go into the living room. “I’m not surprised, given the neighborhood. Don’t worry, Willow, I will keep you safe.”

I wanted to believe him, but my dad was supposed to do all that and he’d up and left without warning and started another family. I’d learned that words meant very little when it came to men. “You’ll do your best, and I appreciate that.” It was all I had at the moment. “Here’s the brick.” I placed it on the heavy coffee table.

“The cops didn’t take it?”

I shook my head. “Said they wouldn’t get any forensics off it anyway.”

Shane grumbled under his breath and shook his head. “I’ll get my team on it. Anything else I should know?”

“You probably know more than I do,” I told him honestly.

“What did Tom say about the threats? Specifically.”

“Nothing specific. He thought they were the rantings of a crazy person. But he said he’d gotten others, more threats like this in the past that he never took seriously. Still, he did seem worried this time... I don’t know if that’s helpful.”

“It is,” he reassured me, “thank you.” He typed something into his phone, and I fidgeted with my shirt.

“So you *are* alive,” Ivy growled from the doorway that separated the living room and kitchen. “I mean, since you didn’t say anything for the last eight million minutes, I started to worry.”

I rolled my eyes. “Ivy, I’m fine. This is Shane. Shane, this is my older sister Ivy and that little munchkin hiding behind her is Lottie.”

The smile he aimed at Ivy and Lottie transformed his face from handsome to breathtaking. “Hello, ladies. How are we doing today?”

Ivy hoisted my niece on her hip and sighed. “I don’t know, how are we doing, Mr. Stone?”

He acknowledged his understanding of her unasked question. “Digging for answers. You’ll be safe. I promise.” Shane turned back to me, a serious expression replacing his smile. “We’re not done.”

“Oh,” Ivy exclaimed. “We’ll go get ready for the day and give you two some time alone.” She rushed off and I glared at Shane.

“You’re bossy.”

He smiled and again my heart sped up. “Yeah, because I’m the boss. Of Griffin, and the people I protect.”

He was a tight ass, but I needed him. “Fine. What else do you want to know?”

“How long have you known Ella and Tom? Any red flags or people who seemed to have a grudge against either or both of them?”

His question surprised me. Okay, I guess it was investigation time. “No. Most interactions were personal, not

public, so I wouldn't have had the chance to notice any of that beyond the clinic staff."

His inky brows dipped in thought. "And none of them gave you any wrong or inappropriate vibes?"

"No. What about you? You made out like you've known Tom a lot longer, so you probably know more about who would do this than I do."

Instead of arguing, Shane took his time to think about it, which surprised me. "Tom and I were in the SEALs together. He was my commander. It's been a few years since we served, but I'll look into it." His jaw clenched and I could practically see the gears as they turned in his head. "Is there a chance this brick isn't about Tom and Ella, but about you?"

I laughed. "Absolutely not. I worked at the Dollar Tree, then met Ella when I was applying for a position in her kitchen and overheard a phone call regarding another miscarriage. I offered my services, but Tom insisted we go through an agency to keep everything above board. For all of us to be protected."

Shane grinned. "That's Tom, a Boy Scout in all things."

That was the Tom I knew too, until that last day. "I haven't had a romantic relationship in a while." *Or any relationship at all, I think, since I've been too busy to do anything more than work and sleep and stress about Ivy.* "I feel confident this isn't about me directly."

"I need to make a couple of calls, but don't worry, my team is committed to getting to the bottom of this. I'm here today because of the sacrifice Tom made, and I owe him. He was more than a commander, more than a colleague, he was a brother of mine."

I feel a warmth at his earnest, heartfelt words. They made me feel like he really would do everything he could to keep me safe.

"Thank you," I whispered, feeling suddenly emotional about everything again. But I held it in, and went out the front door to make his calls.



I collapsed onto the recliner that had seen better days and sighed deeply. Shane was everything I probably needed to stay alive, but I wasn't some damsel in distress.

"All right," Shane said, his return interrupting my thoughts. "The safe house is close to here but not so close that we'll draw attention to ourselves."

"Safe house? No. Absolutely not. I can't leave Ivy or Lottie." We were a family and we relied on each other, leaned on each other to make it through the hard times. "Ivy isn't well."

"I'm sorry to hear that, but you'll have the safe house ready for you by tomorrow morning," he said.

"I'm. Not. Going."

He frowned. "What did I tell you about following my orders?"

I shook my head. "Doesn't matter. My sister and niece are also in danger and it's because of me. I can't leave them. I won't."

"I'm aware, possibly more than you. They are a liability, and could be used against you. Which is why they're safer away from you. The rest of my guys will be wheels down in Seattle any moment now."

"You are not listening to me," I growled at him, chafing at the way he so seamlessly ordered me around. "I haven't agreed to anything yet."

Shane stepped into my personal space. His mouth curled into a grimace-like smile. "That's where you're wrong. The minute you dialed my number, you agreed, and now here we are, in the middle of protecting you. What's more, *this...*" Suddenly his fingers were on my stomach, just a light brush against my skin through my shirt, before they disappeared. I felt a shiver go through me. "This is the child of someone dear to me. I am personally invested in your safety, do you understand? Do as I say, and I'll be sure you make it out of this alive. Don't fight me on this."

My instinct was to yell and scream and pummel his wide chest, but somehow I knew Shane wasn't a man who budged easily. "And if I tell you to go?"

I knew this was probably just my confused emotions bubbling up from an overwhelming night. I was taking it out on this stranger, but it was like I couldn't help my reaction as nerves and adrenaline still coursed through me.

He folded his massive biceps across his chest and stared at me. "Then everyone's lives become more difficult, you and your sister are in much greater danger, and I won't be able to protect you properly. You could die. Your sister and niece could die. Hell, even your cat. Is that what you want?"

"No," I sighed, feeling my heart jerk to my throat at his words. "But how can I accept your protection if it means putting my sister in harm's way just to save myself?"

"You won't be. It's you they're after as far as we can tell, which means with protection she's much safer with you gone. We'll move her to another safe house and keep one of my guys on her, she's safer if they can't use her to get to you. Understand?"

I didn't want to, but I did. "Yeah, I got it."

"Good. Put together a bag of necessities, and tell your sister to do the same. I'll be right here," he promised.

I rolled my eyes and marched off to pack a bag for the next few days because I hoped that's all it would take to figure this out, and because I didn't have many clothes to pack anyway. It took less than twenty minutes to put together a bag, and when I returned to the living room, I found Shane playing a board game with Lottie.

I ignored the way my heart stuttered at the sight of the big, strong former SEAL playing with my niece because it wasn't important. Sure, it was hot and sweet and sexy, but it had nothing to do with anything other than to highlight the fact that I hadn't been with a man in far too damn long.

"Ready when you are."

He turned and gave me a slow perusal that heated my body from the inside out. “Good. We’ll head out when my men arrive.”

# Chapter Six

## *Shane*

“We swung by Tom’s house on our way here since you said everything was under control,” Alec said as he stepped inside the home of the Evans sisters. “The place is crawling with law enforcement and fire department investigators. Not much we can do there until we can get clearance to poke around.”

I stepped back so that Zac could enter too. “See if Charlie can find a way to get us in,” I instructed.

Alec frowned. “You want a lawyer to get involved instead of Jace? He can just get us mysterious clearance.”

“I know,” I said with a sigh, “but whoever the fuck did this, I want him to pay. Whoever was involved or whoever ordered this, from top to bottom I want them dead or buried in a prison. So, we do things the right way first.”

“You’re the boss,” Alec said, and looked around the shabby home. “This is where the surrogate lives? To think, I could be protecting a rockstar right now.”

I sent him a pointed stare. “I’m taking her to a safe house and one of you will keep an eye on her family.”

“You?” Zac’s mild shock wasn’t all that surprising since I rarely did personal protection these days. It was too much of a headache and I had more important things to do, but there was something about Willow that called to me, and I knew I would be personally responsible for her safety. “Wow. I’ve gotta see her.”

“Someone has to do it, and you have important shit to do. This is for Tom,” I growled, offended by his question.

“Yeah, okay. Is there a safe house nearby?”

“Near enough. But not so near that we’ll be targets to other unsavory characters.”

“I can’t leave them,” Willow said as if she’d been involved in the conversation the entire time.

“You can and you will,” I growled at her. “You are the target, Willow, not Ivy or Lottie. Someone wants you dead and they won’t hesitate to hurt your family to find out where you are or to lure you back home.”

“If you’re so good at personal protection, do it from here with all of us together.” She notched her chin in defiance, and my eyes flicked down to her pouty lips before I could control myself. I wanted to kiss her as much as I wanted to throttle her.

A bark of bitter laughter escaped me. “I would love to, but this place isn’t fit to be a safe house. I don’t even think it could even take a high-tech surveillance system.”

She growled and poked me in the chest. “Don’t talk shit about my house. We can’t all afford penthouse apartments.”

“I know that, but you can’t stay here anymore. You have to see that, and insisting otherwise will only paint a target on your family’s back.”

“Wow. I totally get it now.” Zac’s voice pulled us both from our standoff.

Willow turned to him with a frown. “Get what?”

“Why the boss is protecting you personally. Feisty babes are not my thing, honey. You’re nice to look at, but you’re a walking, talking disaster waiting to happen.” He glanced at me with a knowing smile. “Better you than me.”

Willow, to her credit, completely ignored Zac’s comment. “Who is going to keep my sister and niece safe?”

“And Snowflake?”

She turned to me with a dark glare. “Cornflake. Her name is Cornflake.”

Zac laughed. “Cornflake?”

Just then a fat, ginger cat dropped down from its hiding place above a cabinet with an indignant mewl, as if offended by the butchery of its name.

“Her cat,” I explained.

“A woman, a kid, and a cat? I can handle that,” Alec offered with a grin. “Leave it to me.”

“Stop,” she huffed. “You can’t just steamroll over me.”

“Will,” Ivy said in a pleading tone. “This is for the best. Lottie and I will be fine as long as we know you’re safe.”

“But your treatments...” Willow began.

“I’m sure this nice man can get me back and forth without a problem. Right?”

“Sure, and I’m great with kids. The other safe house we’re taking you to isn’t so far that we won’t be easily able to reach your regular spots.”

“See?” Ivy smiled at her sister. “This way we won’t disrupt Lottie’s schedule and I can keep my regular treatment appointments. Life goes on, except for you.”

Willow sighed and nodded slowly. “My only job is to keep this little one safe until the delivery date.”

“The cat can stay with the child. She’ll be comforted to have him around.”

“Her,” Willow added with more than a little attitude. “Cornflake is a female cat.”

“Fine, Lottie will be comforted to have *her* around. Happy?”

“No, but I guess that’s not the goal here.” Willow threw her hands up in frustration and disappeared down the hall.

I bit back a few choice words of my own because this woman was beautiful and stubborn, an irresistible combination for a man like me, but a terrible combination for any personal security provider.

Ivy sighed and turned to Alec, Zac, and me. “Don’t mind Willow. She’s normally the sweetest person around, but this is personal. She’s the youngest, but she’s used to taking care of me and Lottie, and even our mom when she was alive. Us three girls? We’re the only family left in the world and we protect that.”

“Admirable,” Alec said softly.

Ivy smiled. “Yes, but she took this surrogacy job because I’m sick. Not dying, but my heart doesn’t send the right electrical signals, and the treatments are expensive. She took this job to keep me alive, to keep our family together. With Ella and Tom dead, she’s probably worried she’ll now have to find a way to pay for my treatments on top of a newborn baby that isn’t even hers.”

Shit. That was a lot for any one person to shoulder, never mind a pregnant woman. “Don’t worry, Ivy, all of you are in good hands. Even Cornflake. I swear to you.”

“I believe you, but getting Willow to believe you is another story altogether.” Ivy smiled. “I’m sure that handsome face has soothed pricklier personalities than my sister. I have confidence in you.”

Zac and Alec laughed.

I scrubbed a hand over my face. “Thank you.”

“Just keep her safe and I won’t have to come after you.” Ivy’s sweet smile was so at odds with her words that I knew she meant it.

“Noted.”

Ivy walked away with a small smile on her face while Zac and Alec laughed.

I had a feeling this job was going to be more than I’d bargained for.

# Chapter Seven

## *Willow*

“Willow, how are you holding up?” A pretty woman with black hair and kind green eyes smiled at me the moment we stepped off the elevator inside the tall building, her head tipped sympathetically and her pink lips pulled into a half smile.

I blinked up at her because she was also tall, taller than me by a few inches anyway. “Um, as well as can be expected, I suppose?” I looked from the pretty raven-haired woman to Shane, brows dipped in confusion.

She laughed and took a step forward to smack Shane in what looked to be a very hard midsection. My fingers tingled to reach out and see, but I restrained myself with an embarrassed blush I hoped nobody noticed.

“I guess you forgot to mention me. Again.” She rolled her eyes but the affectionate smile on her face told me they were close. “I’m Emily Stone, the little sister, also the one who prepared the safe house you two will be staying in.”

“Who two?” I looked to my right where Shane stood and back to Emily. “You and me?”

Emily laughed. “Um, no. I’m not a bodyguard.”

With my arms folded over my chest, I turned to Shane. “Who is staying here with me?”

He stood a little taller, his expression unreadable. “I am.”

“No. Absolutely not. I object.”

His lips twitched. “This isn’t a court of law, Willow. It’s a dictatorship. I am in charge of your safety, and to keep you safe, I need to be close.”

I took a step back and shook my head. “I don’t even know you!”



“We aren’t going to be sharing a bed, Willow, relax. You called me to help you and this is my version of help.” He put a hand on my shoulder that shouldn’t have been soothing, but I was so frazzled that it helped. A lot. Especially as the image of he and I sharing a bed tumbled wildly through my thoughts. “It’s a two-bedroom apartment, so I won’t be too close.”

“Oh, right!” Emily produced two plastic cards and gestured for us to follow her. “Your apartment is right down this hall and these cards will get you in and out. Zac and Alec will be right across the hall if you need backup or a change of scenery.”

“If they’re here, who’s going to protect my sister and my niece?” He promised me, and I stupidly left with him without making sure I could trust him.

Shane’s strong jaw clenched. “My security guy, Eros, is watching them. They are in very good hands, I promise.”

“But Alec said he was going to be with them!”

I knew it shouldn’t matter who was with them, but this was all so...off-putting. They said one thing, but now they were doing another. It was hard enough for me to let go and trust them as it was, let alone with them changing things on me or not giving me the full picture.

“We decided to switch out for Eros. He’s excellent at his job, there’s no need to worry.”

“Okay,” I muttered. My shoulders sank, but my heart still pounded as the reality of my situation settled around my shoulders. I was pregnant and alone, temporarily living with a complete stranger that I had no choice but to trust, despite everything inside me screaming that I didn’t know him.

“This place is set up for full surveillance,” Emily said, as if she was showing off real estate. “Alec and Zac will be able to see and hear everything that goes on, even when they’re not here. Stark will have backup access if it comes to that.”

“This is a lot. Is it really necessary?”

“Yes,” Shane growled. “My specialty is keeping people safe, and I haven’t lost anyone yet.” A dark look crossed his

face and he turned away, but he recovered quickly. He was a man in complete control of his emotions and right now I envied that.

“But do we really need to be roommates?”

“I’m not happy about it either.” And despite all my reservations, somehow hearing him say that felt...not good. I frowned, but said nothing. “This is how it has to be. Tom and Ella’s place was secure. Me and my men put the system in ourselves. It was high-tech and nearly impossible to breach, yet someone managed, so there’s no way in hell I’m going to take that risk with you.”

He was grumpy and bossy when he meant business. “Um, okay, fine. No need to yell.”

Emily snickered and folded her arms. “This is going to be fun. I mean, also dangerous, but a little bit fun.”

“Emily,” he grunted.

“Okay, okay. Sorry.” She flashed another kind smile my way. “It’s nice to meet you, too bad under these terrible circumstances. Here’s my card if you need anything or you just want to talk.”

I stared at the card. This woman was a therapist? “Oh. Thank you.”

“Don’t worry about Shane. His bark is worse than his bite, and I’m the only woman he’s ever lived with.”

“Emily!”

“Bye.” She wrapped Shane in a quick hug, waved, and hurried out of the apartment.

“Emily has a problem with boundaries.”

I laughed. “She’s nice.” And now she was gone and I was left alone with Shane. He was big and gruff and seemed perpetually unhappy. “Look, Shane, if you’ve changed your mind about this, I will figure out another way. It wasn’t my intention to put you in this situation, I was just trying to do what Tom asked.” Suddenly exhausted, I dropped down on the

sofa and kicked off my shoes, curling my legs underneath myself.

Shane stared at me, his jaw still clenched tight, and I closed my eyes and waited for him to accept the out I'd given him. The couch sank under the weight of his big body and his expensive scent wafted over, temporarily short-circuiting my brain.

This was a fine time for my female hormones to wake up and notice a man. He was gorgeous, but not my type. Too bossy and too sure of himself. Not to mention that right now my life was incredibly complicated. "It's okay, Shane."

"No, it's not okay, Willow." He shifted on the sofa and I risked a glance at him and stilled at his serious green eyes. "I haven't changed my mind about this, and even if I had, I wouldn't leave you on your own to handle it. I may come off as a jerk, but I would never leave anyone, let alone a pregnant woman, alone to handle this threat."

"Yeah, but you aren't even getting paid. I'm not even sure if I'm getting paid." I had no idea how the surrogacy company would handle this sort of situation, and it had been way too much of a whirlwind since this all happened for me to have even *thought* about it until now, let alone call the company and ask whether or not I still get paid for carrying a dead couple's child. Which was a whole other problem that I couldn't even bring myself to think about yet. Did I continue this pregnancy and end up with a baby I wasn't prepared for, or did I think of my other options? I had no idea what the other options would even be, and I was too exhausted and too hungry to think about it. "Sorry, that's not for you to worry about."

Shane slid across the sofa until we sat side by side, and let out a long-suffering sigh. "I'll help you figure out all that too."

I frowned. "But why?"

"Because I'm a nice guy?"

I laughed. "You are nice. Gruff as hell and super bossy too, but you're helping me when you don't have to."

His smile slipped and sobered. “Tom was a good friend of mine. He saved my life and I will find out who did this to him and Ella. In order to do that, I need to know everything that’s been going on in his life for the past few years, including finding a surrogate. His legal papers might give us some guidance.”

“And that would let you know if there were any provisions in the will for me if something happened before the baby came?”

He smiled and holy hell it lit up his whole face. His jaw was still rugged but no longer clenched like a tight ass, which softened the appearance of his thin scar. “Exactly.” His big body moved gracefully as he shoved off the sofa and held a hand out to me. “How about a tour of our new home?”

“Sounds good. Starting with the kitchen?” My stomach chose that moment to sound its desire for food. “Sorry.”

“Don’t be sorry. I’m hungry too.” He smiled, and I followed him to the small but well-equipped kitchen. “Good news. Emily left some basics and a couple of casseroles.”

“She’s a therapist *and* she cooks?” She sounded like a woman who had her life totally together.

“Yeah. Emily is a psychiatrist who specializes in animal therapy with a bit of cooking therapy thrown in for her own peace of mind.” He didn’t say much else, but I knew there was more to the story. “So, broccoli mac and cheese, or lasagna?”

“Mac and cheese. Definitely.” It was my favorite of all comfort food and the broccoli meant the baby was also getting something nutritious.

“All right, mac and cheese it is.” He set the glass dish on the counter and then continued the tour of the small-ish apartment. “Our rooms are across from each other with a shared bathroom. Possibly a little awkward, but...”

I laughed as his sentence trailed off. “Awkward? I’m pregnant with other another couple’s baby, which means I have been poked and prodded by dozens of strangers. If I can

trust you with my life, my sister's, and niece's lives, then we're good."

"You can. I don't fall down on the job and I don't drop the ball. Listen to me and you'll stay alive long enough to push out this baby."

Why was his confidence as sexy as it was annoying? I didn't know, but I looked away to avoid showing too much of how I was really feeling. "Then we should be golden."

He let out a huff of laughter that was masculine and just a tad bit snarky. "Good to know. Let's eat."

"If you insist." I was so hungry I was pretty sure my belly was feasting on itself, but a girl still had her pride, and I needed to hang on to at least a little of it since I was completely at Shane's mercy.

"I insist. I need you sharp and focused, and food is the key, especially for pregnant women. I'll keep you safe, but it isn't a one-man job, so I'll need your help, Willow."

I agreed. "Yeah. I can do that."

# Chapter Eight

## *Shane*

That night, I'd barely slept a wink inside the small bedroom with the bed that was fit for a dwarf. My heels hung over the edge and my elbows knocked against the headboard and the walls because the bed was too fucking small. But it was my home now, one I would share with Willow until I figured out who killed Tom and Ella. It was uncomfortable as hell, and three and a half hours in, I was no closer to sleep than when Willow and I had turned in.

"Son of a bitch!" I growled, and turned to my left side and punched my pillow to get it to somehow soften up, but I swore Emily chose bricks for pillows instead of feathers or foam. I couldn't get comfortable, which meant I couldn't sleep, but at least Willow was comfortably asleep in her room.

"No! It can't be!" A loud scream followed by a pained squeal tore through the empty apartment and I jackknifed up and looked around my own dark suite. "No, please no!"

Willow.

I jumped from bed and rushed across my room and yanked open the door, practically kicking open Willow's door to get to her. It wasn't an intruder; she was having a nightmare so real it should probably be classified as a night terror. "Tom! Ella! No!"

She was sitting up straight up in bed with her eyes open but completely glazed as she shouted into the nothingness. Her fear and her pain were palpable and my heart went out to her.

"Willow," I whisper-yelled. "It's all right."

My initial words didn't sooth her. Willow continued to cry and scream as tears streamed down her face and she hugged her knees to her chest, body shaking with fear. "No, this can't be! Ella!"

“Willow.” My voice was firm as I grabbed her shoulders and gave her a shake. “Willow, wake up. It’s just a dream. Willow.”

“Stop, leave me alone!”

“Willow!”

She gasped and her eyelids fluttered. Her arms relaxed from around her knees, and when she locked her blue eyes to mine I could see that she was finally awake. “Shane? What are you doing in here?”

My lips tugged into a reluctant grin. “You had a nightmare.”

She shrugged off my touch. “It’s not the first and I doubt it’ll be the last.” She was so strong and so damn mistrusting that she was determined to handle everything. “It was just a nightmare, Shane. Thanks for your concern.” She was vulnerable and felt uncomfortable at my witnessing it. I understood that.

“There’s nothing to be ashamed of. I’ve met plenty of service members, active and retired, who have experienced panic attacks. It’s perfectly normal after a trauma.” Which brought up another topic we needed to talk about. “You saw the house explode?”

“I didn’t do it.”

This brought a small, lopsided grin to my lips. “I didn’t think you had.” She was prickly as hell but she was no killer. “But you can’t keep secrets from me, Willow.”

“I know.” She swiped at her tears. “It’s not,” she began, and stopped. “I don’t know what I’m going to do. My full-time job was to grow this baby and keep him or her safe, and now I don’t know what I’m going to do about money, about my sister’s health, about the baby itself... Hell, should I even be keeping it? Is it right? I don’t know what to do about anything.”

The poor woman was torturing herself about a million different things, and now she was crying. “We’ll figure this out, I promise.”

“How?”

“I have a plan. First, we let Tom and Ella’s families know about the baby. We find the killers and then we find a way to help your sister.”

She snorted. “That sounds way too easy, but I’ll allow it. And thank you, Shane.” She laid her head on my shoulder with a relieved sigh and soon after the sound of her even breathing told me she’d fallen back asleep, nightmare all but forgotten.

Placing her carefully down, I pulled the covers to her chin and padded out of the room to call Adrian. He answered, sounding as wide awake as me despite the hour, so I had him come down to stay with Willow while I headed out to find Zac and Alec, who were at Tom’s destroyed residence now that the police had cleared out.

It felt wrong leaving Willow in The Towers, but Adrian was every bit as capable as me, and this had to be done. I was too antsy to sleep anyway, so I might as well put my brain to use.

It was still difficult to wrap my mind around the fact that Tom was dead. Tom, the man who had pushed us and shaped us into the SEALs we were meant to be. He’d trained us hard, trimmed us down until nothing was left but the best of us, totally capable of doing anything and everything the mission required.

It was almost too much to bear, but I needed to find out who killed them and why. I had too much to do, and after that was done, only then I would dive into my feelings. For now, I had work to do. “What have you found?”

Zac turned first. “Not a goddamn thing. Yet.” He sighed and looked around the rubble of what was once their family home. “Someone wanted to erase them.”

I couldn’t disagree with that assessment. “I know Tom, and there’s no way he doesn’t have a safe in here somewhere.”

“I’ve found something.” Alec stood in the middle of a crumbling staircase as if it was nothing, holding what looked like a diary in his hand. “Ella’s diary. It’s not good. You want me to give you the highlights?”



“Yeah, sure.” Alec’s expression was grim and I folded my arms to steel my emotions. “Go ahead.”

“First, there are these.” He held up three photographs showing Ella and an unfamiliar man, and handed them to me. “Stuffed inside the diary, along with a few letters. Love letters and angry letters, from the same person.”

“Who even writes love letters anymore?” Zac mumbled, peering over my shoulder at the photos.

“I don’t know.” Alec shrugged. “Romantic people?”

“Shit.” I handed the photos to Zac and accepted the letters. “The love letters are dated more than a year ago.”

“Yes, but the angry one is dated three months ago.”

Around the time they’d started searching for a surrogate.

“Ella was having an affair with a guy named Liam, and it pissed him off when she ended things.” Alec pointed to the letters now in my hand. “Said she would regret it. That he would ruin her whole life. He’d even followed her around and left little notes on her windshield.”

I frowned. “What kind of threats?”

“The usual kind,” Alec responded with a shrug. “I love you and if you don’t come back to me, I’ll tell your husband. I’ll hurt you. Hurt him. Same old shit.”

“That’s our first suspect,” Zac offered. “We should get the photos to Jace so he can look into the asshole.”

“Agreed. Get the photos and the letters to him ASAP.” I looked around at what was left of their home and sighed. “This feels a little too calculated for a spurned lover.”

“Agreed,” Alec said. “Doesn’t look like anything was missing from the bedroom, no jewelry or underwear, nothing that a guy who writes letters like that would want taken.”

“Let’s keep this Liam character on the list and learn everything we can about him, but we need to keep digging.” Something felt off, and until I knew what it was, we had to chase down every lead we came across.

“I’m gonna stay here and see if there’s anything else we can learn, maybe chat up a few of the neighbors.” There was no place Alec couldn’t worm his way inside and gather intel.

“Sounds good. I’m going to stop by Tom’s office and then head back to check on Willow.” She might very well be awake right now and wondering why I’ve suddenly been replaced.

“I’m headed back to The Towers too,” Zac said, “to send this off to Jace. I can check on the lovely Willow if you want.” Zac waggled his eyebrows and I knew he was screwing with me.

“I’ve got it,” I growled, and walked out, ignoring the laughter on my way.

It took a little convincing of Tom’s head of security, but eventually he’d given me the laptop Tom kept in his office, as well as access to all the threats he and his company had received in the past twenty-four months. There were a lot of threats, which would give me something to do other than think about the pretty blond under my protection.

That’s what I thought, at least, until I walked into the living space to find her with that plump ass of hers pushed up in the air, head down as she inhaled and exhaled slowly. Almost erotically. I should have walked right past her, should have ignored the sight of her round ass and shapely thighs encased in hot pink spandex. I should have done anything other than stand there and stare at her like she was giving me a free show. But my eyes were glued, and I swallowed thickly.

“You’re staring,” she said eventually, not keeping the annoyance from her voice as she came down from upward facing dog, or downward facing baboon, or whatever the hell these yoga poses were called.

“I was just checking out your...form,” I lied. Her form, like the rest of her, was fantastic.

A loud snort came from the couch, and I flicked my eyes over to notice Adrian lounging with his phone in hand, and a completely smug look in his hazel eyes as he stared at me.

Fuck, I was so distracted by Willow's body I didn't even notice my brother in the room. Some bodyguard I was.

Willow pulled her legs forward, crossed at the ankle, before she leaned back with her hands against her mat. "You some kind of undercover prenatal yoga expert?"

"No," I laughed at her sassy question, turning away from her and Adrian and heading to the kitchenette that was part of the open plan living and dining space. "But I was injured in the Navy and had to do some physical therapy, which included yoga to help me regain some flexibility."

"Oh, sure," Adrian muttered from the couch with another snort of a laugh as he stood, "is that the story you're going with?"

"Shut it," I snapped, sending him a pointed glare as I set down the laptop and hard drives from Tom's office.

"Oh." A concerned look crossed Willow's face as she glanced between us, before finally settling on me. "Are you all right now?"

"Yeah, I'm fine."

"Except for your damn headaches." Adrian shoved his phone in his pocket, and began making his way to the door.

"Headaches? From the injury?"

"Yeah," Adrian replied to Willow, "head trauma. Didn't make him any less uptight, unfortunately, only more of a grumpy bastard when the migraines hit."

"Oh, no..."

"*Shut it*, Adrian," I growled, the glare on my face only deepening as I tracked his escape to the door. "I'm fine."

"Sure you are," he said with a massive grin, before opening the door and dipping out, leaving only his head in so he could say, "Toodle-oo! Have a good morning, Willow." And then he was gone.

Willow, for her part, still looked a little worried. "Shane, are you sure..."

“I’m *fine*, Willow,” I sighed, not liking the concern on her features. “Adrian is just being dramatic.”

“But...”

“And you need to be careful of your back,” I said by way of distraction.

She frowned and touched a hand to the small of her back. “What’s wrong with my back?”

“Your hips.”

“What?”

I hid my smirk at accomplishing Mission Distraction on her so quickly, by lifting a glass of water to my lips.

“Shane, what? What have my hips got to do with my back?”

“You drop them too much in that pose, which is fine now, but as the baby grows and your stomach along with it, your back pain will increase.”

“Um, okay.” Willow spun on the mat and returned to her upside-down goat position or whatever. I was never good with the stupid names. “My core is tight, so what else do I need to do?”

My fingers tightened around the glass momentarily as I steadfastly did not think about how hot and tight her core would feel—

*Jesus. Get your head out of the gutter.*

I distracted myself by moving, dropping the glass on the counter and heading towards the couch.

“Wait, come here and show me,” she said, lifting a hand to wave it in my direction while her hips still pointed straight at the ceiling.

“Uh, right,” I said, stepping towards her. She waved me down, and I knelt by her.

“Okay, hurry, I’m still new to this and my arms are gonna give out! What should I do?”

“Take small steps,” I said a little breathlessly, because the sight of her ass in my face was too much to bear. “See how your weight shifts and your hips start to fall?” My jaws clenched tight as her hips moved, the soft swish of the fabric between her thighs sent a flash of erotic images through my mind.

“Yeah. What do I do?”

“Use more effort to keep your hips up high and your core tight. If you get used to it now, it’ll be easier as your body changes.” I sat there like a damned horny teenager and watched the sway of her hips and ass while she tested out my advice.

“How’s that?”

Good. Great. Fan-fucking-tastic. “It’s good. Better form.”

At my words, she relaxed her arms and walked them back until she was standing in front of me. “Thank you, Shane.”

“You’re welcome.” I jumped to my feet, eager to put some distance between Willow—my client—and myself. Just as I reached for Tom’s laptop, my phone rang. “Hello?”

“Shane,” the shaky but familiar voice of Tom’s mother sounded on the other end of the call. “It’s Jane.”

My shoulders slumped at the absolute grief in her voice. “Jane. How are you holding up?”

“As well as can be expected,” she sighed. “Making plans that no parent should. The funeral will be in three days. Thursday was the quickest I could schedule it and the autopsy still isn’t complete.”

“You know I’ll be there.”

“Oh, I know that. More importantly, I know you’re looking into who killed my boy and Ella. If there’s anything I can do to help, you know how to reach me,” she said. “I’ll see you on Thursday.”

I stared at the phone for a long minute, acutely aware of Willow’s blue gaze searing into the side of my face. “What?”

“That was Tom’s mother, wasn’t it?”

I said nothing, and Willow grunted in frustration. “I heard everything. The funeral is on Thursday and I need to go home and get my black dress.”

“Absolutely not.”

“Why the hell not?” She marched over to the stove where a large pot bubbled, and as soon as she lifted the lid, a savory scent filled the small apartment. She stirred with a long wooden spoon and turned to me with a defiant glare.

“Why else, Willow? It’s not safe.” Did the woman have no idea of the kind of danger she might be in?

She pouted and pulled a loaf of bread from the oven. “So you’ve found something?”

“Nothing worth mentioning yet. But that baby is connected to Tom, and until we know for certain who did this, we must assume you aren’t safe.” She didn’t need to know about Ella’s affair. Not yet. “How close were you and Ella?”

She shrugged. “Friendly but not friends. Close because of our circumstances, but we didn’t talk much about personal things other than her job and my sister and niece. She was sweet, though.”

“So you wouldn’t know if she was having problems with anyone?”

“No, but one time we went to that fancy tea room uptown and when we came out there was a note on her windshield. She seemed spooked by it, but she didn’t share the details.”

Liam, no doubt. I absorbed the information as the scents that wafted from the small kitchen reminded me that I hadn’t eaten today. “What’s in the pot?”

“Beef stew and fresh bread. Hungry?”

“Starved.”

Willow busied herself scooping soup into two bowls and laying out the fresh bread on a chopping board. Back and forth

she went, every step graceful and easy, until the small table was set and piled with food. “I’m going to the funeral, Shane.”

I shook my head because she’d waited until I had a mouth full of soup to speak.

“I’m carrying their baby, and even though he or she is just a bundle of cells right now, they deserve to be there. Ella and Tom were nice people and I’d like to say goodbye properly.” As if the matter was settled, she sliced a few pieces of bread, slathered them with butter, and dunked one in her stew.

This was the part of personal protection I hated, constantly reminding the client they were in danger. I appreciated Willow’s fiery argument in favor of going, but it was a foolish risk. “Funerals are too open. Threats could be lurking behind thousands of headstones.”

“I get that, truly I do. But wouldn’t it be better if I go with you instead of sneaking off by myself?”

I clenched my jaw and slowly put my cutlery down. “Willow.”

She just batted her lashes at me innocently, and popped a dunked piece of bread between her lips.

Jesus fucking Christ. *Fine*. “You’ll wear a disguise and you will stay glued to my side. If you go to the bathroom, *we* go to the bathroom. No exceptions. No excuses. Got it?”

A slow smile curved her full lips, and she swallowed. “Got it. Thank you for being reasonable.”

“Wish I could say the same for you,” I grunted in reply, before re-thinking replying to her gratitude with snark. “Thank you for the stew. It’s delicious.”

She left me all kinds of confused, and I wasn’t sure how I felt about it. But for some reason, that only drew me to her more.

# Chapter Nine

## *Willow*

It felt good to be out of the apartment after nearly a week locked inside. I hated that Tom and Ella's funeral was the reason I got to leave, though. So many people had shown up to pay their respects. Most of the men and even some of the women had that military look about them that said they'd served with Tom.

I watched from Shane's side as he greeted people with a kind smile and a commanding air that made me wonder if he was ever off duty. I was wearing a curly ginger wig and black rimmed glasses that stood out harshly against the pale color of my face. I couldn't help but fidget with the long, orange-brown strands nervously, wondering if a single wig-and-glasses combo could really be called a 'disguise'.

I'd been hoping for some James Bond-esque spy gear to transform me into a completely different human...but no. Apparently, the bold color and texture of the wig—which *did* look real, but just really distracting—would be enough to make people remember that, instead of my face. Coupled with hiding half my head with bangs, curls, and these distracting glasses, Shane was confident that people wouldn't see *me*, so I guess I had to just go with that.

"This is my girlfriend, Rosie," he said loudly to a group of men who were all big and handsome and smiling. "Rosie, these are some of my colleagues. And my brothers, Jace, and of course, you've met Adrian," he said of two similar-looking men, one whose eyes were hazel, unlike the piercing green eyes Shane share with Emily and one of his brothers. They all had thick black hair, though. Talk about good genetics.



“It’s nice to finally meet you, Jace,” I said with a girlfriend-worthy smile. “Shane talks about you all the time.” My breath caught when Shane gave my shoulders a supportive squeeze for remembering my role. Part of me, the silly part, wondered if he would even consider me girlfriend material if we’d met in the real world, instead of the start of an action movie.

“You remember Zac and Alec,” he said of the two men I’d gotten to know over the past few days, because they’d taken over as my default babysitters whenever Shane had to leave.

“You guys clean up well.”

They were all so fit and handsome, and their fraternal camaraderie only made me miss my sister and my niece. And Cornflake, who was approximately the color of my wig, now that I thought about it.

“Well enough to take you away from this joker?”

I batted my lashes up at Shane. “Never.”

He squeezed me again and pulled me closer, his expensive masculine scent invading my mind, and I leaned against his big, strong body. Shane was too much man, far too potent for a simple girl like me, which served as the perfect reminder to stop romanticizing things between us. He was rich and gorgeous and accomplished, he probably had women chasing after him who were lightyears ahead of me in the world. This was all just for show, I had to remind myself.

“Rosie, I’d like you to meet Stark, Caleb, and Paul. They all work with me at Griffin.”

My eyes widened at the sight of these giant men wearing grim smiles. “It’s nice to meet you all, and I am sorry for your loss.” I reflexively reached up to tuck a strand of hair behind my ear in a nervous gesture, when I remembered the wig on top of my head that might not exactly tuck easily, and let my hand drop to brush nervously against my thigh instead. The rest of my ‘disguise’ was put together by Alec, who had impeccable and expensive taste judging by the designer dress

and shoes he'd bought for me to wear just once, since I hadn't been allowed to go back home for any of my stuff. I felt good, beautiful even, and when Shane's gaze wandered to me, full of masculine appreciation, I knew he thought so too.

It was nice to know, but handsome men were trouble, and Shane was extremely handsome.

"Shane!" a deep voice boomed over the rest, and as an older man came into view, I immediately pegged him as Tom's father from the cast of his face. "It's good to see you again, son, even if it is under these terrible circumstances."

Shane nodded, but his body had gone stiff. "It's good to see you again as well, Congressman Jenkins."

Congressman? Neither Tom nor Ella had mentioned his father at all, never mind that he was a member of Congress. My shoulders sank as I realized I hadn't known them nearly as well as I thought. A reminder that I was carrying the baby of strangers.

"Congressman? Please, call me James. What have you heard?"

"Not enough, sir. But we're still digging." Shane's words were clipped and civil, and I knew he didn't care for this man. "If you'll excuse me, I need to check on Jane." He squeezed my hand and tugged me along.

"That was super tense."

"Tom wasn't close to his father for most of his life, and it only got worse when he divorced Jane a few years ago."

I leaned in close as he tugged me through the crowd. "Could his father's political dealings have something to do with *it*?"

"I'll look into it."

I noticed Jane's tearful face when the crowd parted. I'd met her once when Tom couldn't make it to an appointment.

"Jane." He wrapped the older woman in a hug. Her brown hair, which was heavily streaked with silver, was pulled back into a demure, neat bun, but her expression couldn't look any less well put together. She seemed devastated, even as she

pulled back with a shaky smile. “So many people loved him. Both of them.”

“They were both wonderful people, and life won’t be the same without them,” I told her honestly.

She turned to me with wide, watery brown eyes. “Will—I mean, Rosie, it’s so nice to finally meet you.” She gave me a big hug and whispered in my ear. “Anything you need, please call me. I’m more than happy to be there for you and your family, for everything you’ve done for mine. No matter what happens from here on out.”

Her words sent a rush of warmth through my body and produced a familiar stinging sensation behind my eyes. My arms came up around her of their own accord, and I gave her a tight squeeze, emotion choking me.

“I can keep the baby!” I blurt-whispered into her ear. I hadn’t made a decision yet up until this point, and it was still early enough to swing either way. But with Jane in my arms, wracked with pain and yet still promising to look after me, the words just spilled out. “I can do it, I can keep it if you want me too.”

Jane gasped and pulled back. “Oh, my dear, I hadn’t meant to push... That isn’t why I said—”

“No.” I bent my head towards her, and put both my arms on her shoulders to look like I was comforting her, so that I could continue the conversation as quietly as possible. “I know that. But this is the last memory of two good people, and I...I can do it. I was going to do it anyway, before everything happened. If you want me to, I’ll keep it.”

More tears welled into her eyes, before spilling down her cheeks. “If you want to, it would...it would mean more than you can know...”

I nodded, never more sure of anything in my life, even as emotion completely overtook the older woman and she had to lean into me for support.

“I will. I’ll keep this baby safe for you,” I whispered, not even knowing if she could hear me over her tears.

I wrapped an arm around Jane and guided her towards the front row where she was meant to sit beside her ex-husband, Shane close at my heel the entire time.

James rolled his eyes at the sight of her as we neared. “Oh, Jane, pull yourself together. This blubbering is unseemly.”

I glared at the man and wrapped Jane in another hug. “Her son is dead, have a little fucking compassion,” I snapped in an angry whisper before I joined Shane in the row behind Tom’s parents.

“You tell him,” Zac snickered.

“Badass,” Alec whispered, his gray eyes mingled with mirth and grief, and when he held up a fist I reluctantly bumped it with my own.

I took my seat beside Shane and he wrapped an arm around me. “He deserved that, but don’t draw attention to yourself.”

“Sorry.”

He smiled. “Tom would appreciate you standing up for his mom.”

The funeral service began and the non-denominational pastor spoke eloquently on life and loss, love and death. His words were a gentle reminder to live life fully, because tomorrow wasn’t promised for any of us. It was a beautiful speech, but his words only made Jane cry harder and louder until she was full-on sobbing.

“I can’t do this,” she cried out when she was supposed to give the eulogy.

“I’ll do it,” the Congressman grumbled, as if he wouldn’t enjoy being up in front of everyone.

“No,” Jane replied with a newfound steel in her voice. “It should be done by someone who loved my boy, who knew and loved him.” She turned back to face Shane. “Will you do it?”

And despite all the sadness welling up inside me, I couldn’t help the watery smile that flashed across my lips at her dig.

The color drained from his handsome face, but Shane agreed anyway. “Of course.”

I put my hand on top of his and gave a supportive squeeze. “Just speak from the heart. Tom was your friend, your brother.”

A small smile touched the corners of his lips as he stood and made his way to the podium. I reached forward and gave Jane’s shoulder a squeeze, and her fingers came up to squeeze mine back. She held on to me like that the entire time Shane spoke, and the way her frame shook beneath my hand with her tears was enough to send a waterfall of sadness through me.

“For many of us here,” Shane said in a quiet, firm voice, “Lieutenant Thomas R. Jenkins was more than a commanding officer. He was a friend when we needed one and a swift kick in the ass when it was called for.” He smiled as laughter went around the room. “He turned us into men, into SEALs, into the people our country needed us to be. But Tom the man was more than that.” Shane spoke passionately and eloquently about his dead friend, and as I listened to him, it became clear just how much Tom had meant to him.

My heart went out to Shane, who I knew hadn’t had the time to properly grieve the loss of someone so important to him. But it wasn’t just grief that called to my heart, it was the man himself. He stood erect with squared shoulders as he looked around the room at all the people who mattered to Tom and Ella, spoke tenderly of his friendship with both of them. He was a man who, despite his outer appearance, loved deeply and fully.

*Oh no.* I felt the kick in my heart and I knew what it was. Feelings. Emotions. My heart wasn’t just calling out to Shane because he was good and kind and caring, it was calling out to *his* heart because that’s what I wanted. Him.

Feeling nauseous, I turned my gaze away from his compelling figure and scanned the crowd of mourners, all of whom had their eyes fixed on Shane.

All but one.

A man sat on the other side of the casket, but unlike the others, his gaze was focused on me. I tugged on my bangs nervously, noticing that he wore a hat. And sunglasses, despite the overcast day. Another person in ‘disguise’? The hat’s wide brim shadowed his features, but I took note of what was clear because even though sunglasses shielded his eyes, I could feel them on me.

I smacked Zac’s leg with my free hand. “Look.”

“What?”

I turned to him and whispered, “Look at the man directly across from us, he’s wearing a hat similar to a fedora.” I turned back to point and the man was gone. “Shit.”

“What about him?” Zac asked impatiently.

I shook my head, suddenly unsure if the man was even there at all, or if I was just imagining his disguise and weird countenance. “I don’t know, he was staring at me instead of at Shane. Something about it unsettled me.”

The moment Shane’s eulogy was over, Zac grabbed my arm and guided me through the crowd towards my fake boyfriend. “Shane. She saw something.”

Shane turned away from a group of men and women with a kind smile and an apology before he stepped away to join us. “What did you see?”

With Shane’s arm around me, I could hardly think straight, but the time it took us to get away from the crowd let me think about what I’d actually seen. And I realize that maybe I was overreacting.

Shane stopped and took both of my hands in his as his gaze scanned the crowd, making sure that any onlookers would just see a couple chatting. “What did you see?”

I told him about the man. “He was gone so quickly, though, that now I’m not sure.”

“What did he look like?”

“That’s the thing, I don’t really know. He looked like he was wearing a disguise, like me, with a hat and sunglasses.”

Belatedly, I realized that if a hat and sunglasses were enough to stop me from being able to ID him, maybe a ginger wig and glasses really *were* a good disguise. In any case, I did my best to try and remember what I could. “He had a long, straight nose and thin lips, and a hint of a five o’clock shadow despite the early hour and the whole clean-shaven military thing going on here.”

Shane turned to Zac. “See if you spot anyone who fits that description.” When Zac took off, Shane looked back to me. “Why do you doubt what you saw?”

“Because I looked at Zac for a second, just a quick moment, and when I turned to point him out, he was gone.” My shoulders fell and I shook my head. “I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be.” He rubbed a soothing hand up and down my back, and I didn’t care if it was for show or for real, the comfort he provided made me feel better.

I never wanted to let go.

# Chapter Ten

## *Shane*

I couldn't sleep after Tom's funeral, and it was only partially due to my grief over my friend's murder. It had a *lot* to do with the fact that my team and I hadn't made one step of progress in finding the asshole who killed Tom and Ella. Despite the near around the clock work, we hadn't been able to identify the mysterious Liam, which only created more questions.

How had Ella met him? Was his name really Liam? Had their affair been a honey pot just to get access to the house?

I didn't know, and that just pissed me off and made it difficult to sleep. I'd been at his funeral, surrounded by people who loved him...and I'd had nothing to show them to sooth at least part of their grief. Not even progress to let them know we were closing in on the bastard who'd done it.

Instead of tossing and turning, I got out of bed. Willow had been asleep for hours, so there was no risk of waking her, or dealing with the distraction she posed.

I didn't know what the hell Alec had been thinking, dressing her in that figure-hugging black dress and black stilettos that made her look like my every fantasy come to life. Thank goodness the ginger wig had been so curly and distracting, or I might not have been able to focus on Tom's eulogy. The woman was a distraction I didn't need, and the worst part was it wasn't just a physical distraction. She was at turns sassy and vulnerable. She was quick to apologize for a mistake and earnest about being able to help.

She was irresistible.

I opened my bedroom door and noticed that her door was still closed. I relaxed and made my way towards the living room, where I froze halfway at the sight of Willow standing on



a foot stool in nothing but a t-shirt that barely covered the globes of her ass.

“What in the hell are you doing?”

She gasped and turned quickly—too quickly—and toppled off the stool.

I was there in an instant and caught her soft curves in my arms. Her hand pressed against my chest and her breath hitched as she stared up at me with big blue eyes. Heat-filled blue eyes.

Willow recovered from our proximity first. “You scared the hell out of me.”

I smiled. “Same goes. What the hell are you doing climbing up on the refrigerator?”

“Oh my God, I was hardly scaling the fridge, Shane. I was using the foot stool to grab the tea that *somebody* decided to put out of my reach.” She shoved at my chest when she was safely on her feet, and her nostrils flared with heat, but the stubborn woman covered it quickly.

“Tea? Is something wrong?”

“Yeah,” she put a hand over her chest, “I can’t sleep.”

“Wanna talk about it?” Listening to her problems might help me figure out my own, and if not, at least she might talk herself to sleep.

She sighed and accepted the box of tea I handed to her. Willow turned on the kettle and reached for two mugs. “Watching Jane today, seeing her sadness, makes me wonder if I even have what it takes to take care of this child.”

I frowned. “Your logic is confusing.”

“Jane seems like a capable woman, strong and loving. My mother...wasn’t like that at all. I mean, she wasn’t abusive or anything, but when my dad split, she curled into herself. She shrank until she was barely a functioning human, consumed by depression and alcohol. She died too soon. That’s my example.”

“That’s rough, Willow. I’m sorry you and your sister had to go through that.”

She shrugged like it was nothing but the sadness that swam in her eyes said it was a big damn deal. “I told Jane today that I’d keep the baby. I promised her. And now, I’m wondering if that really was a good idea. She’s old, Shane. I don’t know if she can be a full time mom anymore... So, did I just promise to be this kid’s mother? My heart is willing, I *want* this baby, you don’t understand how attached I’ve grown to it in such a short time, but...but what if I can’t? What if I ruin everything?”

“The way I see it, you have as good a shot as anyone else at being a good mom, maybe a better shot because you know what not to do.” I couldn’t imagine how she must have felt, watching her mom slowly die in front of her.

“That’s one way to look at it.” She let out a bitter laugh and shook her head, leaning back against the counter as she wrapped her arms protectively around her midsection. I wondered if she realized she was doing that, protecting the baby with her body.

“Shane, I was wondering... What’s happening with Ella’s funeral?”

I sighed, and leaned my hip against the counter beside her. “I don’t know. Ella’s side of the family has completely cut themselves off from us. They refuse contact, won’t speak to us at all. Her funeral might have already passed for all I know.”

“That’s rough,” Willow murmurs, brows creasing with concern. “Why are they acting like that? I would really like to have payed my respects. Ella was lovely.”

“Adrian thinks they blame us all for her death. Everyone on the military side.”

“But it’s not your fault!”

“Isn’t it?” I run a hand through my hair in frustration. I just don’t even know anymore.

“No,” Willow says with such decisiveness, it surprises me. “It’s not your fault in the slightest, and that’s the end of that.”

I huff, and feel my lips curl into the smallest smile.

“Is that why you can’t sleep?” she asks quietly, turning her body to face me more fully.

“Partially,” I mutter. “My mind won’t shut off, thinking about who would have blown up Tom and Ella’s house.” So far it was all dead ends, which just didn’t make sense.

“Wanna talk about it?” Her sweet smile was genuine and I wished I’d stayed in my room.

“You sure?”

“Yeah, maybe it’ll help me forget how much I miss Ivy and Lottie. And Cornflake.” Willow shrugged. “And if it doesn’t, at least it’ll help you find who killed them and make them pay. You will make them pay, won’t you?”

“Damn right I will.” My gaze shifted to her shapely legs when she turned back to pour the water over the tea, bringing lemon and honey to the table. For two. After a fraction of a second hesitating, I pulled out a chair and joined her. “So far, we haven’t found anything concrete. Ella was having an affair sometime last year, but all we have is a name. Liam.”

Her eyes widened. “Ella was having an affair with Liam Crown?”

“You know him?” I asked, sitting up a little taller in my seat.

“Not personally, but I told you I was interviewed at her restaurant, right?”

“That’s where they met?”

“Pretty sure, yeah. She ended our conversation when someone told her that the food blogger, Liam Crown, had arrived. I’d never heard of him.”

“And that’s odd?”

“Not on its own, no. But Liam isn’t exactly a common nickname for William here in the US, so the name stuck in my head.” She nibbled her lip and looked away.

“What else?”

She sighed. “It’s just that, don’t reviewers like to remain anonymous to make sure they get typical service instead of special service?” She shook her head and took a sip of steaming tea. “I looked him up later, thinking I could get some more leads on restaurants in the area, and it was just a landing page. Sorry, that’s all I remember.”

“That’s helpful, Willow. Thank you.”

She finished her tea, eyelids growing heavy until she was asleep at the table.

I should have just called her name, but I couldn’t resist the opportunity to hold her in my arms, to feel her warm skin against mine as I lifted her and carried her to bed. The sheets smelled like her, fruity and floral, and when she snuggled in bed and turned her back to me, I was greeted with an eyeful of sheer pale pink panties.

Mustering up all the willpower within me, I stepped back slowly until I was on the other side of the door. Far away from the temptation of Willow.

The vision of her in pale pink panties was stuck in my mind, an unforgettable image that plagued me throughout the next day.

“Yo, Earth to Shane.” Alec waved his hands back and forth in front of my face, his tone half annoyed and half amused. “You with us, brother?”

I smacked his hand out of my face. “Yeah, I’m here. I was just thinking about something Willow said.”

Zac wiggled his brows. “Sure it was something she said and not something she wore? Or *didn’t*?” When his black brows only began to waggle harder, I sighed and stared upwards in annoyance. “I’m sure living with her, you’d see—”

“She said that our ‘Liam’ is Liam Crown,” I interrupted harshly, and that got everyone’s attention. “She suspected he was a phony blogger and restaurant reviewer.” Her unexpected help had given us a direction to go in for the day.

“Why phony?”

I told them of her history with Ella, applying for a job at her restaurant. “She wasn’t completely sure, but she thought it was odd that a reviewer would announce himself when it could impact the quality of the evening’s service.”

“Good point. Did she say anything else?” Alec asked.

“No, but she was shocked that Ella had an affair with him.”

“I mean we all are, right?” Zac said. “She seemed like the trustworthy sort, at least to me.”

“They were having problems,” Alec explained. “I spent the night reading her journals, cover to cover. The miscarriages had taken a toll on their relationship and she turned to someone else. She didn’t say much about him other than he was handsome and kind and a good listener. Even in her diary she was pretty tight-lipped about him.”

That’s what I was afraid of. “Alec, I need you to catch up with Jace, have him look into Ella’s phone records for the past year. It’s all we have to find this asshole.”

“On it,” he said, and left the room.

Later that day found me and Zac back at the rubble of the Jenkins family home, in a desperate attempt to find something, anything at all. The house itself was still in horrible shape, but not any worse than the night it happened. One half of the building was partially upright, with some walls and foundational structures remaining solid, as if to remind us of what used to stand on this block, and the other half—completely destroyed. Nothing but Ash and concrete rubble.

“Any idea what kind of explosives could create this amount of damage?” I asked as Zac and I picked our way through the debris.

Explosives were Zac’s specialty, and if anyone could figure out the ingredients and timers used to make a place this big go boom, it was him.

“I’ve been thinking about it, and I have a few ideas.” Zac motioned for me to follow him and we moved carefully through the collapsed ceiling and walls. “You seem to have

taken to our lovely new client,” he said casually, but Zac didn’t say or do anything casually.

“She’s a client,” I grunted at my friend. Zac didn’t miss much and the fact that he commented on my interest in Willow meant I wasn’t as careful as I’d hoped.

“No judgments from me, brother. In fact, I think it’s a good thing. You haven’t looked at a woman the way you look at Willow in years. Many, many, many years,” he added with a laugh.

We picked our way down the cement stairs of the basement and I decided to opt for honesty. “Willow is nice, she’s spunky as hell and she keeps me on my toes, so, yeah, I like her. But she’s a client, so it’s irrelevant.”

“It’s a rule you created, which means it’s a rule you can break.”

“Maybe, but there’s also the fact that she’s carrying Tom’s baby.” Which made everything twice as complicated.

“Oh, come on, man, don’t say it like that. You act like she was Tom’s side piece when she wasn’t. It was all medical, and who is better equipped to take care of Tom’s kid than you?”

His word conjured up an image of Willow and me together with a dark-haired kid with Ella’s smile and Tom’s too serious demeanor. It was too soon, too ridiculous to think thoughts like that. “You have something to show me?”

Zac flashed a knowing smile because he knew what I was doing, but rather than calling me out, he motioned me towards the corner of the basement. “The marks right here indicate this was some heavy fucking explosives. This isn’t some kid living in his mom’s basement, collecting tools from local hardware stores. These materials are hard to come by and they require special skills to use.”

“You sure?”

“Hell no. Without a look at the tests run by the forensics teams I can’t be totally sure of a damn thing, but these white marks don’t come from your everyday pipe bomb. This person

has experience, and I'd bet money that it's military experience."

"Why?"

Zac squatted down. "The materials can be bought with enough cash, but the method is what gives it away. This was meant for precision," he said, and pointed to the ceiling. "Directly above us is the kitchen and living room, the two rooms Tom and Ella were most likely to be in during that window of time. This person stalked them, watched them, and made a plan."

"Too organized for a spurned lover?"

"Yeah, exactly. We should still hunt down Liam's details, but we need to expand our search."

I heard what Zac said, and more importantly what he didn't say. "You think this isn't some random crazy person, this is directly related to Tom's past in the Navy." That idea left a streak of acid burning down my throat and into my stomach.

"You think so too," Zac said, his voice as full of sympathy as his expression. "We need to figure out the connection."

"If it's not someone from Tom's past, then someone hired former military to get the job done." Neither prospect was ideal, but it was a place to start.

Zac took a few samples from the blast zone to take for testing. "It would be really fucking helpful if we could get eyes on the police reports."

"I'll reach out to Stafford to see if he can help." Stafford Jones was an SFPD detective we used often back in San Francisco, and if anyone could get the cops to open up, it was him. I hoped.

"You think Seattle PD will talk to an outsider?"

"I don't know, but I'm hopeful." Stafford hadn't let us down yet, and it was worth a phone call to get the ball moving again.

"I'm going to take a look at these samples under a microscope to see what else I can learn about the explosives. Do you need anything else today?"

I glanced down at my watch and shook my head. “No. I’ll reach out to Stafford and finish going through Tom’s work laptop and threats.”

“Sounds good. Tell Willow I said hello.” He laughed when I flipped him off. “Guess I’ll tell her myself, then.”

I knew the guys would get a lot of mileage out of my apparent interest in Willow and I’d prepared myself for it, but the one thing I absolutely could not have prepared myself for was the woman herself.

I returned to the apartment and she was sprawled across on the sofa, sleeping peacefully. She was beautiful, even in sleep, but more than that she was relaxed. Gone were the frowns that plagued her waking hours. Now, like this, she was just stunning.

And the strip of midsection on display wasn’t helping matters, dammit.

I locked the door and rushed to my room, eager to wash away the vision of Willow in a small pair of shorts and a worn t-shirt that left little to the imagination.

As much as I wanted Willow, it was an ill-advised attraction. I’d seen it too many times, a protector grew too attached to his protectee and it ended badly for both of them. You couldn’t scan for threats if you were too busy gazing lovingly into your client’s eyes. You couldn’t see the world clearly if you weren’t watching the world, and this case was too important to put myself in that position, so I did what any logical, sane, horny man would.

I took things into my own hands.

Underneath the hot spray of the shower, I stroked my cock as I imagined Willow might. I tugged in long, quick strokes and thought about her teasing me, rubbing her thumb over the slick bead of arousal at the tip of my cock. I thought of what it would be like if she was in the shower with me now, on her knees as she stroked my cock until I was hard and aching, begging for her touch. Would she flick a tongue over the head



of my cock, or would she wrap her lips around me and take me deeper and deeper into her mouth?

Would she swallow me down or rinse me from her mouth? I thought of it both ways, imagining her smile as my cock nudged her opening, the anticipatory breath she would suck in during that moment between teasing her and sinking into her heat. Fire shot up my spine as I imagined her pulsing around me, leaking around me as the friction grew slicker and slicker.

“Fuck,” I growled as my sac tightened and my spine tensed, stroking myself until long jets of pleasure streamed from my body and swirled with the steaming water until it circled the drain. “Shit!” It was a desperately needed release, yet it did nothing to curb my attraction to Willow, nothing to stop me from wanting her.

Sated but not satisfied, I wrapped the towel around my waist and left the bathroom in a hurry. Too bad it wasn’t fast enough to avoid another glimpse of Willow.

“Shane?”

I froze in the middle of the hallway with the woman torturing me every second we were together less than five feet away from me. “Yes?”

Her eyes widened, first in shock, and then they filled with heat. It wasn’t just a regular heat, it was white-hot, and when she licked her lips, I felt my cock spring back to life. “Um.” She looked away, but her eyes flickered back to my bare torso again and again. “Um.”

I smiled, happy to see she was as messed up about this attraction as I was. “Can this wait until I put some clothes on?”

Her gaze returned to mine and one brow arched. “Oh, are you not dressed appropriately?”

“Willow,” I growled, and didn’t miss the way her nostrils flared.

“Shane. Did you find out anything today?”

“Not as much as I would have liked, but we made some progress. Did you remember anything else?”

“No.” Her shoulders fell but her eyes remained fixed on my chest and abs. “Yeah, maybe you should put some clothes on. You must be...cold.”

“Freezing,” I replied, as the intensity of her gaze heated my body more than the hot shower.

“Okay, you do that and I’ll be out here. Are you hungry?”

“Starved.”

Her blue eyes went wide and she nodded as she took a few steps back. “Oh, um, okay. Got it. I made some, uh, food.”

“Sounds good.”

“Yep, it does.” Her gaze was still fixed on my body and my body appreciated her appreciation a little too much.

I took a step forward and Willow took a step back. “Willow.”

She blinked. “Yes?” Her voice was low and husky and without thinking, she took a step forward.

I took another step forward and we continued this dance until mere inches separated us. Her breath hitched and my jaw clenched.

I reached out and wrapped a lock of blond hair around my finger. Willow’s eyes fluttered closed and she leaned into me, putting one hand on my bare chest.

A loud, frantic knock sounded on the front door, which effectively broke the spell.

Willow leapt back and put a hand on the wall to steady herself. “I should, uh, go see who’s at the door. And you might want to put some clothes on.” She turned and rushed down the hall.

“Is that what you want?”

She turned back to me, her blue eyes narrowed to slits. “No, but that is probably exactly why you should,” she admitted with total honesty. “In fact, put on some layers.”

I laughed and she continued towards the front door.

“Don’t open the door,” I called after her. “We don’t know who is out there.”

“I’m just seeing who it is. The door is bulletproof, right?”

“Do you really want to test that theory?” I asked as I dressed quickly, knowing it would be Zac, Alec, or one of my brothers at the door. Whoever it was, I wanted to kiss and kill them for interrupting that moment with Willow.

Would that moment have led to another moment? A kiss? A taste of her?

Would my shower fantasies have come true if not for the interruption?

I had no more answers for what to do about Willow than I had about who had killed Tom, and one was more pressing than the other. “Down boy.” My cock, my needs, and my desires would have to wait.

There was work to be done, and it started with keeping Willow safe from whoever had tossed that brick through her window and blew up Tom and Ella’s house.

After that was done, I would have my head examined.

I opened the door to find Zac standing there. “I’ve finished up with the microscope, boss,” he told me. “There were no surprises, of course. We know this bombing was set up by someone with skills. I just wish knowing that was of any help.”

# Chapter Eleven

## *Willow*

The past few mornings hadn't been kind to me, and when I emerged from the bathroom after a long, hot shower, a quick prayer to the porcelain god was followed by another shower, I felt ready for bed again. My stomach was empty and my head was so damned foggy I didn't know how I made it to the kitchen without bumping into everything.

"Sit," Shane barked, and I looked up until our gazes collided.

"Excuse me?" The man was as bossy as he was handsome.

"Sit down. You look like a strong wind might knock you over."

"I am not a dog, Shane."

"I never said you were." He gave me his strong back again. Today, those muscles were covered in a mint-green shirt tucked into dark gray slacks that cupped his well-formed ass perfectly.

*I must be crazy.* Instead of staring at the image of masculine beauty before me, I buried my face in my hands and inhaled and exhaled deeply until the lingering sense of nausea faded. A loud thud sounded beside me, startling me, and I wiped a hand down my face.

"Drink this."

My gaze slid to a steaming mug full of dark liquid beside me, and the one in front of him. "I can't drink coffee right now, not even decaf."

"It's not coffee. It's tea, and it's the best thing for nausea."

I arched a brow at him. "Are you an expert on morning sickness?"

“No.” Shane said nothing for a long time and I figured he would leave it at that. He took the chair across from me at the small table, his gaze taking in every detail of my disheveled appearance. “I was injured, and one of the lasting effects of that injury is headaches that get so bad they make me sick to my stomach.” I remembered, then, the interrupted conversation we had about this days and days ago in the living room while I was doing yoga. He’d brushed it off then, but I saw now that maybe Adrian’s words weren’t as dramatic as Shane would have had me believe. “I’ve tried every anti-nausea medication the US military has access to, and there are only two things that work.”

His gaze was still focused on me so intensely I found myself touching my hair self-consciously, and when I spoke my voice wavered slightly. “How were you injured?”

He shrugged. “It’s a long story, but a bullet grazed my head. It was just deep enough to cause these damn headaches.” His jaw clenched and his nostrils flared, both surefire signs that whatever had happened still bothered him.

“I have time to listen,” I told him, even though I knew he wouldn’t share it with me.

“It’s not a pretty story, Willow.”

I let out a loud huff of laughter. “War stories usually aren’t, but talking about it might help lessen the burden. Or the guilt. Or the pain.” It was obvious to me that he was still in pain over whatever had happened, and if I could help even a little, I wanted to.

His lips pulled into a grin that lacked any joy or amusement. “Our unit was on patrol one day in the desert. Me and Tom, Alec and Zac, and the rest of our unit were out there when we saw the Taliban attempt to kidnap a local woman.” His gaze took him back to the past and he had a white-knuckle grip on the still-steaming mug.

“Did you know her?”

“Not really, I mean, we all knew of her because she taught at a secret school for girls, which is why they were trying to

kidnap her. Those guys aren't too keen on the idea of women being educated." He shook his head. "I stepped in to save her and all hell broke loose. Gunfire erupted from all sides, at least that's the way it always seems in those canyons, but I had the woman and she was safe."

"Was?"

"She shouted something none of us but Tom understood. He rushed us and knocked us to the ground just as bullets rained down from one of the ridges above. If he hadn't acted that bullet would've gone straight through my head. He got a bullet to his shoulder for his efforts, but the woman caught one right in the lungs. She died in my arms, and I later found out another man was dishonorably discharged for her murder. It wasn't even the enemy who'd shot her."

"Holy shit. I mean, Tom is a certified badass first of all, right?" He was such a buttoned-up guy it was hard to imagine him like that, but it made sense why Shane and his men were hellbent on getting justice for him and Ella.

Shane smiled. "He was just a guy who saw what needed to be done and did it, that's what made him a hero."

I did my best to process his story, to take it in as a real thing that happened instead of imagining it like some sort of movie. But it was so...so surreal to hear it, especially with the emotionless way Shane spoke of it. I didn't really know how I was supposed to react.

On instinct, I reached forward and touched the back of his hand.

"That's a lot. I'm sorry."

He stared down at my fingers, a muscle in his jaw jumping, but he didn't otherwise move or speak.

"How are you even a functioning person after that?" I hadn't meant to say it, and as soon as the words left me I worried that they would sound insulting. But he just snorted and looked up at me.

"Who says I am?"

I pursed my lips at that, and curled my fingers around so that I was holding firmly onto his warm, rough palm.

“You run a successful business, and you spend every day of your life protecting people. After everything you dealt with in the service, you decided to come out and continue to be a hero. You’re still a badass, just one that wears expensive suits now instead of...whatever SEALs wear in the field.”

His eyes dropped back down to our hands, and after a moment, his fingers curled around mine and squeezed.

I sighed. “Did it hurt, getting shot?”

“Yes and no,” he said quietly. “I was so worried about the woman that I didn’t notice at first, not until Caleb pressed a cloth to my head and it hurt like a son of a bitch. Thirty minutes later I was on a surgical table with lots of drugs, and she was dead.”

I stared at Shane with new eyes. He was still handsome and bossy, but he was a man with layers, hidden depths he didn’t like to show the world. Silly me, I was desperate to see more of that side. “I’m sorry you went through all that.”

He looked away, as if embarrassed.

“And thank you for the tea.”

He cleared his throat and shifted, leaning back in his chair and letting go of my hand as he looked around the room, suddenly avoiding my eye contact, as if embarrassed by his emotions. “Feeling better?”

“Some,” I replied, leaning back as well and deciding to let the matter drop. It seemed clear to me that he was possibly a bit overwhelmed at that moment and needed a break from his own thoughts. “It’s lessened but it’s still there, just waiting to wreak havoc on my day.” Luckily my days lately were just plain boring.

After a moment, he leaned back over and extended his palm across the table, although his eyes were still not meeting mine.

“Give me your hand.”

I extended my arm to him, and his thumb and forefinger gripped the inside of my wrist. “Make sure your palm is facing you and move your fingers like this, down to this spot.” His fingers fluttered against my skin as if afraid to touch me as he showed me what to do. “Massage gently.” Shane’s actions matched his words, and the relief was instant.

So was the heat and the arousal that shot through my body. My nipples beaded at his gentle touch. It was strictly therapeutic, but the tenderness of his touch and his voice, his desire to help, and the moment we just shared, was more than my hormonal body could bear. I could feel his vulnerability, and it opened a similar emotion in myself.

When his fingers gently massaged against a certain point in my palm, a loud, damn near erotic moan escaped me, and I instantly tried to pull my hand away. “Sorry.”

He didn’t let go.

“Don’t be,” he whispered, and those green eyes of his made their way back up to mine, heated and open. “Especially if it helps.”

“It helped,” I assured him, a little breathless. “A lot. Thank you.”

His gaze lingered on my face for a second longer than was necessary and then, as if he realized what he was doing or who I was, Shane released me and shoved his chair back from the table. “No problem. I’ll bring back some salty crackers and ginger beer.”

I blinked. “Beer?”

“It’s not actually beer, but it has less sugar and a stronger ginger flavor than soda. It’s effective for nausea, I promise.”

I felt a bit bewildered at the topic change. “You haven’t been wrong yet.”

Shane’s face split into a grin. “Now you’re getting the idea.”

A sharp knock sounded on the apartment door, the sound yanking a gasp out of me. “Sorry. I guess I’m jumpy.”



“I’d be surprised if you weren’t,” he said, and headed towards the door. “It’s Alec, Zac, and Dewey,” he said a second before he opened the door. Dewey? I hadn’t heard that name before. A man in his early twenties with mousy brown hair and light brown eyes stood behind everyone.

“We’re going to meet with someone who sells black market explosive materials,” Shane continued, “Dewey here will stay with you. He’s new, but no one else is free now and you’ll be in here safe behind these walls anyway. We’ll only be an hour.”

Dewey was well built and dressed smartly, but something about his expression seemed out of place. He didn’t carry himself with the ease of the others, and I figured if he was new on the job, he might be feeling out of place surrounded by the well-established team.

“Okay,” I said as I stared at everyone. “Is there anything I can do?”

Four sets of eyes turned to me and not one of them did a damn thing to hide their shock at my offer. “Seriously?” Zac shook his head. “The woman pregnant with the child of a recently murdered couple while the man who did it is still out at large, and probably trying to track her down for another dose of murder, wants to head out and play with explosives?”

I glared. “I didn’t say *that*.”

“It’s best if you don’t get involved, Willow,” Alec said kindly, as the newcomer Dewey entered the room, and then he came to stand next to me as if afraid I would bolt out the door and he’d have to catch me.

I rolled my eyes and crossed my arms. “Yeah, I get that, but I’m bored and pregnant and scared, and if there’s anything I can do to occupy my time and help, that would be good for all of us. Right?”

The men all stared at each other, probably trying to figure out who would tell the pregnant woman she was useless to help them. Shane, being the boss, had been silently designated to speak for them all. “There is something you can do.”

I blinked. “There is?”

Alec also blinked. “There is?”

Shane crossed the room into his bedroom before he returned with a black flash drive. “This is every digital footprint left behind by Tom and Ella. It’s mostly her, since he didn’t have much of a social media presence, but go through every photo and see if you can find the man you spotted at the funeral. Copy every photo you think might be him into a separate folder.”

I wrapped my hand around the drive and ignored the heat that sparked an electrical current from his flesh to mine. “I can do that. Thanks.”

Shane headed towards the door. Before leaving, his gaze locked on mine. “Stay here. Don’t leave the apartment, don’t leave the building. Got it?”

“Got it,” I told him with a salute.

Left in the quiet apartment with a stranger who awkwardly sat on the couch and looked around with a squinty expression, I grabbed the basic black laptop and got comfortable on the second sofa.

I went through hundreds of photos of Tom and Ella’s life together. They had tons of friends who showed up for dinner parties, holidays, and birthdays. They had a happy life filled with love and smiles and a big loving circle of family and friends. It was a life to envy, one that left a big hole with them gone.

One tear slipped down my cheek and then another and another. Before long I was in the middle of a full-on crying session, sad over the fact that Tom and Ella would never meet their child, that someone had killed them in such a horrific way.

Dewey came to my side, one hand hovering awkwardly over my shaking shoulder, and a completely overwhelmed expression on his face. “Is, uh... Are you alright? Can I help?”

“It’s just *everything*,” I sobbed, curling my arms around myself and hunching forward. “I’m carrying the child of a

dead couple... Do you know how depressing that is? How incredibly sad? This kid will never know their real parents, and we don't even know why. Why did they have to die?"

"Uh..." Dewey's voice wavered before a hand settled tentatively on my back and gave me a few cursory pats. "There, there... Everything will be alright."

"Oh no!" The tears had triggered another wave of nausea, and I shoved Dewey aside and rushed to the bathroom, where I managed to lose the nice cup of tea I'd had.

"Uh, Willow, ma'am?"

"I'm alright," I called through the closed bathroom door, "go back to the couch. I swear, it's just the hormones. I feel like I'm going crazy."

"If you're sure..."

When my only response was to hurl into the toilet once more, Dewey finally gave up and I heard his footsteps head back to the living room.

A quick glance at my phone said Shane had only been gone about thirty minutes, which meant it would be at least another thirty before he returned, if not longer. I set my phone on the sink counter and slumped over the toilet seat. I needed something other than the tea to settle my stomach. I tried to wait it out, but crumpled on the bathroom floor. The feeling wouldn't go away even when I did the hand massage Shane had taught me.

And my thoughts only continued to spiral.

Mixed with hormones, grief, insecurity about my future, and pure, horrible nausea, I felt almost drunk on the combination, and I couldn't stand it anymore. I leapt off the floor and ripped open the small bathroom window, desperate for some fresh air. As I took in deep lungfuls, I glanced down and saw that just across the street was a drugstore, one of the big ones that had lots of security cameras all around.

It would be perfectly safe to pop over there real quick. I could leave and be back before Shane ever knew I was gone.

The streets below were busy, which meant I would be fine. Plus, I had Dewey, who was a trained bodyguard.

Dashing into my room, I grabbed my wallet and hurried out through the living space and opened the door.

“Ma’am?”

Dewey leapt off the couch, and I sent him a woeful look as another bout of nausea hit me.

“We’re going to the drug store,” I said before swallowing thickly to try and push down another wave of vomit before it started. “Hurry up.”

“What the...” But I was already out and pushing on the elevator button. “*Wait, Miss Willow!*”

The doors slid open, and I stepped in and turned to watch as Dewey’s bewildered face appeared at the door, which he slammed behind him before diving into the elevator just as the doors pinged shut.

“Are you crazy? We have to go back up!”

“I need anti-nausea drugs,” I said before I gagged and shoved my hand and wallet over my lips to hold it all back.

“No, Mr. Stone said we need to stay inside.”

“I’m going to vomit on you,” I whispered, my eyes wide and pleading, and he backed up a step. “The drug store is just there across the road, we won’t be more than two minutes.”

“Miss Willow, we have to go back up,” he said firmly, although he was eyeing me like I was a wild animal about to spit poison at him.

“You’re a bodyguard, aren’t you?” I told him as the elevator lurched to indicate we were hitting ground floor, which only made my stomach roil more. “So guard my body.”

“But I don’t have my weapon!” I heard him cry as the doors slid open and I raced out, but it was here. The puke was here and there was nothing I could do to stop it, so I ran the few steps through the lobby to get fresh air into my lungs and hurl on the pavement instead of on the nice lobby tiles.

*No weapon? Well, shit,* I thought, as I deposited nasty chunks against the concrete of the alleyway just two paces from the building's entrance.

"*Miss Willow!*" Dewey sounded both frustrated and worried as his footsteps reached me, which was an odd combo. "*Please.*"

I grabbed his arm for support as I got the last of the chunks out, before taking several deep, gasping breaths and wiping my mouth with the back of my hand.

"Why," I asked a little breathlessly, "don't you have a weapon?"

Now he looked both angry and worried, which was an even odder mix. "You ran out so quickly! What was I supposed to do? I didn't have time to grab it as I chased you."

I sighed forlornly and stepped away from him, leaning into the wall for a second and closing my eyes as the bustle of people walking on the busy street behind washed over me. I was just a few steps away from my savior; drugs. But instead, I had to turn around and go right back up.

"Alright, let's go back," I whispered, but then a grunt and a crumpling sound reached my ears, like a sack of potatoes hitting the ground, and when I turned around I was faced with a wide, unfamiliar chest. "What...?"

Thick arms suddenly wrapped around me in a bear hug that completely pinned me down, and I gasped.

I started to squirm to get out of the grip, my brain not quite catching up to what was going on yet but my body definitely reacting, when I realized the man who'd grabbed me had a rag in his hand and it smelled awful. Like chemicals.

"No! Get away! Somebody, help! Please!" But he only squeezed me tighter and tried to bring the wet rag up to my face. I noticed Dewey's polished shoes only just peeking out from behind a dumpster, and I struggled even harder.

# Chapter Twelve

## *Shane*

“Huntington fucking Security! I should have known those unscrupulous assholes were going to be involved.” Alec’s words mirrored my own thoughts. The source for explosives had given us several local names who had bought at least half the materials needed to make the kind of bomb that blew up Tom’s house.

Huntington Security was our biggest competitor on the West Coast. Located in Seattle, the company was identical to mine in nearly every way, from the number of former armed services members on staff, to the areas of security provided. Where we differed was that Sam Huntington had no problems breaking the law to make his clients happy. There were rumors of kidnappings and extortion, but nothing concrete enough to put them out of business.

“I just want to know why they were surveilling Tom’s house.” The only reasonable explanation was that the killer had hired them.

“I could reach out to Sara Beth, see if I can tease some intel from her.” Zac wiggled his eyebrows with a wide grin. “She always hits me up when she comes to San Francisco.”

Huntington’s receptionist was a good place to start. “Tread lightly since its likely she doesn’t know anything.”

Zac’s smile widened. “The things I do for this company.”

“Getting paid to get laid,” Alec joked. “Makes you a whore, doesn’t it?”

“Maybe. Jealous?”

“Hell no, Sarah Beth has stage five clinger vibes all over her.” He shook his head with a visible shudder. “Good luck. I hope you get some intel for the hassle you’re about to have on your hands.”

I turned onto the street where The Towers were located and slammed on the brakes. A sense of déjà vu washed over me as I spotted a woman struggling with a man twice her size. “Guys,” I barked, and darted out of the car. In several long strides I was beside them. Having a few inches on him, I grabbed the man by his collar and yanked him back until a few feet separated him from the woman. “Miss, are you—Willow? What the fuck!” I couldn’t believe she had ignored my warnings and her safety.

“We got ’em,” Zac said as they grabbed the man’s arms and hauled him inside the building before the busy passersby on the street could make a crowd around the drama.

I turned back to Willow with a dark expression on my face. “What in the hell are you doing out here on the street? Did you forget that someone threw a brick through your window? Broke into your home?” I held back the string of curses on the tip of my tongue as I gripped her forearms.

“Dewey!” she gasped, clutching at my suit jacket to get herself steady, before looking around. “He got Dewey! Oh my God, is he alright? I need to check on him!”

I immediately turned my head to where she was looking and saw a set of legs poking out from behind the dumpster.

“*Alec*,” I bellowed, not caring as a woman on the street startled at my voice and then glared at me as she walked off. “*Alec, come back out.*”

I was already walking towards the body, Willow wrapped protectively within my arms, when Alec joined us back outside.

There was no sight of blood, and Alec immediately crouched beside him and checked for breathing and a pulse, since I was not about to let go of Willow.

“Alive,” he sighed in relief. “His pulse is strong. Fuck, what happened?”

“It’s my fault,” Willow whispered, tears already beginning to fill her eyes.

“You’re damn right it’s your fault,” I snapped, anger pulsing through me like a wild thing. Anger and fear. Anything could have happened to her just now. *Anything*.

“I’m sorry...”

“Sorry isn’t good enough!” I pushed her back from my chest so I could glare at her, although I kept my hands firmly on her. I wasn’t sure I’d ever be able to let go of her again, after this. “I was gone for forty minutes, Willow. *Forty. What the fuck were you thinking, leaving the premises?*”

“Shane,” Alec said, a little more firmly than I’m used to, and I turned my glare to him. “You’re shaking her.”

“Maybe she needs someone to shake some sense into her!”

He stood up, gray eyes boring seriously into mine, and put a hand on my shoulder. “Why don’t you take her upstairs, where it’s safe? Zac is dealing with the would-be kidnapper in a secure room, and I’ll stay here to make sure the med team gets to Dewey.”

I took a long, slow breath and loosened my grip, noticing Willow’s small wince as I did so.

Fuck, I didn’t mean to actually hurt her.

I grumbled at Willow, “You. Upstairs. Now.”

She walked inside with me without a fuss, without a word, until the elevator doors shut before us and we were alone again.

And then I was the one who broke the silence, unable to hold it in. “Tell me why you disobeyed a direct order, Willow.”

“I...” I had one hand wrapped around her bicep, and she did nothing to move further away, or closer. “I’m sorry, I...”

“I didn’t ask for an apology,” I growled, although I hated the way she winced at my tone. “Tell me why.”

“I was feeling sick,” she all but whispered, looking down at the ground, blonde strands falling forward to partially shield her face from me. “The drug store was only just across the road. I took Dewey with me, I didn’t think—”



“That’s right, Willow, you didn’t think, did you?” I interrupted, and her lips sealed shut, squeezing together tightly and hiding all of their plumpness from my view.

The elevator doors opened to our floor, and we stepped out in silence.

Once we entered the apartment and the door locked behind us, Willow went quickly to the sink to grab her probably cold teacup and started to sip at it almost compulsively. I gave her a moment before I continued scolding.

“It was stupid of you to leave.”

We stood opposite each other in the empty space between the kitchen and living space, me with my hands balled into fists at my side, and Willow with an arm wrapped around her midsection.

“I know.”

“You could have been hurt, the baby could have been hurt. You could have been *killed*.” And that was the real reason I was so damn furious. Realizing it was Willow that was being manhandled by the unknown person had stopped my heart cold. She was becoming too important to me, and that was dangerous.

“I’m sorry,” she said so quietly I almost couldn’t hear her. “It’s a good thing you came back when you did.”

I nodded, but I still wasn’t calm. “Lucky for you I pulled up when I did, or else you’d already be wherever he planned to take you.”

She sucked in a breath and looked up at me with wide, fear-filled eyes, clumsily placing her teacup down. “I said I was sorry, what else do you want from me?”

“A promise that you won’t do something so stupid again. I hope this has proven to you that this is all very real, Willow. I’m not just being overly cautious.”

“I know.”

“This person used a bomb to kill two people. It was overkill, which means it was highly personal, and that means the target

on your back is very real.” Just the idea of what that man planned to do to her terrified me. “You smelled that cloth in his hand?”

She looked away. “A little. He didn’t get it over my mouth.”

“That smell was chloroform. He was going to knock you out and take you somewhere, either for ransom or something else.”

Her blue eyes slammed shut. “Stop! I understand, okay? I shouldn’t have done it and it was stupid and reckless of me. Understood.”

The silence intensified until it was its own living and breathing thing between us.

“Willow.”

She dropped down on the sofa and turned to me, the sight of her blue eyes, red rimmed from tears she refused to let fall, made my gut tighten. “What?”

“I’m sorry for being harsh.” I was surprised to hear my voice come out hoarse as I said this, and I squeezed my fists harder as I stared down at her. “I can be very mission-oriented when it comes to my clients, but that’s no excuse and I apologize.”

A small smile tipped up the corners of her mouth. “I’m sorry too. I did all kinds of mental gymnastics to convince myself that going was safe enough. Turns out I was wrong.” She looked away and I could see the instant her adrenaline wore off and the shock of the situation, the reality of what could have happened to her, sank in. “It was stupid.” The words came out just above a whisper. She started to tremble, and I went to her and wrapped my arms around her. “I’m sorry.”

I rubbed my hands up and down her arms which were cool to the touch. “You were thinking that you were sick and would do and risk anything to stop it. Lesson learned. Right?”

She nuzzled against my chest and I held her close while she cried.

The sound was heartbreaking, but Willow was stronger than she gave herself credit for and I wanted, no, I needed her to know that.

“Stop.” The word was firm but not unkind, and Willow pulled back with a gasp, her blue eyes shocked as she looked up at me. “Don’t cry. Please.”

“I could have died.”

“But you didn’t. Willow, you did the only thing you could have in that situation, you fought like hell. You fought long enough for us to get here and help you. If you hadn’t, who knows where you would be right now.”

She shook her head. “Still.”

“You learned that you should always listen to me and that’s good. But you also learned that you’re a fighter, remember that. Let’s just hope you don’t need fight again anytime soon.”

Her shoulders relaxed and her lush mouth pulled into a reluctant grin. “I won’t,” she promised. “At least no one but you.” She gave my chest a light poke, and then another, slightly harder. “We seem to fight a lot.” She pushed me again.

I grabbed her wrists and pulled her close. The air between us stilled, and even though I knew it was a bad idea, I also knew that my brain had shut down and my desire for this woman had taken over. One arm banded around her waist to pull her onto my lap and the other buried itself in her thick blond hair. A heartbeat later, my mouth crashed down over hers. She tasted a little bitter from her mouthfuls of tea, but I didn’t care, her tongue plump and wet against mine as they danced together.

Willow gasped and I drank from her mouth with the fervor of a thirsty man lost in the desert, knowing that she would pull away at any moment, hell, knowing that I should be the one to pull away. But I couldn’t, not when she was so warm and so soft and tasted like heaven. She wriggled on my lap until she straddled me, the heat between her thighs covering my erection and her hips rocking in a slow, back and forth motion while I savored the depths of her mouth.

“Oh!” My hips thrust up against her and her head fell back, separating our mouths for just a brief moment.

She continued to rock against me, the scent of her arousal driving me wild as much as the taste of her.

A loud, sharp knock sounded on the door but neither of us made a move to separate. The knock came again, louder, as our breaths turned shallow and Willow’s hips moved faster and faster. The third time, the knock became a fist pounding on the door, and finally my good sense returned to me. I pulled back and stared at Willow, who stared back at me with lust-heavy lids, kiss-swollen lips, and a heaving chest.

“Wow.”

“Indeed,” I agreed, and gripped her waist so I could lift her off me. “I’d better get that,” I told her, and stood, taking time to adjust my swollen cock behind my zipper.

She flashed a satisfied smile. “Maybe untuck your shirt too.”

I did that and opened the door for Zac and Alec, who rushed in and sat on the sofa, putting enough distance between me and Willow so I could focus on them instead of the taste of her that lingered on my lips. “What’s up?”

“Liam Crown is how Willow and Ella knew him, but his real name is Gordon Crane.”

“Wait! Is Dewey okay?” Willow’s voice was a little breathless, and some might mistake that for worry, but I could still see the faint flush to her cheeks and her lips, which had only been between my own just a few seconds ago...

“Dewey is fine,” Alec said gently, “he’s already awake again. The team got to him quick, and he’s under observation but he’ll be okay. Just a little bump.”

“So,” Zac said, impatient to get his story out, “Liam already had the fake name, but he didn’t become a food blogger until after he fell in love with Ella.”

I still couldn’t believe Ella had cheated on Tom, but that wasn’t the important part now. “How did they meet?”

“The old-fashioned way,” Alec answered. “At a bar. Ella was there drinking away her worries after another miscarriage. He was there on the prowl, and when he saw her, according to him, *he just knew*. Said she was an angel sent from heaven especially for him.”

“Seriously?” Willow asked.

Zac nodded. “Yep. At least that’s what he’s just told us.” He grinned a feral, viscous sort of grin and cracked his knuckles. “After all the incentive I gave him to be truthful, I believe him. She was broken and her marriage was headed for divorce, and an affair started, hot and heavy and very intense. Romantic dinners, getaways, jewelry, the full court press.”

“He fell hard,” Alec picked up where Zac left off. “The thing is, he’s got a bit of a record. Jace managed to find a psyche report that the dude has one of those compulsive love disorders. The cops arrested him for domestic issues enough times that they had it done; I’m amazed he was ever let out on bail, but hell, you can only hold a person so long without pressing actual charges. He’s obsessive, but to his victims he just seems smitten at first. As soon as Ella decided to fix things with Tom, she realized her mistake.”

“He’s the one who threatened her?” I asked, even though I knew the answer.

“Yeah. Jace hacked into his accounts and found everything, all the typewritten notes he left for her, the vague threats meant to scare her into coming back to him.” Zac turned to Willow. “He found out about you by stalking her and he’s the one who threw the brick through your window.”

Willow blinked. “So he’s the one who killed them?”

“No,” Alec answered. “He just wanted to scare you into leaving your house because he was upset about Ella’s death.”

“But why? It doesn’t make sense.”

Alec and Zac both looked at me and then to Willow. “He wanted to snatch you and take you somewhere to induce a miscarriage. He blames the baby for taking Ella away from him for good.”

“But he didn’t kill them? How can you be sure?” Willow stared at me and waited for an answer.

“If he had the opportunity to get close enough to bomb the house, he would have risked everything to take Ella with him. The only way a guy like that would kill her is by accident, to prevent her from leaving him.”

“Right,” Zac agreed, and held up his phone. “Jace confirmed he never threatened Tom, and nothing in his past or internet searches indicates he’s a proficient bomb maker.”

Alec turned to Willow. “Is this the guy from the funeral?”

She examined the photo for a long moment before she gave a decisive shake of her head. “No. His nose is too round and too wide. It’s not him.” She sighed, and her hands fidgeted nervously. “How did he know where I was?”

“That’s the fucking kicker,” Alec growled, and banged a fist on the coffee table. “Someone sent him a message saying you were at The Towers.”

My mind raced with the possibilities of who would do that and why. “This is personal.”

“I’m inclined to agree,” Zac said. “But why do you think so?”

“The killer has to be the one who hired Huntington Security. He learned of Ella’s affair through their surveillance, which is how he knew about Crane.” I closed my eyes as all the pieces started to slide into place. “And this last bit. He told Crane where Willow was, which means he knows too, but he’s made no effort to show up and finish the job.”

“Assuming he wants to,” Alec added. “Crane was the obsessive one, and the police have already scooped him up on outstanding warrants for stalking half a dozen other women.”

“But why send Crane here if they were done with the matter? No, we now know Tom was the target. That baby is a piece of Tom, but they aren’t his only connections.”

“You mean us?”

I nodded. It was the only thing that made sense, but with long careers in the Navy, it could be one of hundreds, possibly thousands of men. “We have to keep digging.” I didn’t have all the answers yet, but this all felt very personal.

# Chapter Thirteen

## *Willow*

Between Shane's heart-stopping kisses and the news that the man who attacked me on the street was not the person who killed Tom and Ella, which meant this craziness wasn't over, sleep didn't come easy. I tossed and turned most of the night, my mind plagued with images of Shane and I naked and sweat-slicked as we brought each other to the heights of pleasure. Those images were only interrupted by all the ways today could have ended differently. That guy, Liam—no, *Gordon*, wanted to induce a miscarriage with no thought at all to my safety or well-being.

It was all too much, and sometime just before the sun started to streak the sky with shades of orange and gold, I gave up all pretense of sleep and stared up at the ceiling. Thinking. I had a crush on the world's least attainable man, I was pregnant with a child that technically wasn't mine but I had decided to assume responsibility for, and I had no real means of support. "Stop!" None of this helped my current situation, so I tried turning to more pleasant thoughts, or rather fantasies.

Images of Shane's broad shoulders pushing my thighs apart came to the forefront and my body heated up, my thighs tingling as if the scruff of his jaw was actually there, rubbing against the sensitive flesh. Even the sounds of his tongue sliding between my damp folds, the guttural growl I imagined he would let out with every cry and every moan of pleasure.

As the images bombarded me, my hand found its way between my thighs, slipping through my slick heat with a ferocity I hadn't felt in years. Fantasy Shane brought me to orgasm quickly and I collapsed against the soft mattress for a few more minutes before I decided to get up and get started on my day—my boring, aimless day.

I made scrambled eggs and toast for breakfast and washed it down with a hot mug of tea to stop the morning sickness



before it could get started. It wasn't the tastiest meal I'd ever eaten but it did the trick.

"Smells good." Shane's deep voice startled me out of my thoughts and I looked up at his handsome, freshly shaved face.

"I made breakfast. Enough for you too."

"Thanks."

Breakfast conversation was stilted and awkward and I was relieved to see that a worldly man like Shane was just as thrown off by that kiss as I was. But he was my only real contact and I couldn't live with even less conversation.

"I'd like to check in on Ivy and Lottie today. *Not in person,*" I quickly added when his piercing green gaze sliced up to mine. "Maybe I can call them?"

He finished chewing. "That can be arranged. I'll have Jace set up a secure connection, even though I'm not sure it's necessary if whoever killed Tom knows where you are. Where we are."

His theory from last night came back to me. "You really think this could have something to do with you guys too?" The idea that it wasn't just me under attack but the men charged with protecting me only made me feel more uneasy.

"I do. If I'm the killer and I know where you are, I'm finding a way inside and taking care of business, no matter what. This toying with us? It's personal, so I can only assume it's aimed at me or one of my team members."

"Wow. This is really starting to feel like a spy movie or something, and not in a good way."

Shane laughed. "It's only fun to watch, trust me."

"I do." The words came out easily even though I hadn't meant them to, but I didn't bother to walk it back because I did trust Shane. I trusted him with my life.

"Thanks for breakfast. I don't usually have time for more than coffee." He rubbed at his temples and I slid my mug across the table.

“Another headache?”

“Not yet, but it feels like one is coming.” He flashed a grateful smile and lifted the mug to his lips, draining it in seconds. “I’d better get going before this damn headache takes me out for the whole day. Zac and I are going to check out a few leads. Alec will be here all day, right next door. He’ll mostly be working in here with you, but he may need to dip in and out briefly throughout the day. That button there,” he pointed to the intercom by the door, as if I didn’t already know about it, “is connected directly to him. If he isn’t here and you so much as hear a mouse fart, I want you to smack that button like your life depends on it. Got it?”

His pointed look made me smile. “Don’t worry, I’ve learned my lesson.”

Shane let out an unexpected laugh and the sound was rugged and masculine, deep and rumbling, and a little bit rusty like he didn’t laugh often. “Wasn’t sure I’d ever hear you say that. Need anything?”

“No, thanks. I’m going to talk to my sister and finish going through those photos in search of the man at the funeral.” His gaze lingered on mine, and I wondered if he could tell that I’d started my day with a nice orgasm provided by his fantasy twin.

Finally his gaze left my face and I was free to breath, to think clearly again. “Jace will call you and walk you through the secure set up to talk to your sister.”

“Great. Thanks.”

“Alec will be here in about twenty seconds. Behave.”

“Don’t worry,” I mumbled, “I think I’ve lost my taste for travel.”

He grinned, pushed back his thick black hair, and opened the door just as Alec was raising his hand on the other side for the handle.

“Morning,” Alec said as he strode in, to which Shane only grunted and left.

I felt as if I held my breath until Shane left the apartment, because the moment the lock clicked into place, I was breathless. The man had a ridiculous effect on me that made me feel like a giggling school girl. My heart raced so loudly it blocked out the sounds of traffic below. The butterflies in my stomach made me forget about my mid-morning bout of sickness.

“Good morning, Willow.”

“Morning.”

It was silly to feel this way about a man who was a protector for a living, a professional bodyguard. He probably made all of his clients feel this way. That’s what I told myself and that was what I told Ivy when we were finally able to get connected on a video call and I locked myself away in my room for some privacy.

“But you like him,” she insisted with a wide, cheesy grin on her face.

I rolled my eyes. “Of course I like him. He’s hot as hell, but that could just be the pregnancy hormones.”

Ivy laughed. “And your deader than dead love life before you got preggers.”

“Okay, yes, and that too. He’s very good looking but he’s also kind and sweet, which makes it a lot easier not to throttle him when he’s bossy. I don’t know, Ivy, I just like him and I shouldn’t. A pregnant mom-to-be crushing on a hotter than sin business owner who lives in another state is the literal recipe for heartbreak.”

“Maybe,” she conceded with a smirk. “Tell me what you like about him and we’ll figure this out like we always do. Together.”

I smiled. “Okay. Well, like I said, he’s bossy as hell but he is the boss and his job is to keep people safe, so even though I don’t always like it, I get it. But when he’s not being bossy and serious, he is seriously kind. He gave me this acupressure treatment and tea for morning sickness. When he lets his guard down and talks, there’s so much to him. He’s smart and

unintentionally funny, and he really cares about people.” I blinked away some tears that started to form and brushed them off as pregnancy hormones, even though I suspected they were more than that.

“Well, dear sister, I’m sorry to tell you, but I think your big, bad protector might like you too.”

I shook my head. “Don’t say that. I don’t need any more fuel for this fire, Ivy.”

“I’m serious. Why would he share anything personal with you when that only makes it harder to keep you safe? This is why surgeons don’t operate on family members, they can’t be objective. Think about it.”

“Nope. I can’t, and more importantly, I won’t. Even if you’re right, it can’t become anything. He doesn’t even live here, remember?”

“Geography can be changed. It’s not like either of us has a job that’s good enough to turn your back on love.”

“Love? Oh boy, what are you girls watching over there, nonstop rom-coms?”

Ivy laughed. “Maybe. I think our resident bodyguard, Eros, is starting to come around on romantic comedies, though he pretends to suffer through them.”

“Sounds like you guys are getting along.”

“Yes. He’s a quiet sort, but Lottie has taken to him like I’ve never seen. He even indulges her afternoon tea party.”

“No way!” My eyes were wide with disbelief and Ivy laughed at my expression.

“Way. He can’t even fit his finger through the handle. It’s hilarious and adorable.”

My smile lingered as I wondered if Ivy had a bit of a romance going on herself. “Oh!” I doubled over as a sharp pain started on the left side of my abdomen. The pain pulsed low in my belly and another sharp cry escaped.

“Willow, honey, what’s wrong?”

I shook my head. “Don’t know. Sharp pain.” I turned on the sofa and settled on my back while I inhaled and exhaled slow and deep. “Ow!”

“Oh shit. Eros, call Shane! Something is wrong with Willow!” Ivy’s voice grew faint as she went to wherever Eros was at their own safe house.

“Aunt Willow okay?”

I smiled and turned my head to the screen. “Aunt Willow is okay, just a pain in my tummy.” It was hard to breathe and talk at the same time but I didn’t want to worry my niece.

“Chocolate?”

I laughed around the pain. “I wish it was from too much chocolate, baby girl.” It felt as if an eternity passed before Ivy’s face appeared again.

“Honey just breathe slowly in and slowly out. Yeah, just like that. In and out.” Ivy’s soothing words helped with my panic but did nothing for the pain.

“I think I’m losing the baby, Ivy.”

“Don’t be silly. This happened to me too, remember?”

“But a man tried to chloroform me yesterday,” I finally told her, even though I hadn’t planned to.

“What man? What happened? Tell me everything right this second!”

“Ivy,” I growled. “Later.”

“Right. Eros called Shane and he’ll be there any second now.”

“No need,” I said, worried about interrupting his busy schedule, “Alec is here, he can take me to the hospital.”

“Apparently he was just around the corner, already on his way back to check on you.”

In that moment, I heard a bustle and a bang at the front door, and Shane’s voice in the living room.

“What do you mean ‘what do I mean’? You’re in the damn house with her, and you don’t know she’s having complications?”

I sighed, although it immediately turned into a grimace, and called out, “I’m in here, Shane.”

The door flung open and Shane appeared, gorgeous and worried.

“I’m here.” He stalked across the small room and scooped me up off my bed in his big arms so I was nestled against his broad chest. “Thank you, Ivy. I’ll call later,” he said, and closed the laptop.

“Shane, it’s okay...” I said, although I secretly loved that he’d barged in like this for me.

“Willow!” Alec’s worried face appeared before me as Shane strode back across the apartment. “Why didn’t you tell me something was wrong?”

“It... It happened so quickly, I... Uh... See you later, I guess?”

I barely had time to say anything as Shane powered down the hall, leaving a confused Alec behind.

I had no choice but to wrap my arms around him and hold on tight as he punched the elevator call button with his knee. “Shane.”

His green gaze lowered to mine and our mouths were just a few inches apart. “Are you all right? Tell me what happened.”

I quickly explained about the sharp, shooting pains as the elevator lowered to the basement floor rather than the lobby. “Why are we going to the basement?”

“Extra precautions until we figure out who else knows we’re here.” Shane settled me in the passenger seat of his car and strapped the seat belt across my chest. He paused and put a careful hand on my stomach. “How are you feeling?”

“Scared. What if that chloroform did something to the baby? He didn’t get it over my mouth but I could still smell it.”

“It didn’t,” he said, and closed the car door and jogged around the front.

“But it could have,” I insisted.

“Don’t scare yourself with guesses, Ivy.” He started the engine and pulled out of the parking lot. “Call Caleb,” he ordered his phone’s voice assistant.

“Shane, what’s up, brother?”

Shane maneuvered the car expertly while he spoke to his friend. “I have Willow with me and we’re on our way to the hospital. Sharp pains in the abdomen at two months.”

“Could be the stress of the situation, but I’ll call ahead and talk to the OB/GYN on call to consult. Stay calm, Willow, stressing won’t make this better.”

I nodded even though he couldn’t see me and let out another slow breath.

“He’s right.” Shane finally broke the silence after the call ended. “Just focus on staying calm, okay?”

“Okay.” I turned my gaze to the streets as they whipped by on the way to the hospital. Everyone kept saying stay calm as if it was just that easy, as if any pregnant woman on the planet could stay calm while she was quite possibly losing her baby.

Shane slammed on the brakes right in front of the emergency room doors, jumped out of the car, and ran around to me. He carefully but quickly unstrapped the seat belt, scooped me in his arms. and rushed inside. “I need some help.”

A young nurse did a double take at the breathtaking sight Shane made in his worry. “Sir, what seems to be the problem?”

“She needs a doctor,” he barked, and walked past the woman to deposit me on the first bed he saw.

“I’m sorry, sir, but you can’t do that.”

He settled a hand on my shoulder and turned to the nurse. “It’s already been done. We need to see a doctor, immediately.”

“I understand that, sir, but there is a certain order to these things.”

“*Now*,” he roared, and realized what he’d done. “Please.”

She looked a little afraid and ran quickly from the room before he exploded again.

“Your charm is lacking right now, Shane.”

He let out a huff of laughter. “Didn’t know I had any, so thanks.” He turned a more assessing gaze on me. “How is the pain?”

“Better, but not gone,” I told him honestly, and then a moment later, as if my words had conjured it up, another sharp pain struck.

A doctor appeared wearing a bright smile on her lips. “Mr. and Mrs. Stone, I presume?”

I frowned, but Shane dropped a hand on my shoulder. “Exactly.” He settled on the bed beside me and put a hand on my thigh as he explained my pain to the doctor. “We’re just worried.”

“First baby?”

“Yes,” I squeaked out with a nervous smile.

“Let’s start with your vitals and then an ultrasound to make sure everything is okay. How does that sound?”

“Perfect.” I tried to focus on my breathing and telling myself to stay calm while the doctor took my pulse, my blood pressure, and even my temperature. Nothing worked. I was sure there was something wrong with the baby, even as Shane helped me onto my back and the doctor squirted cold gel on my belly.

Suddenly, a loud *glug-glug* boomed in the small room and pulled me from my worries. “What is that?”

The doctor smiled. “That is your baby’s heartbeat. It’s strong as it should be.” She adjusted some dials. “This one is yours and it doesn’t need to beat quite so strong. My guess is that you had a panic attack, Mrs. Stone.”



“A panic attack? But I don’t have panic attacks.” I was the calm sister, the one who was good in a bind. I didn’t panic or freak out. Not ever.

“You’ve also never had a baby growing inside your body before. It’s wonderful and amazing and all that jazz, but it is also terrifying.”

Okay, yeah it was that.

“I’m ordering you to relax. Starting now.”

I nodded as she turned her attention to the black-and-white screen and jotted down some notes with her free hand. Shane’s hand slid down from my shoulder until his hand clasped mine.

“Relax,” he whispered. “The baby is fine. You’re fine.”

“I’m fine.” I repeated his words over and over again until I felt my body starting to relax. “Thanks.”

Shane winked and I swear my heart kickstarted into high gear again. The man was just...perfect. He was highly skilled as a protector, he was a smart businessman, and gorgeous to boot, but this soft side of him was irresistible.

The simple truth was that if I had put together a cake of the perfect man, Shane Stone possessed all the crucial ingredients.

He was my perfect cake and it was too damn bad that I was on a diet.

# Chapter Fourteen

## *Shane*

My mind was still on the sound of the baby's heartbeat. It was so fast and so strong, but more than anything it was real. The little flicker on the screen was the heartbeat. Even though it was too soon to see much of anything else, that made this baby real for me. It was no longer just an idea, just another person I needed to protect. As my gaze lingered on the screen with my hand around Willow's, one thing became alarmingly clear.

I was falling for Willow, or maybe I'd already fallen for her. Whatever the progress of my heart was, there was no way in hell I would walk away from Willow or the baby when all this was over.

I couldn't.

It wasn't exactly clear to me when my attraction to Willow had gone from purely physical to something more, but I knew without a doubt that my heart was hers. I had no clue how to tell her, but I knew one way to show her. I stepped out of the exam room and made a call. "Alec, I need a favor and I need it done in the next forty-five minutes." I explained the mission and held my breath for him to give me shit about it.

Surprisingly, he didn't. "I got you, brother."

"Thanks." I ended the call just as the door opened and Willow emerged with a shocked expression on her face. "Everything okay?"

She appeared to be in shock. "It's just...I don't know, it's so much more real now. The baby is still in there, growing and alive. It's not just a cluster of cells that managed to take root anymore, its...*alive*, you know?"

I wrapped an arm around her and we started for the exit. "That's how babies work, Will. Do I need to give you a

refresher course on the birds and the bees?”

“No, smart ass. It’s just that it was all pretty theoretical aside from the morning sickness. But now, the whole process is taking shape. I’m the only person this baby has in the world and I’m not even sure I can do this.”

“You can,” I assured her. She could do it because I would be there with her, cheering her on when she doubted herself, holding her up when she forgot how strong she was. “You’ve already gotten this far.”

She shook her head. “I haven’t done anything. Not yet.”

I helped her inside the car and fastened her seat belt. “Let’s just agree to disagree on that point.”

“Where are we going?”

“You seem to enjoy cooking, so I figured while you’re out—*with me*, I’ll remind you, and not *anybody else*—you can get ingredients you actually want.”

She smiled the whole time we were in the grocery store as she examined each item and put them in the shopping cart.

“What’s up?”

I frowned. “What do you mean?”

“Do you have bad news to share or something? I mean, not that I don’t appreciate this trip to the store. I’m enjoying it far more than a grown woman should, *anywhere* is exciting to me right now, and it’s nice to be out and have some room to move around. But something is up. Right?”

“No. Nothing is up. I promise.”

“Okay.” She shrugged and grabbed a fresh loaf of bread and pre-made pizza dough. “Thank you.” She was so cheerful when she wasn’t worried, and I wondered if it was wrong of me to want her, to subject her to a life where she was worried about me when I was out working. After all of this, didn’t she deserve a normal life with a normal man who wouldn’t cause her a moment of worry?

Maybe. But she was mine, dammit.

A yawn escaped Willow the moment she was settled in the car and I knew she was wiped out. We drove back to The Towers mostly in silence, but it was a comfortable silence. She was easy to be around, easy to be with, and I didn't realize how much I craved that until I met her.

"You're thinking awfully hard over there, Shane." She turned in her seat just as I maneuvered into the subterranean parking. "Please don't hide anything from me."

"I'm not. I was just thinking that it's easy being with you."

"Oh." Her eyes were wide with shock and a hint of longing before she blinked quickly and smiled a little too brightly at me. "Thanks. I think." She grabbed one bag and waited for me to get the other.

"I'll take that," I told her, and took the bag from her as we stepped inside the elevator.

"I'm not an invalid."

"No, you're pregnant and apparently having panic attacks. Doctor's orders are to relax, so relax."

She folded her arms and looked away, but I spotted the hint of a smile on her lips. "Fine, bossy pants. Thank you for helping."

"No problem." I walked a few steps behind her and let her walk in first. At hearing us talking in the hallway, Alec popped his head out the door of his apartment and gave me a thumbs up, which Willow didn't see as she opened the door.

Willow stepped inside and gasped. "Oh my goodness, Cornflake! Where did you come from?" She dropped to her knees and the cat easily jumped into her arms and, I swear, wrapped its arms around her neck in a cat-hug. "I've missed you so much." She turned and looked up at me questioningly.

I shrugged. "I figured a bit of animal company might help stave off the boredom and make you less anxious about your situation."

She stood with tears in her eyes. "Shane. Thank you." Cornflake jumped from her arms and went to explore the

apartment, but Willow's gaze remained locked on mine as she closed the gap between us and wrapped her arms around me. "That was so thoughtful. So sweet."

"You're welcome. Now that Lottie is well settled, I figured it was your turn with your comfort animal." So far, I hadn't done right by Willow, not the way I should have. But protecting her while trying to nail down the identity of the bomber hadn't proven easy. Life wasn't easy, for sure, but she deserved more.

"Not, it was perfect timing. Just right, Shane."

What was it about a woman like Willow that made even the smallest acts of kindness make me feel like a goddamn superhero? She accepted small acts as grand gestures and rewarded them with the gratitude of a bear hug.

"Willow," I growled as her breasts pressed against me, her warmth engulfed me. It was something I knew I didn't deserve, yet I ate it up like it was my due.

I stroked my hands up and down her back. "I have to go."

She sighed against my chest. "Of course you do. The hero always has to leave."

"Hero? Please don't look at me with rose colored glasses, Will. I like that you see me as I am, flaws and all."

"I do. Your worst flaw is that you're incredibly bossy, but I get why and that's why I appreciate the other parts of you that you allow me to see. The worried man who rushed home from an important investigative mission just to check on me. The guy who gets a little emotional over the sound of a fetal heartbeat, it's all so sweet. So endearing." She sighed. "It makes you a hero. One who can't stick around for long. I understand and I accept it."

I didn't want to leave Willow, but I had to. Jace had gotten his hands on the forensics report from the house and the bomb used to obliterate it, which meant this was our best chance for a lead on who wanted Tom dead. "I wish you didn't have to accept it."

“I know, but you wouldn’t be the man you are if you didn’t do stuff like this.”

I wished she didn’t see me the way she did because her rosy view made me want to be the man she saw when she looked at me. I wanted to be better for her, but the truth was that I was just a tool, an instrument trained to seek out wrong doers, to hunt them down and make them pay. I wasn’t the guy who got out of every situation with his hands clean, but that’s not what Willow saw.

“Will,” I groaned.

She jumped up on her tiptoes, pressed a gentle yet heated kiss to my lips, and pulled back with a wide, beaming smile. “It’s all right, Shane. Go and figure out who killed your friends, the people who welcomed me into their home and their lives as family. Tom and Ella were a rare breed, rich and kind and just good damned people. They deserve this and I want you to be the one to give them and their families justice.”

I put some distance between us, knowing that if I let her closer, even a few inches closer, my resolve would crumble and I would take her to bed and keep her there.

Indefinitely.

I met with Zac and Alec later in the apartment opposite Willow, leaving Dewey to sit in with her with *strict instructions* to keep his weapon *strapped on at all times*, and to call us over at the slightest sign of a disturbance.

We video-conferenced with Jace, who had gotten his hands on the forensics report. A physical examination of the house had produced fuck all in terms of intel, but the official report included a list of the suspected ingredients used to blow up Tom and Ella’s home.

“What did you find, Jace?” My brother was a serious sort, the guy who could hack into anything and find us the answers we needed to move forward.

“It’s not good.” His expression was tired and worried. “The bomb was put together in a way that suggests the guy was current or former military.”

“Zac figured that.”

“This wasn’t just some random crazy motherfucker,” Zac confirmed, “it wasn’t some terrorist. This was someone who knew explosives and knew them well. In fact, I’d argue that we should be looking at people just like me.”

“I think they could even be copying your style, Zac.” Jace’s words were the exact opposite of what I wanted to hear.

“If they aren’t military, they’re the kind of enthusiast that could properly frame one of us.” Jace sighed and tapped a few keys on his keyboard. “Look at this. The way the wires are put together, the position of the bomb in the corner of the room for maximum blast impact? It’s no different from bombs built by the unit I was in just before I became a SEAL.”

“Me too,” Zac agreed.

Several images appeared across all of our wirelessly connected laptops, giving me an up close and personal view of a set of explosives that we all knew well because we came up during the heyday of terrorist bombings, with explosives planted everywhere from markets and squares to vans full of schoolchildren. It was all too fucking familiar and I knew, without a doubt, that this guy knew what we knew. He was one of us, or had been at some point anyway.

“We need to dig through service records,” I said as the reality of the situation became clear. “Any of us whose service overlapped with Tom’s. Anyone involved with important missions.”

“No matter where they went later, Tom was the one who trained recruits, prepped them for what came next in their service.” Zac shook his head. “It could literally be anyone.”

“Which is why we need to dig. I knew Tom well, but I’m starting to think that none of us knew him, or Ella for that matter, as well as we thought. We need to dig through disciplinary actions that he filed, as well as anything filed against him. It’s our best lead.”

Jace scratched his head and sighed. “Maybe you ought to see if you can find this information through traditional

methods before I go hacking into military records.” He was an expert hacker, the very best in the business, but even Jace had his limits, and one of them was hacking into records that would come back to bite us in the ass.

“Okay, I’ll see what leads I can find through traditional channels.” There wasn’t a good chance that I would find what I needed that way; the military was an old institution that prided itself on seeing the very best in everyone, particularly those who had served for a long time and with the highest honors, which meant they would be reluctant to reveal the truth about current or former Navy men.

“You have as good a shot as any of us,” Jace reminded me. “You’re the golden boy, so if you can’t find it, then I’ll use my methods to get the info we need.” He ended the video call and it was just us left in the room, waiting for something to pop.

“This can’t really be one of us, can it? Who could hate Tom so much, or any of us, for that matter?”

“You’d be surprised,” Zac said. “There were plenty of washouts, plenty of men and a few women who couldn’t hack it, who just weren’t ready to be in the big leagues, and more times than not they blamed a guy like Tom for their own shortcomings. We should start with people who washed out of the SEALs and move on to those who faced disciplinary action. Those guys have the skills and the anger to do what was done to Tom.”

Most of us were happy to make it as a SEAL, to go on special missions that helped with our overall mission. But there were a few guys who were there for the wrong reasons, who used the power they were given to hurt people, to do the unthinkable, and those were the guys we needed to look into. “It’s time to look into our own dirty laundry, boys. Anybody you can think of who had a reason to hold a grudge, specifically against Tom or any of our individual units, should be at the top of our lists.”

“Shit. I can’t believe we’re actually doing this. I mean, I know that guys go bad, but this is something just beyond the fucking pale. Someone who could do this to Tom isn’t worth



the due process they earned in the service.” Alec shook his head and raked a hand through his hair. “How far back should we start searching?”

“Start with Tom’s most recent active year and work backwards.” This wouldn’t be figured out as quickly as any of us hoped, but we had a good point of reference and for now that was enough.

# Chapter Fifteen

## *Willow*

“Down, Cornflake!” I snapped my fingers the way I always did when Cornflake decided the kitchen counter or table were appropriate to rest her ass on. “You know the rules and they don’t change just because we’re not at home.”

“Meow,” was her sassy reply after she jumped down and glared up at me.

I laughed. “Yeah, I’m happy to have you back too, girl.” Having Cornflake at my side again made all of this a little easier. My fear of, well, everything, hadn’t disappeared because I had my cat at my side, but it just made me freak out a little less, which the doctor recommended. If I let the quiet settle in for too long, my mind wandered to the man who tried to kidnap me, who had stalked Ella but apparently did not kill her.

I owed it to Ella and Tom to keep this baby safe from Gordon Crane and whoever else out there meant him or her harm. No panic attacks, no undue stress, nothing that would make this pregnancy more difficult. They had given me a way to save my sister when I had no alternatives and this was how I planned to pay them back.

Thanks to Shane, I was safe and I had Cornflake at my side. It really was such a sweet gesture on his part, and each time I stared down at her ginger fluff, I smiled. The gruff, bossy guy definitely had a sweet side and it was making it harder to keep my thoughts strictly platonic. I knew we didn’t have a real shot at being together, that it was just a fantasy even after that incredible kiss, but a little crush never hurt. Right?

Instead of attacking him with my horny pregnancy hormones, I decided to reward his kind gesture in the best way I knew how. Dinner. Shane seemed to appreciate coming home

to a hot meal, so I drank a glass of delicious ginger beer, and got started in the kitchen.

I'd gone a little crazy at the grocery store, which meant there were plenty of things I could make. I blamed hunger, cravings, and a strong desire to impress for choosing steak, pasta, and salad. It ended up being a lot of food, so whatever we didn't eat, I would eat tomorrow. Or later tonight.

The door opened and Shane stepped inside with a groan. "Is that butter?"

I smiled. "Good nose. Long day?"

Shane entered with another huge sniff of the air as Dewey took his leave, and he turned his exhausted green eyes on me, raking a hand through his thick black hair. "Very long day. You?"

I shrugged. "Having Cornflake helped a lot." Dewey was sweet, but he was so on edge and seemed afraid to make conversation, as if I'd suddenly convince him to go on another outing against orders. "I made dinner, if you're hungry." I held my breath and realized I expected him to reject my offer, to say he'd already eaten or some other perfectly plausible reason.

"Starved. Do I have time for a shower?"

I threw my head back and laughed. "You mean one of those two-minute rinses you call a shower? The steak won't even be done before you're back, soldier."

"SEAL," he shot back playfully, and the sight of his smile made my legs wobble.

"My bad, *SEAL*. Skedaddle." I made a shooing motion and he flashed a handsome smile and disappeared down the hall. Seconds later, I was forcing myself to ignore the fantasy of him naked and dripping with water. My body started to overheat as my eyes slid closed, remembering the way he'd looked shirtless, miles of bronzed muscle on display for me to feast on. "No. Stop."

The last thing I needed was to be flushed and moments from a fantasy-induced orgasm when he joined me for dinner. I

splashed some cold water on my face in the sink and when he came back, I was calmly scooping butter on top of the thick steak.

“Smells amazing in here. I hope you didn’t go through too much trouble.”

“No trouble at all. We both have to eat, right? Might as well eat well.” I sucked in a deep breath and let it out silently as I finished up the steak. “So, how was your day?” My eyes slammed shut at my ridiculous question. “Sorry, that came out weird. It was weird, right?”

“Not at all. My day was long and exhausting and a little fruitful. How was yours?” His teasing smile sent a shiver down my spine.

“You’re funny.” The char on the edges of the steak was perfect if I did say so myself, and I removed the skillet from the fire. “Did you make any progress?”

“Yes, but not enough. We think Tom’s killer might be military.”

I gasped in shock. “Oh my God, no!” The idea that it was one of their own had to be painful. “I’m so sorry, Shane.”

“Yeah, me too,” he said quietly. “But that’s all I know so far, and I’m not going to ruin this fantastic-looking dinner over my lack of progress.”

“Maybe the good food will knock something loose in your head,” I told him, and brought a big bowl of pasta to the table. “Do you think it’s some kind of mercenary or more personal, like someone he served with or trained or something?”

“That’s the part I’m still thinking about,” he answered, and brought the salad and then the steak to the table. “Enough shop talk, Willow. Tell me how you ended up living with your sister.”

“It’s always just been Ivy and me, even when our mom was alive. We’ve always been a team, so when she found herself pregnant and her boyfriend leaving skid marks on his way out the door, it was a no-brainer that I would help. Then she got

sick. So I moved in. I worry about making sure she gets her medication and treatments and some kind of health insurance.”

“I’ll figure this out, Willow. I promise.”

I smiled and looked away, suddenly uncomfortable that I brought up money during this nice dinner. “Enough about me, tell me about you, Shane. Why did you join the Navy?”

He grinned and his whole face lit up beautifully. “I wanted to do something that mattered. A job where I could make a difference, and that landed me on the doorstep of a recruiter.”

“Wow, really? I expected a generations-long military lineage. You give off,” I motioned over the food to his body, “a whole Captain Dan kind of quality.”

“Captain Dan?”

“*Forrest Gump*? Please tell me you’re joking.”

“I’m joking,” he deadpanned. “It wasn’t a family thing, but now it kind of is. My brothers followed in my footsteps and joined the Navy.”

“Aw, how cute!” I could picture them all in their uniforms for family photos. “Your folks must be so proud.”

“Yeah. Mom was worried about BUD/S training, with all three of us. She didn’t like the missions we couldn’t talk about, but when we came back home, she threw the biggest party with enough food to break the table.”

“You guys are close,” I guessed. “And I can’t believe all three of you became SEALs. that’s, like, statistically improbable, isn’t it?”

His brows furrowed. “I’m not sure.”

“Because that’s who you are, you just do the job that needs to be done. It’s admirable.”

“And bossy?”

“Of course.” I grinned. “Guys like you were born bossy.”

“Maybe, but look at what bossy got me.” He pointed to his empty plate and reached for the serving bowl of pasta.

“Seriously this is delicious.”

“Thanks. The plan was to have Ella train me in her kitchen after the baby was born.” I shook off the fear and anxiety that welled up inside of me every single time I thought about what life was going to be like when this baby was born. “Anyway, I’m happy you like the food. It’s music to my ears.”

He nodded and chewed, his gaze never leaving mine, which made it hard to eat because I didn’t want to look away. “If you want, I can have Caleb look at your sister’s medical history and see if he has any creative solutions.”

“That would be wonderful, if he has time. I don’t want to take up any more of your resources. You guys are already keeping me and my family safe.”

“No worries. I very rarely do anything I don’t want, Willow.”

Damn, the way he said my name sent my temperature soaring by at least ten degrees. “Good to know.”

“Have you thought about what you’ll do after the baby is born?”

“Other than staying alive, it’s all I can think about. Tom’s mother messaged me recently and offered to take the baby if it was too much for me, but I’m struggling with the idea of parting with this little bundle. And I’m worried that at her age, it’ll be too much for her anyway.” I hadn’t given her an answer yet because I was hoping to hear something from Tom’s lawyer.

“You have time to make your choice, Willow. You’ve decided to grow this child to full term, which you would have been within your rights to terminate the contract once Ella and Tom passed... But Jane will want to know which way you decide in terms of care. No need to rush, but, you know. Don’t forget to think about it, I guess.”

I smiled and rolled my eyes in mock annoyance, although I was touched that he was thinking about this as seriously as I was. “Yes, boss.”

He snorted in amusement as he finished off his plate. “Don’t boss me, not unless you’re going to actually do what I tell you without questioning me.”

I grinned and batted my lashes as I scooped up both our finished plates and dumped them in the sink. “Want to watch a movie?”

“*Forrest Gump*?” he asked around a laugh.

“If you insist.” We worked together to quickly put away the food and rinse the dishes before we both plopped down on the sofa, so close his body warmth radiated against my skin. “You’ll love this movie,” I assured him. “It has everything from war to love to friendship and everything in between. Promise.”

“I trust you.”

I snuggled into the sofa to get comfy as the movie started, but I fell asleep before little Forrest turned into Tom Hanks. When I woke up later, my head was on Shane’s broad shoulder and my hand rested on his thigh. I inhaled the masculine scent of him, so fresh and appealing to my horndog hormones.

He was asleep too, his hand resting protectively on top of mine, and in that moment I knew this was more than a crush. This big, strong man, so gruff and sweet, had stolen my heart. I was falling for my protector.

How cliché was that?

“You’re staring,” he said suddenly, and startled a gasp out of me.

“You’re very handsome and peaceful when you’re sleeping.”

His lips curved up into a smile. “Yeah?”

“Yeah,” I whispered, and then, because I couldn’t resist, I pressed my lips to his and poured my whole heart into it. I didn’t know if I would ever tell him how I felt, but in this moment, I could at least show him.

I waited for Shane to freeze against my lips, for him to gently push me away and give me a firm rejection, tell me that

we couldn't do this again, that it was a bad idea. Seconds passed, and they felt eternal, but then Shane did the unthinkable, his lips started to move against mine and his hand wrapped around my waist before it settled on my lower back.

I gasped as his tongue slipped between my lips, massaging my tongue while he pulled me closer and closer until I straddled his lap. His sweat pants and my leggings not nearly thick enough to keep our heat away from each other, and the quiet moan that slipped from my mouth and into his had his hands tightening around me. He was long and hard against where I ached and throbbed for his touch.

Shane deepened the kiss, attacking the depths of my mouth as if he were a lust-starved man and I was the only one able to satisfy his need, his desire. The kiss went on and on, his touch and his taste sending flames licking at my flesh until I felt beads of sweat trickle down my spine. His hands tightened on my ass, squeezing hard before they slid up my back and around to my bra-less breasts.

“Willow,” he moaned, and his hips jerked up against me.

My head fell back and I groaned, the sound low and erotic. Needy as hell. “Yes.”

Shane grabbed my t-shirt and shoved it up. “Beautiful,” he grunted as his eyes feasted upon my breasts, the want in his eyes making my nipples bead painfully. “Fuck.” He let his hands roam over my breasts, squeezing and massaging as if he was committing every part of them to memory.

“Oh!” His mouth feasted on one, flicking his tongue over the hard nipple and licking the soft flesh around it. He nibbled and sucked, licked and laved, sending my arousal up and down on an erotic rollercoaster I never wanted to end. “Shane,” I moaned, and arched into him, feeding more of myself to him. “Yes!”

He pulled back and unleashed a panty-soaking smile. “Yes?”

I licked my lips. “Hell yes.”



“Willow.” That one word, just my name, contained too many emotions to name, especially as he attacked my other breast with the same energy as the first.

My body shook and trembled and I wondered if it was possible to reach orgasm just from having a man touch and taste my tits. “Shane...” I called his name in warning, and heard the answering growl start deep in his belly.

He didn’t say a word in response, simply banded one arm around my back and bucked up against the damp fabric between my thighs, over and over, until my body tightened with carnal tension and pleasure flooded my entire body.

“More.”

“Greedy,” he growled, and he’d snatched every ounce of pleasure he could from my body in that moment. “I like it.”

He started to move and my body protested the distance that only lasted a second because he laid me out on the sofa and stared down at me, half naked and panting like a well satisfied woman.

“You are fucking beautiful,” he growled as he tugged my leggings down over my hips and down my legs before he tossed them over his shoulder.

I smiled and rolled my eyes. “No need for the charm offensive, Shane. I’m butt ass naked now.”

He let out a harsh bark of laughter and his smile was magnificent. Bright and beautiful. “I’m a vocal man. Sue me.” Then he covered my body with his, using his lips and tongue to kiss and taste every inch of me, down to the soles of my feet.

I was so turned on I couldn’t think straight, not when his tongue licked a trail of heat up my ribcage, not when he nibbled the inside of my thigh, and certainly not when his tongue slipped between my folds over and over, up and down until I was sure I might snap in two. “Oh God, yes!”

Shane was a wonderful lover, dedicated and focused on my pleasure, which made me feel selfish, but each time his tongue flicked through my damp heat, all rational thought escaped my

mind. His mouth was magical, sending me higher and higher until the air felt as if it grew thinner, which made it hard to breathe.

Two fingers slipped inside me and my back arched towards him as pleasure quaked my body with such ferocity that it shocked me to my core. This time my orgasm exploded out of me and I felt my body pump around his fingers, now coated with my pleasure. “Shane, oh shit, Shane!” My eyes were closed tight as he pumped and licked until my body went slack and a satisfied smile crossed my face.

“Willow.” His voice was deep and growly, my name like a command that snapped my eyes open quickly. He smiled when I made eye contact. “That’s what I want to see, the lust in those beautiful blue eyes.”

His words sent a spear of heat through my already overheated body and I licked my lips, hungry for him. I realized that at some point he’d managed to shuck his clothes off without me noticing, and I couldn’t help but rake my eyes across his every muscle. “Come closer.”

Shane laid his big body across mine, careful of the life growing inside me, and smiled. The tip of his cock butted up against my opening, still wet and pulsing, teasing me relentlessly until I dug my feet into the muscles of his ass, urging him to give me what we both wanted. Finally, blessedly, he slipped inside with a moan. “Is this close enough, sweetheart?”

“Almost,” I panted, and bucked up against him, taking that last inch with a loud roar of pleasure. “Perfect.” He was long and thick, and he filled me up almost painfully, but the longer he sat there, the wetter I became, the harder I pulsed around him.

His strong jaw clenched as I squeezed him, the thick corded muscles of his biceps and triceps flexed on each side of my thrashing head. He was so masculine, so much man that his muscles, his scent, the feel of him thrusting inside me, short-circuited my brain.

“Ah, Willow,” he growled. “Tight. Hot. Wet.”

His words turned me on even more, which surprised me because I didn't usually like any kind of talk, never mind dirty talk. But those words, hot and choppy, send another rush of moisture between us.

"Needy," I whispered.

At that one word, Shane's infamous control snapped. His hips moved like a machine as he pumped in and out of my body in such measured strokes that wild, feral noises started to erupt from me. The pleasure that flooded my body took me out of myself and I floated above the room and watched the intense way he focused on my pleasure. That laser-like precision was probably what made him so good at his job, but it was the way he listened to my cues, the sounds I made that made him a phenomenal lover.

"Shane," I panted as the fiftieth or maybe the hundredth stroke hit that magic button. Again and again he hit that spot that made rainbows explode behind my eyes, that set my heart to beating faster and faster as beads of sweat formed all over my body. "Oh, yes, Shane!" I bit down on my bottom lip and a beat later another orgasm rocketed through my body with so much force I bucked up against Shane again and again.

His jaw tightened further, his strokes deepened, and his hips moved faster and faster. He was a magnificent sight to behold when his orgasm came. Eyes clenched tight while his mouth was slack, his body jerked until every drop of pleasure melted away. "Willow," he grunted, hips still grinding into me, prolonging my pleasure until a nervous laugh escaped.

"Wow." I'd had some pretty mediocre sex in my life and one decent sexual encounter, but this, what had just happened between Shane and me, was out of this world good. It was the kind of sex a woman told her friends about, the kind of lovemaking that made a woman start thinking about things she shouldn't.

Things like more sex.

Things like something *more* than sex.

Things like a life together.

Things like forever.

I closed off those thoughts and focused on the pleasure still floating through my body, the way his cock pulsed inside me before it slipped out. The way Shane's mouth melded with mine in a passionate kiss I felt all the way down to my toes. "That was amazing."

He smiled and it turned into a laugh before he brushed a gentle kiss to one corner of my mouth. "It was better than amazing, Will. It was everything."

Well, hell. What was a girl supposed to say when a man like Shane told her she was everything? I had no idea, but I was sure the blush that stained my skin said enough.

Shane picked me up and surprised me yet again by taking me to his room and curling his body around mine until we fell into a deep sleep.

Together.

# Chapter Sixteen

## *Shane*

I woke up after the most thrilling, exciting, and unexpected night of my life wrapped around a soft, curvy woman who emanated enough heat to power a mid-sized American city. I couldn't pull myself away no matter how many times I told myself it was the right thing to do, the noble thing.

Last night had been wonderful, a dream come true. But it had also been a monumental mistake, one that could put both of our lives in danger, which was why I struggled with what to do the morning after paradise. I wasn't supposed to sleep with someone under my protection. It was irresponsible, reckless even, especially given the uncertainty of Willow's future, yet each time I attempted to berate myself, I found that I couldn't.

What did I have to offer her? A life filled with holding her breath, anticipating more bad news? She had enough of that with her sister's chronic illness, and the current life or death worry that plagued her. What could I, a man who had pretty much sworn off relationships, offer her? I didn't know the answer for either of us. Did I have space for her in my life, and did she have space for me?

Willow and I were a lot alike in many ways. We were the people who took care of others, who put their safety and happiness and well-being before our own. Did either of us even know how to put ourselves, our wants and needs first?

Probably not.

But the thing was, I wasn't scared to try. I wasn't scared to just throw caution to the wind and see what happened with us. Willow was worth it, at least so far, she was. The thought of walking away from her, of saying goodbye once the threat was eliminated and never seeing her again was terrifying.

I was in trouble. Major fucking trouble where this woman was concerned, and the only thing I could think of was fleeing

the bed to make breakfast, to make sure she and the baby were nourished. Cared for.

Loved.

To distract myself, I sent an email to one of my Navy SEAL buddies who would still possibly be able to gain access to the data we needed to find the bomber, but soon after received a reply that he wouldn't be able to help. I hated the idea of having Jace poke around, but the truth was I already knew it would have to be done. With a sigh, I fired off an email to him as well, telling him my usual lead was a bust and we were out of options, and he agreed to find some way to get the records we were after.

Rather than worrying about the feelings I was unable—or unwilling—to put a name to, I decided to show that I cared in a way that didn't require me to put a name or a voice to those feelings. I made my way to the kitchen and whipped up a quick breakfast for us both. It was a simple meal, bell pepper, spinach and onion scrambled eggs, toast, and sausage patties. It wasn't as fancy as her meal but it was a symbol of what I could offer.

“Oh man, it smells delicious in here. I hope there's enough for me.” Willow walked into the kitchen sleepy-eyed with disheveled hair, skin pink from hot water, and a wide smile on her face that made me want to kiss her. She was beautiful and light and sunny; she was more than I deserved.

“You think I'd make only enough for me?”

“Of course not,” she laughed. “But as ravenous as I am this morning, I think you should've made enough for four.”

“Pretty sure this will be more than enough. Sit,” I commanded, and her skin flushed pink before she took a seat at the small table. “Good girl.”

“Mouth-watering,” she moaned around a bite of scrambled eggs. “The vegetables are a nice touch. Even the spinach.”

“Not a fan of spinach?”

“No,” she sighed. “But after last night I'm feeling a tad more open-minded.” Her crooked smile told me that last night

weighed as heavily on her mind as it did mine.

“Good to know.” The toast popped up and the oven timer sounded, giving me plenty of time to get my thoughts off of last night and on to the present. The future. “Are you okay, with, um, everything?”

Willow shrugged. “I don’t know, Shane. It was incredible, without a doubt, but I’m feeling things I probably shouldn’t.” She looked away as if ashamed or maybe just embarrassed about whatever was on her mind. “It’s just that you’ve looked after me more than any other person in my life has ever looked after me. I mean, I know that Ivy loves me, but I’m the caretaker, the boss, the one who makes sure everyone is safe.”

“But?” I could tell there was more she had to say.

She flashed a wry smile. “But between my hormones and your effect on me, it’s all pretty damn confusing.”

My lips pulled into a lopsided grin. “I know what you mean. I have a company as well as dozens of lives to look after and care for. I get it, Willow. I do.”

“And that only makes you even more appealing. The things that I’m feeling, they’re confusing and terrifying, but I find that I don’t want to run away from them.”

Her honesty wasn’t just refreshing, it was endearing. With every vulnerable word I felt my heart call to her. Her blue eyes were full of something that could have been hope or hesitation, and I knew what to say in that moment. “Then don’t run, Willow. Who knows who might chase after you.”

Laughter sprung from her, loud and feminine and beautiful. “Good point. Besides all that, I’m not exactly in the shape to run from a SEAL.”

“Good to know.”

“If we’re always taking care of other people, who is taking care of us?” She flashed a shy smile.

“Who’s left to take care of us?”

Willow batted her long blond lashes and grinned. “Maybe we could take care of each other.”

“You know, Willow, I’m starting to like the way you think.”

“Yeah?”

Her shy side rose to the surface and it was like a hand had reached out and wrapped around my heart, making me powerless to do anything other than let the inevitability of us unfold organically. I went to her side of the table and pulled her out of her chair so our bodies were flush against each other. “Oh yeah,” I told her, and stole a kiss that was so hot it immediately set my body on fire, and I devoured her mouth, because what else could I do?

We kissed so long, it made me think about hot, teenage make out sessions when I couldn’t get enough of a girl. Willow was so hot, so fiery, and her desire was so contagious that I continued to devour her, to satisfy my desire for her until I had us naked and bent her over the breakfast table, begging for me.

“Shane, please,” she gasped, sending me a hot look over her shoulder. “Don’t tease me.”

“But teasing you is so much fucking fun,” I growled, and slid in just a few inches, enough to satisfy her but not enough to give her what we both wanted. “Fuck, the way you clench around me.”

“The better to tempt you,” she teased, and flashed a smile.

“Tempting you are,” I growled, and slammed hard and deep inside her quivering body.

“Shane,” she cried out, and arched, pulling me deeper into her hungry, greedy body. “Yes. Don’t stop. Please.”

As if I could, with her back arched so temptingly, her head tossed back in ecstasy, and her body hanging onto mine like long lost lovers.

“Willow,” I grunted, and grabbed her hips as I plunged deeper and deeper into her wet, clenching body. In that moment I knew fighting my feelings for Willow was useless. In such a short period of time she had become as much a part of my life as anyone in my daily life. She was becoming a part



of me, had woven herself so deeply into my life that I couldn't imagine waking up without her in my arms, at my side.

I wanted Willow too much to care about the dangers, or what happened next. All that mattered was what happened in this moment and the next. I pounded into her with everything I had, showing her with my body what I couldn't say with my mouth.

*Mine.*

“Shane!” Her body clenched and pulsed, milking me dry with the force of her orgasm that triggered my own. “Yes, oh fuck, yes!”

The way she threw herself into passion was intoxicating and I couldn't get enough, couldn't separate myself from her. I smacked her ass and continued to stroke into her, prolonging her orgasm as she vibrated with pleasure. “Willow, babe.”

“I know.” Her body continued to pulse and shiver through her orgasm.

My body collapsed against hers and I kissed my way down her spine, languishing in the aftermath of another spectacular orgasm when a loud, forceful knock pulled us from our post-orgasmic reverie. “Shit.”

“Duty calls,” Willow said around a laugh that squeezed me even tighter.

“Always,” I growled, and continued to kiss my way down her spine until I reached the small of her back.

“Yes,” she hissed out her pleasure.

The knock sounded again and I pulled back with a groan. “I should answer that. It's probably Zac and Alec.”

“Go ahead,” she said even as she arched her back even more.

I growled and gripped her hips. “Willow, please.”

“Mm, I kind of like it when you beg like that.”

I gave her ass a smack and slowly separated our bodies. “You're trying to kill me.”

“Only to tease you,” she said playfully.

“Consider it a job well done,” I told her, and pulled on my sweat pants with a grunt. “But now, I really need to answer that.”

“Open up, boss! We have a lead.”

Willow collapsed against the table because she knew those were the magic words. “Go on.”

I pressed one final kiss to the back of her neck and let out a low moan. “Send Caleb your sister’s medical records so he can take a look at them. And,” I began, as I put a foot of distance between us.

“Don’t go anywhere?”

I smiled. “Exactly.”

“Got it. How long do I have before Dewey gets here?”

I checked my phone as I threw on a shirt, and grinned at her. “About thirty seconds.”

“*What?*” She leapt suddenly off the table and gathered her clothes from the floor faster than I’ve ever seen her move, and I couldn’t help the laugh that tumbled out of me as she sprinted butt naked for the bedroom.

# Chapter Seventeen

## *Shane*

“We started with explosives specialists in every unit Tom supervised or led, and found a connection.” Zac shook his head and pinched the bridge of his nose, knowing that his findings would have the same impact on all of us. “It’s just so un-fucking believable. This can’t be one of us, it just can’t.”

Alec snorted. “We’re SEALs, Zac, not superheroes. It’s inevitable that a few of us would go bad. The money is often too good to pass up.”

“Yeah, I know that,” he spat out as I maneuvered the car down a long, non-descript road to track down a lead. “I was in explosives even before I was a SEAL, so I know how difficult the training was, how much dedication it required. I just can’t see how someone did this as just a job.”

“Who said it was just a job?” I’d been turning it over in my head most of last night and this morning, even if it was through the fog of lust and desire, and that was the one thing that didn’t add up. “This was personal. Really fucking personal.”

Alec turned to me in the passenger seat with a frown. “How can you be so sure?”

I turned down a dirt road on the outskirts of town. “Zac, if this were just a money job, would you set a timer or use a cell phone detonator?”

“Distance is key to avoid being caught. Rule number one of explosives training, behind ‘watch out for your fingers’.” Zac flashed a smile in the rearview mirror and shrugged. “If it was personal, I might want to watch it all play out, see the destruction just like a pyromaniac.”

“Exactly. There are only a handful of men who had explosives training and a personal grudge against Tom.”

Zac clapped his hands together. “Shit, that’s why Jace’s algorithm spit his name out. It makes perfect sense, and I can’t believe I didn’t see it until just this moment.”

“Who?” Alec and I shouted at the same time.

“You remember Jackson DeBerg?”

I nodded at the familiar name. “He was the backup explosives specialist on that tour in Afghanistan, right?”

“Yep. He was dishonorably discharged but it’s all very hush-hush, and Jace said it would take some time to access the formal records.” Zac shook his head again. “Jackson was on the short list of possible suspects, and the fact that he was dishonorably discharged has to mean something. Doesn’t it?”

“I’d be damned surprised if it doesn’t,” I said, and turned left down another dirt road, following the directions Jace had input into the navigation system. “I guess Jace thinks we need to talk to him?”

“He might have held a grudge against Tom for his dishonorable discharge. I mean, that’s what would make the most sense, but why?” said Alec.

The mission in Afghanistan that ended with the teacher’s death was all a blur to me. After that woman’s death, I don’t remember much. And I spent months in the hospital, so whatever happened after was unknown to me. “We should have a chat with Jackson while Jace digs into his Navy file.”

After about twenty more minutes of driving through the back roads, we finally pulled into the neighborhood we’d been looking for. Jackson DeBerg lived in a nice residential neighborhood on a large, tree-lined street. Many of the lawns were dotted with tricycles, soccer balls, and other signs of a family-oriented neighborhood. It was an odd choice for a single man, but maybe he craved the peace and quiet of suburbia. Who was I to judge, when I lived in a sterile tower in the sky?

“This is all so damned normal,” Alec growled. “It doesn’t make sense.”

“It doesn’t have to,” I said, and shoved the car into park. “Let’s talk to Jackson and see what he has to say for himself.” Maybe this was all just a nasty coincidence and Jackson was innocent, or worse, being framed.

I raised my fist and rapped on the door, fully expecting a fellow SEAL to answer it quickly, and when that didn’t happen, my hopes began to sink. It was the middle of the day; of course he wasn’t home.

“You guys looking for Jack?”

Alec looked over at the neighbor first, flashing the charming smile that made him so adaptable in the field. “Yeah. Jack’s an old friend and we were in town on other business, figured we’d stop by for a chat.”

The man shook his head and stepped out of his house, damn near identical to Jackson’s. “He’s working afternoons now over at Bill’s Electronics, so he’s not home until about nine o’clock.”

That was late, but what was more concerning was that a man with Jackson’s skills was content wasting them on a rinky-dink electronics shop. That was definitely suspicious. “Ah, thanks for letting us know.”

Alec nodded. “If you see him around, can you give us a call? We’d love to drop by and surprise a fellow SEAL. A reunion of sorts, you know?”

The neighbor’s eyes widened and he smiled. “Of course. You guys and your rituals. Mum’s the word, guys. And thank you for your service.”

“None necessary,” Zac assured him with a smile and a firm handshake.

Back inside the car, Zac shook his head. “We should go to his job, see if we can get some answers.”

“That’s a good idea,” I told him. “I’ll go do that and you guys see if you can trace his credit cards to find out what else he does in his spare time.”

Zac and Alec called a cab and we split up. I made it to Bill's Electronics just before closing time. A man with busy white hair and a matching mustache greeted me with a wide, toothy grin.

"Welcome to Bill's Electronics. I'm Bill, if ya need anything."

I took a cursory look around the shop, which specialized in high-end digital equipment for everything from nanny cams to spy cams and everything in between. "I need two things, Bill. First, one of those doorbell cameras for a female friend."

"Easy enough," he said with a friendly, dismissive wave. "What's the second thing?"

"Rumor has it an old friend of mine works here. Me and a couple of guys are in town and we wanted to see him."

"You talkin' about Jack?" He shook his head. "Haven't seen him in days. Normally, Jack is as reliable as the sun rising, but he's been gone for at least three days, maybe more. Sorry."

"Bummer," I said easily, as I absorbed the information that Jackson DeBerg was almost certainly exactly the man we were looking for. "Now, about that doorbell?"

I was getting tired of looking out the tiny peephole on the door, and besides I wanted an excuse to learn a few more things about Jack while Bill made a sale. Maybe the next time I had a job to do in Seattle the guy might end up cutting me a deal.

# Chapter Eighteen

## *Willow*

“Wow! This is a wonderful surprise!” I gasped, leaping up from the couch as Shane opened the door.

When he had returned home, he'd told me he had a surprise for me, and I assumed it was another round of naughty sex after dinner, maybe in the shower or up against the windows overlooking the city. It hadn't occurred to me that it would be this great.

Lottie and Ivy stood at the front door wearing matching smiles. “Aunt Willow!” Lottie raced inside and ran to me as fast as she could, slamming into my legs with all the power of a three-year-old. “I missed you.”

I crouched down and squeezed her in a big bear hug. “Missed you too, sweetheart. Let me get a look at you and see how much you've grown since I saw you last.”

Behind her Ivy entered, followed by their own personal bodyguard, Eros, who tipped his head at me with a smile before heading towards the couch.

Lottie let out a sweet little girl giggle. “Not that long, Aunt Willow.”

“It's been way too long,” I assured her, and gave her another tight squeeze. “You have to be, what, five or six by now, right?”

She giggled again. “I'm three!”

“Wow. Unbelievable.” I was only half joking, because I swore the little squirt had added a few inches since I last saw her. “Are you taking care of your mom?”

Lottie gave an exaggerated nod. “Mr. Eros says I do good job of watching Mommy.”

“Excellent,” I told her, and held up a hand for a high-five. “If he says it, it must be true.” I turned my gaze up to my sister, who looked down at me with watery eyes. I stood with a frown. “Ivy, is everything all right?”

She blinked away her tears and put on a smile as fake as a three-dollar bill. “I’m fine. Just realized how long it’s been since we’ve seen you. It just feels wrong.”

“Right?” I pulled my sister into a hug. “How are you feeling?”

“Fine,” she insisted. “No flare-ups and I still have another month of medication left, so stop worrying about me. Please.”

“Might as well ask the sun to stop shining.” I looked up at Shane, who watched us with interest. “Thank you, Shane, for making this happen.”

“My pleasure,” he said, his tone gruff, but I knew him well enough now to know the man hated praise of any kind.

Lottie played with Cornflake, with Shane keeping careful watch, while I finished off lunch and chatted with my sister.

“She looks like she’s coping with these changes all right,” I said, indicating Lottie.

Ivy said, “Kids really are incredibly resilient, and Lottie is more so than the rest. She has Eros having tea parties, and he taught her how to play poker, which I’m not sure I approve of, but she’s having so much fun.”

“If she can have fun in the middle of this shit show, she’s way ahead of us. Or at least me.” I still hadn’t told Ivy about Gordon Crane or his plans for me, but I didn’t want to worry her. She had enough on her plate with her health and her daughter.

“How are you, really?” I hated when she looked at me like that, as if she knew every single thought dancing through my brain.

“I’m fine. Mostly. Things are complicated as hell but I’m trying to be like Lottie and make the most of it.” Shane was



too close by to reveal the truth to Ivy about my feelings for him, but Shane wasn't the only complication in my life.

A knock sounded at the door and Shane stood quickly, on full alert instantly. "I'll get it."

"Wow," Ivy mouthed, and waggled her eyebrows. "Hot."

"I know," I mouthed back, and rolled my eyes, but in the next moment my smile died on my face as a gorgeous woman with shiny red hair, piercing green eyes, and a body to rival any supermodel on the runway entered the room. She was stunning and confident and she greeted Shane with a familiar smile.

"Who is that?" Ivy whispered.

I shrugged in response.

Shane smiled at the woman and guided her inside. "Willow, Ivy, this is Charlene Miller."

Charlene waved and flashed a blinding, beauty pageant smile. "Please, call me Charlie, everyone else does." She sighed and set down an expensive-looking leather case. "You, Willow, are a difficult woman to track down."

I blinked, and looked at Shane. "I'd...hope so?"

She laughed airily. "Tom's estate lawyer has been searching for you for weeks, and when he reached out to me to see if Shane could track you down, I guess it all worked out."

I frowned. "What all worked out?" I felt as if Charlie was speaking a foreign language.

She flashed a sympathetic smile. "I'm sorry. I'm the attorney for Griffin, and Blake and I go way back, that's Tom's lawyer. Anyway, there's a lot to talk about."

"There is?"

"Of course."

"I'll, um, be just over here," Ivy said, looking awkwardly between me, Shane and the exotically beautiful Charlie, before making her way to the couch to sit beside Eros.

“Tom’s mother is perfectly willing to take the baby and raise it, but Tom and Ella’s wishes were that if anything happened to them, that you raise the baby, should you be willing.”

“Me? Really?” It didn’t make sense. I wasn’t family or anything close to family. “Why would they choose me?”

Charlie smiled again and slid a mint green envelope across the table. “This will explain everything. But the fact is that you are listed as the guardian of the child and they have made financial provisions to assist in caring for him or her.”

“Holy shit,” Ivy exclaimed before shrinking back into the couch. “Oh. Sorry.”

I pointed to my sister and grinned. “What she said.”

“There’s no pressure right now to make a choice, but it is something you need to think about, Willow. Mrs. Jenkins will happily take over the responsibilities if you choose not to, and you will be financially taken care of through the birth and recovery only, should you choose to give the child to its grandmother.”

It all sounded so cut and dry, so cold. Yet in all that coldness was an act of love and kindness, of generosity and trust. Tom and Ella wanted me to parent their child, to teach him or her about the world, and prepare them to make their mark on it. “Wow.” Tears sprang to my eyes as I thought of all the things Tom and Ella would miss. “Tom. Ella.”

“Yep. Just consider it and get back to me when you have an answer.”

“Not Tom’s estate lawyer?”

She laughed. “Blake is a little squeamish about danger, so he’s given me permission to discuss this with you. I’ll be your go between, at least until the danger has passed.” She flashed a friendly smile at Shane. “Which I’m confident it will. Soon.”

I nodded because I was too speechless to say anything else. Tom and Ella were trusting me with their greatest achievement, the last sign of their everlasting love, and I wanted to honor that. The longer I carried this child, the more

unfathomable it became to give them up. The more I longed for a fantasy that could never become reality, that Shane and I would raise this child together, maybe add a few of our own to the mix.

He was the sort of man that would be a wonderful father. The kind of man with the patience to teach a child anything from Krav Maga to algebra, but who would also wrestle with them and even have a tea party with a sweet little girl. Even now, he played with Lottie while I talked with Charlie, making her giggle with his fumbled rendition of “Let It Go” and his clumsy attempt to paint her nails.

He was a good man who would be a damn good father.

But not the father to my child, because that was not what was happening between us. Was it?

I didn’t know, but instinctively my hand went to my stomach, to this child growing inside me, a life created by two loving parents who would never get to see this baby grow and blossom into a real person. I sighed and shook my head. “It’s a lot to think about.”

“It is. Just sit on it. You’re not even showing yet,” Charlie said with a friendly smile. “You have time.” She gave my shoulder a squeeze and headed for the door. “Later, Princess Shane.”

He growled, but when Lottie giggled, his scowl turned into a grin.

“Princess Shane! Yay!”

He rolled his eyes and settled against the sofa while Lottie set a crown made of napkins on top of his head, before turning to do the same to Eros. “Thanks, kid.”

She giggled again and collapsed against his broad chest, comfortable with him.

Yeah, Shane would be a great dad to some little kids.

Someday.

# Chapter Nineteen

## *Shane*

I'd woken up early every morning since freshman year of high school, for football practice and then later because the Navy required it, and later still because my college courses required it. Waking up early for me was a way of life, it was second nature to me to rise before the sun did most days. It gave me time to lay out what my day would look like, time to plan what was next while the world was still quiet. Peaceful.

I sat up straight and looked around the darkness of my bedroom before I swung my feet to the floor and padded to our shared bathroom, where I was greeted by a wonderful sight. Willow, topless, staring at her reflection in the vanity mirror, an expression of pure awe on her face.

At least until she noticed me standing in the doorway watching. She gasped, and her expression met mine in the mirror. "Shane. What are—I mean, is everything all right?"

"Everything is fine. Are you all right?"

Her skin turned pink. "Yep. I had to use the bathroom and noticed this," she said, and pointed at the slight roundness of her belly. "That's new."

I smiled at the awe in her voice. "The baby is growing."

"It is! Want to feel?"

The answer pulsed in my veins instantly. *Yes*. My hand hesitated in the air between us, perched above her belly in indecision. Willow took control of the situation and laid my palm over her belly.

"It's hard."

"Right?" She smiled wide and it was just for me. "So bizarre."

“Amazing.” The feel of the baby that grew inside her belly was unlike anything I had ever felt before. Knowing there was life in there made me wonder about my own children someday, about what it would be like if I was the man allowed at Willow’s side to guide her through this pregnancy. Maybe even beyond.

Her eyes locked with mine and the air between us crackled with intense electricity. I could practically hear the sizzle over Willow’s sharp intake of breath. She licked her lips and took a step closer, placed a hand over my racing heart. “Shane.”

“Willow.” After those two words, no more were spoken between us. Our bodies collided the same as our mouths, a mash of lips and teeth and tongues dancing together. The heat was palpable all around us in the confines of the bathroom and I lifted her by the waist and set her on the bathroom vanity. My need for her was insanely urgent and I couldn’t wait. As our mouths tangoed together, I slid her panties to the side and thrust deep.

“Yes!”

I swallowed her cry of pleasure and smiled against her lips as I continued to thrust hard and deep and fast. She wrapped around my cock perfectly. “Willow, babe,” I grunted. “So hot.”

She smiled and her head fell back against the mirror on a deep sigh. Her legs wrapped around my waist and urged me deeper as she pulsed around me, her orgasm so close to the surface I could feel it. “Shane, yes!”

It was fast and explosive, and moments later her pleasure triggered mine. “Oh, Willow!” Her name left my lips on a roar and I pounded harder into her, harder and deeper until another orgasm swept her away. She was beautiful as she hung onto me, scraped her nails down my back as pleasure swamped her. It was a magnificent sight and I couldn’t look away.

“Holy hell, that was fast. I’m not normally so quick on the draw,” she said around a sexy laugh.

“I’m not complaining,” I told her honestly. “It was hot as hell.”

“So hot.” She laughed again and a shiver rocked her body. “You’re making me tingle.”

I waggled my brows and she laughed even louder. “Join me for an early morning shower?”

“I’d love to.” She blushed prettily and I took my time with Willow in the shower, washing and kissing every inch of her until we were both satisfied. “Best shower ever!”

A loud knock sounded on the front door and I rushed to my room to check the security monitor. “It’s Jace,” I told Willow to ease her concern.

He knocked again, even louder. “Open up, Shane, we got a lead on Jackson!”

I dressed quickly and pressed a quick kiss to Willow’s lips and headed for the door. “Don’t leave the apartment,” I tossed over my shoulder with a smile. “If Jace has rushed here to take me away, he’ll have already called Dewey over. So *be good*.”

“I will!” she said with a laugh. “I promise.” She held up three fingers in a Scout’s Honor and shooed me out the door.

I was smiling when I came face to face with Jace’s scowl. “What’s going on?”

Jace stepped back. “Why are you smiling like that?”

“Like what?” I asked, even though I knew damn well what smile he was talking about.

“Like you...holy shit,” Jace leaned in close to whisper. “Like you just got laid. Did you bang the pretty Willow?”

I wanted to lie, to deny it outright and throw in a little outrage for good measure, but that wasn’t how things were with us. Jace and I were always honest, brutally honest when it was necessary. “No comment.”

Jace laughed and shook his head as we walked down the hall. “Holy shit, brother. You of all people broke your own damn rule.”

I knew it and I hated myself for it, but I couldn’t stay away from Willow. “What’s the Jackson lead?”

“The neighbor called to say someone was at Jackson’s place but his car wasn’t parked out front. Zac went ahead to scope things out.”

We raced to Jackson’s residence, breath held as we pulled into the driveway and slammed on the brakes. A message arrived from Zac.

*Someone is in the house. A man.*

Alec and I put on our game faces and left the car ready to act. Alec went through the front entrance and I rounded the house to take the back exit. As soon as I got to the backyard, a figure ran and hopped the fence.

“He’s running through the back!” I gave chase, over the fence and down a narrow alleyway, but the guy was fast. Incredibly fast. I could hardly make out any significant details but reported what I could. “Six feet. White male. One eighty to two hundred pounds. Approximately six one to six four.”

“Copy,” Alec said. “House is all clear.”

The man hooked a right at the end of the alley, and when I reached the position, he’d disappeared. “Shit. I lost him.”

“Come back to the house.” There was something about Zac’s tone that put me on edge. “Jace found something.”

My brother, even from hundreds of miles away, always came through for us. “On my way.” I retraced my steps back to Jackson’s house, curious what Jace had uncovered. “What have you got?”

“He hacked into Jackson’s security camera footage. You won’t believe it,” Alec said, and shook his head as he turned his laptop screen towards me. “Check this shit out.”

I watched as the familiar figure of Tom strolled up to Jackson’s door. The date on the footage was exactly one week before Tom and Ella’s murder. Tom didn’t look bothered, just his usual, casual self. He wore khaki pants, a short-sleeve button-up shirt, and casual loafers, but the SEAL within him shone through.

Jace had fixed the audio enough that we could hear what was happening between the men.

“What the hell do you want?” Jackson’s disdain for Tom was evident and I didn’t know why.

“I want to talk,” Tom said in that staid voice that had led many men into battle. “Please?”

“There’s nothing to talk about. You did what you did and I paid the consequences.”

Tom sighed and pinched the bridge of his nose. “You don’t understand, Jackson.”

Jackson shook his head. “I don’t understand?” He let out a loud, disgusted laugh. “I understand that you threw me under the bus, lied about who actually killed that Afghani teacher, and you got all the honors the Navy has to offer. But what did I get? Dishonorably discharged with no way to move forward with my life.” Jackson shoved Tom. “There is nothing for us to talk about.”

“I’m sorry that happened to you.”

“You mean you’re sorry that you did this to me? Sorry that you let me take the heat for the death of that Afghani woman even though it was *your* doing? Because that’s exactly what you did, Tom!”

Tom stepped forward, but Jackson snapped and pushed him away, before slamming the door on him. After several moments, Tom sighed and left, and we heard muffled banging, shouts of anger, and things smashing from inside the house.

Zac, Alec and I all looked at each other uneasily before the footage skipped to nearly twenty-four hours later, where we could see medical emergency services arriving to remove Jackson from his home on a stretcher. It seemed he’d hurt himself, whether deliberately or not was unclear to us, but somewhat irrelevant.

“Jace confirmed that Jackson was still institutionalized until a week after Tom and Ella were murdered,” Zac said quietly, the three of us still reeling from what we’d just seen. “He has the motive, but not the opportunity.”



Zac's words offered no comfort. Tom had lied about the events that had unfolded with the Afghani teacher, the moment that had solidified our friendship. Our brotherhood.

"This makes no fucking sense."

"None," Alec agreed. "But you saw it yourself, Tom didn't deny it. If anything, he showed extreme guilt."

I agreed, and my heart pinched at the realization.

"Hey, check this out." Alec pointed at the screen. "His security footage is motion sensitive. It shouldn't have recorded once he was institutionalized, but clearly there was movement while he was gone. This is three days after Jackson was carted off."

A man picked the front door's lock and, along with about five others, set the place back to rights. You could see broken items being carted out the front door, and heard some instructions from the men indoors about what to clean up and move. It took a few hours but the men cleaned the place and then left.

"The guy who entered first looks a lot like the man I chased down today." It couldn't have been a coincidence. "The question is, why did he come back?"

"He's after something," Alec and Zac said at the same time.

"We need to figure out what he's looking for. And why."

"Is there any way we can get into the hospital where Jackson is staying?" Zac asked.

"I'll give Emily a call to see if she can get in there and talk to him. Maybe she could get one of us inside." Emily had privileges at plenty of hospitals, and if she could get private access to Jackson, we could make some real progress on this case.

Alec sighed. "The cleanup job has government fingerprints written all over it. The question is, which government agency is responsible and why were they targeting Tom."

"Or Ella," Zac added with a serious expression. "We can't discount that she was the mark just because Tom is the most

likely target.”

“Let’s make some progress on these leads. I’ll have Jace access all public—and private—cameras to see if we can identify the man who was here today, and dig into his background. I’ll start digging into what any of this has to do with Tom.”

“Sounds good,” Zac said with a sad smile. “I’m going to stay behind and see if I can find any fingerprints or DNA. The police still have some unidentified prints from Tom and Ella’s place.”

“Sounds good.”

Jackson couldn’t be reliably ruled out yet, but this shadow man was definitely a prime suspect.

We dispersed in different directions with a plan to meet up later.

# Chapter Twenty

## *Willow*

When Shane was gone from the apartment it felt hollow. Empty without him.

Even though I was never alone with Cornflake as my now constant companion, and an ever rotating team of bodyguards with me—although it was usually Dewey, as he had the least amount of responsibilities within the company for now—I still found myself missing Shane.

I spent the day cleaning the common areas and cooking a big pot of chili, spicy but not too spicy, with my mom's crumbly cornbread that I craved.

Shane hadn't said how long he would be gone, but a few hours had already passed so I assumed he and his team had found something important. The idea that this would all be over soon was comforting, but it also left me feeling sad, a little bereft at the idea that sometime soon, Shane would no longer be part of my life. He would go back to his fancy life in San Francisco and I would be here, a single mother with no prospects for the future. It was a depressing thought.

“What am I going to do about myself, Cornflake?”

The cat looked up at me with a bored expression, meowed, and then walked away to settle onto Dewey's lap. Which meant settling onto the keyboard of his laptop, much to Dewey's annoyance, but that was a cat for you.

I giggled at the sight, and then sighed, because even Cornflake was tired of my pity party. “You're right, I'm going to shut up.” And the best way to accomplish that was with a big bowl of piping hot chili and a hefty side of cornbread.

The door opened and Shane walked in with a scowl on his face. He glanced around the room, jerked his chin at Dewey in a gesture that seemed to say, ‘Get the fuck out,’ and he

remained motionless as Dewey gathered his things with a relieved expression and scampered out.

“Bad day?” I asked once the door was firmly shut.

“You could say that,” he growled without sparing a glance for me. Instead of noticing that the whole place smelled like chili, Shane stomped across the living room and down the hall where he locked himself in his room for a good fifteen minutes.

I wanted to go to him to make sure he was all right, but Shane was the kind of man who needed time to himself, to decompress before he was ready to talk. When he emerged from the bedroom dressed in jeans and a plain black t-shirt, he still looked grumpy as hell but more approachable.

“Want to talk about it?”

Shane’s green eyes met mine and what I saw there—despair and anger and confusion—tore at my heart. “Yes. No. Hell, Will, I don’t know.”

I pushed away from the table and grabbed a dark blue ceramic bowl to fill with chili before I went back for two big hunks of cornbread. When it was all set on the table, I pointed to the chair. “Sit and eat, and if you feel like it, I’m here to listen.”

He looked almost relieved that I wasn’t demanding to know every detail of what made his day so bad, even though I was dying to know what had put that look on his face. “Thank you, Willow. This looks and smells delicious.”

I shrugged and took my seat across from him with my own bowl. “It’s just chili.”

“Chili can’t be delicious?”

I shrugged. “I love chili, and this is kidney beans, beef, and black beans. I hope you like it. Eat up.”

We both focused on our food for several long minutes, eating in comfortable silence. Curiosity burned, but I knew when he was able to process whatever it was, he would share what he could. “This cornbread is perfection.”

“Thanks. It was my mom’s recipe. Cornbread was something she could do perfect every single time without even looking at the recipe pinned to the fridge.” I smiled at the memory of my mom in some of the happier days. “When she died, I committed the recipe to memory, but I still have that faded sheet of paper with her neat cursive handwriting and notes on the bottom.”

He flashed a sad smile and took another bite of food with a groan. “It looks like one of our old team members might be involved.”

I frowned, doing the mental gymnastics required to leap from cornbread to murder investigation with only a second of processing time. “But why?”

His expression darkened. “It looks like Tom might have used Jackson as a fall guy for the op where he saved my life.”

“But you don’t believe Tom would do that.” I couldn’t imagine Tom doing that either, but what happened in war wasn’t like what happened in the real world.

Shane shook his head vehemently. “No, I don’t. Tom wasn’t just a good man, he was a great leader. Hell, he took accountability for shit that went sideways all the time, even when it wasn’t his fault, so I just can’t see him pinning something, especially something like this, on a subordinate.”

“That guy Jackson is saying this?”

“He’s not saying anything yet because he’s currently in a psychiatric institution, but we found some footage of him and Tom talking before the bombing.” Shane’s hand balled into a fist and he slammed it on the table. “Tom didn’t deny it, Willow.”

This poor man, so strong yet so hurt by this revelation, broke my heart. “Not to be insensitive, but the man is in a psych ward. Maybe Tom thought it was best not to poke the bear, so to speak.” He looked at me with hope in his eyes, desperate to believe the unbelievable. “Tom was kind of quiet and uptight, but he was a good man down to his core. He let me know there could be danger and he provided for me in the

event something like this happened before the baby arrived. Those are the actions of a good man.”

He let out a huff of laughter at my words. “Uptight—he was that at times, but it’s only because Tom was such a stickler for the rules. When any of us would complain about doing things a certain way, it was Tom who stepped in to show us why it had to be done as laid out. What he understood from the beginning and drilled into all of us was that we followed protocol, followed rules, because if we didn’t, chances were good we wouldn’t all make it back home.” He shook his head again. “That’s why it’s hard to believe this.”

But I could see that Tom’s lack of denial gnawed at his soul. “Then maybe there’s an explanation for what happened.”

“Maybe, but I don’t see how.” He stabbed at his chili once again before he shoved the bowl away and slumped against his chair. “I told you about Tom saving my life.”

“You said after the teacher shouted something in her native tongue, only Tom understood it and he rushed you, knocking you to the ground where you barely missed a downpour of gunfire.” Shane stared at me like I’d lost my mind, but my excitement reared up like one of those wind-up toys. “If he rushed you to save you, it doesn’t seem likely that he could have shot that woman, which means that whatever reason this Jackson guy was dishonorably discharged, it wasn’t because Tom set him up.” He didn’t look convinced. “If Tom started shooting in the direction the woman was pointing in, likely warning you that there were shooters in the distance. And then he rushed you both and knocked you to the ground before he got up and started shooting in the direction of the gunfire... I just don’t see how he could have done it. If he hadn’t tried to save you, he never would have gotten shot in the shoulder.”

“If I’m remembering correctly,” he added dismissively.

“One little doorbell camera and you’re doubting a memory you’ve held for years?”

“I’m considering all factors.”

“Well, consider this; maybe Jackson only blames Tom because he didn’t stand up for him. Maybe he thinks Tom could have done something to save his career and he didn’t do it.”

“Maybe, but that’s not what he said.”

“People lie all the time, Shane, but they lie to themselves more than anyone else, and sometimes, some people start to believe their own lies.”

He blinked and stared at me with a look of curiosity in his eyes. “Why are you so sure about this, Willow? You barely knew Tom.”

“A man who would literally run in front of bullets to save a friend, who thought about his poor surrogate in his will, that isn’t the kind of man who would let an innocent man take a bad fall, especially one of his own men. Whatever Tom’s sins are, I don’t think this is one of them.”

Shane sighed. “I don’t either, but I can’t deny the evidence.”

“You mean the lack of evidence, don’t you? All I heard was that Tom didn’t deny the dude’s accusations.” I gave him a stern expression that dared him to disagree with me.

Shane leaned forward and grinned. “Can’t argue with that, can I?”

“No, no, you can’t.” I couldn’t help but smile, not just because Shane was smiling, but because his shoulders sank in relief and he seemed less burdened than when he walked in the door. I would like to think it had something to do with me as well.

“Then I won’t.” He reached across the table and took my hand, giving it a gentle tug until I was on my feet and suddenly in his lap. “Hi.”

“Hey.” My voice came out a little breathless.

“Thanks for listening.”

I put a hand to his handsome face and cupped it, letting my thumb slide back and forth against the scruff that now covered his jaw. “Anytime.”

His gaze was pure fire as he stared at me. And suddenly, our mouths were locked together in a fiery kiss that turned my blood to molten lava as it coursed languidly through my veins. His touch, his taste, left me intoxicated and hungry for more.

Shane deepened the kiss and I found myself floating as he swept us off to his bedroom. He stripped me down so slowly my body vibrated with the need of his touch, and when his strong hands finally made contact with my skin, I combusted right there in the middle of his bed.

“You’re beautiful when you come,” he growled, and settled his body on top of mine. He was hard and hot, and I welcomed him into the heat of my core with an agonized moan.

He smiled down at me, keeping his gaze on mine as he slowly entered my body, inch by inch, until he was buried so deep that Shane was all I could see. All I could feel. A brief moment of conflict crossed his face but it was quickly replaced by pleasure. Bliss. “I’m right here, Willow. Right,” he grunted as he slid out and slammed in hard and deep, “here.” He did it again and again, giving it to me so good that tears spilled from my eyes.

My eyes slammed shut against the wave of emotions this moment was having on me. My feelings for Shane were too strong, too big, and it was way too fast for that, but as he looked down at me like I was special, a treasured gift while he took my body to the heavens and back with such tenderness and intensity, I was in danger of falling deeper. Faster. “Shane,” I whispered in his ear.

“I feel you, Willow. Let go, honey. Whenever you’re ready.”

The fact that he could read me so well only made things worse. Or better, depending on how you looked at it.

“Oh fuck,” he growled when I started to pulse around him. “Greedy little pussy,” he whispered in my ear, and that was it, I fell.

My orgasm exploded through me at the same time my heart expanded with love for this man, this good man who had been nothing but perfect—and bossy—from the moment we met.



He protected me, complimented me, made all of this easy for me when he didn't have to. And now this? The way he claimed my body and made it his? There was no way I was going to walk away from Shane with my heart in one piece.

Hell, I'd be lucky if I made it out of this with just a few broken shards.

Since it was impossible, I threw myself into it with a renewed sense of urgency, bucking up against him as he pumped fast and deep in search of his own pleasure. I gave him the same gift he gave me. "I can feel you getting harder inside me," I moaned as my body continued to pulse around him. "So good."

Shane growled and sat up, his big hands squeezing my boobs while he pounded into me with his strong hips until a loud, satisfied roar was ripped from his throat as his body filled me with the warmth of his seed. "Oh fuck, Willow. Babe." When his body stopped jerking from his orgasm, he pressed his forehead to mine and sighed. "What am I gonna do with you?"

The words that lingered in my heart somehow found their way to my lips. "Keep me?" I held my breath and closed my eyes, embarrassed as hell I'd given a voice to my deepest wish.

# Chapter Twenty-One

## *Shane*

*Keep me.* Little did Willow know that's exactly what I'd been thinking about. Keeping her with me, at my side, in my house and my bed, for as long as she would have me.

"Keep you, huh? Is that what you want?"

She swallowed and looked up at me with her heart in her eyes, which should have made me take a step back and reevaluate my actions as well as my words, but I couldn't. I was too far gone to stop this train and all I hoped was that she was too. "Um, yeah, I think it is."

"You think?" I needed to hear her say the words.

"I mean, it is what I want. Is it what *you* want?"

I nodded.

She grinned. "Sorry, I didn't hear that."

"Yes, Willow, it is what I want." I pulled back and rolled to the side, pulling her so we were face to face, chest to chest, as we spoke our truths. "I want you today. I want you tomorrow. I want to see you every day even after Tom and Ella's killer is caught. Did you hear that?"

Her lush lips lifted into a smile so bright. "I heard it, and it is music to my ears because that's what I want too." She pressed her lips to mine and instead of worrying about tomorrow, about the logistics of being with this woman who lived two states away, I leaned into the kiss and savored the taste of her, the feel of her breasts as she rode me to another orgasm.

I stayed in the moment and enjoyed the pleasure because tomorrow would come soon enough and I knew I would spend the whole damn day overanalyzing all of this.

Luckily for me that when the sun rose and tomorrow arrived, the day was too fucking hectic to overanalyze my relationship with Willow, whom I left sleeping and smiling as I left the apartment with Zac at my side, leaving Alec to keep an eye on her today.

“You’re wearing the look of man who totally got laid last night.” Zac’s words filled the silence in the car, and I could feel his shit-eating grin on the side of my face. “So, spill it.”

I shrugged. “What’s to spill? I like her and she likes me. When this is all over, we’ll see where it goes.”

“You know she’s pregnant with another man’s baby, right?”

I ignored his childish snickers and glared at him. “Asshole.”

That sent him into a raucous laughter that lasted entirely too damn long for nine o’clock in the morning. “Hey, man, I’m happy for ya. If any of us are cut out for the wife, kid, and picket fence life, it’s you.”

I frowned. “What in the hell does that mean? All of us are cut out for it, but only for the right woman.” I risked another glance at Zac and laughed. “Or man.”

“Har-har,” he deadpanned as we pulled up to a generic-looking office building and went inside. “You really think Willow is that woman?”

“I do. I mean, she’s the only woman who’s tempted me to break my own damn rules. Has to mean something, right?”

“Only time will tell,” he said, and clapped me on the back. “I’m happy if you are, man, and I’m rooting for you.”

“Thanks, I guess.” It didn’t feel right, being happy or talking about being happy when we were no closer to figuring this shit out. We entered the building and headed for Charlie’s office, but as we walked through the halls I couldn’t help but voice the thought that was repeating in circles around my head.

“Jackson is lying about Tom, right?”

“Abso-fucking-lutely,” Zac agreed easily. “Tom had flaws, without a doubt, but mostly they were because he was a

stickler for rules and protocol. No way he would have thrown someone under the bus to save his own ass. Unless he didn't have a choice."

Willow had implied the same thing, which made me think about the circumstances of that fire fight. "What do you remember about that day?"

Zac sighed. "Too fucking much. That day was a real shit show and I wish I could forget it."

I grunted and swung the office door open. I'd continue the conversation soon enough.

"Boys," Charlie said with her most professional smile. "Glad you could make it. We're set up in the conference room."

I frowned and followed our lawyer into a large room where Jace and Emily sat at opposite ends of the long table. "Jace? When did you get here?"

"Late last night. Looks like you had a good night," he said with a smirk that caused all eyes to turn my way.

I glared at Zac, who raised his hands. "I didn't say a word."

The good thing about being the boss was that no one blinked twice when I turned into an asshole. "We find anything yet?"

"No, but also yes," Jace answered with a laugh. "I accessed the Defense Department records and you won't believe it. The whole damn file is classified, which means an in-person trip to the Pentagon if you want to put eyes on it."

"Classified? That doesn't make sense, it was a normal day. Nothing out of the ordinary."

"Right? Something is definitely fucky about that." Jace shook his head before he settled a questioning look on Charlie. "Or maybe there's a legal avenue we could take?"

Charlie said, "I'll go make some calls," and snatched her phone off the table before she left the conference room.

"Emily, what are you doing here?"

She shrugged. “Alec said you might need a medical professional to sneak into a psych ward.”

“Really? That would be great. You really think you can make it happen?” It was just a spitball idea last night, I hadn’t expected anything to come of it.

“As it happens, I was licensed in Washington State before I changed my specialty in California. I can get in, but we’ll have to be creative to get you in with me.” She eyed me in a way that made me uncomfortable because my little sister was the master of harebrained schemes.

“What’s that look for?”

“You’ll see,” she said ominously.

An hour later, Emily was inside Whispering Oak Psychiatric Hospital with her psych nurse—me—in tow. “Stop scowling, you look good in scrubs.”

“Funny,” I whispered as quietly as I could inside the damn near silent ward. “Keep your distance from Jackson. No matter how doped up he is, the man is a trained fighter in multiple fighting styles.”

“This isn’t my first rodeo, just keep your mask on so he doesn’t recognize you. And remember, just linger in the background doing nurse shit. Listen but don’t say a word. Got it?”

I wanted to argue, but this was Emily’s strength, not mine, so I simply nodded. “Yeah, I got it. Thanks, Em.”

She knocked on Jackson’s door and waited with a pleasant smile on her face. “It’s Dr. Stone.”

“You have more rights than I do, so why bother knocking?” Jackson didn’t sound drugged up, and that got me excited about the prospect of getting answers.

“Because this is your private space, Mr. DeBerg. May I come in?”

“Yeah, sure. Come on in.”

Emily stepped inside and indicated for me to follow her at a distance. “Good afternoon, Mr. DeBerg.”

“Call me Jackson. You’re new.”

“New to you, yes. But I have some experience with problems like yours and I thought maybe you wanted to talk.”

He huffed in annoyance. “Problems like mine? You mean delusional? Paranoid? Or what else did the last headshrinker say, oh, that’s right, I’m having hallucinations. Want to pile on to that so I never get outta this hell hole?”

“Nice hell hole,” Emily mused with a smile. “You’ve been on your meds for a few weeks, how are you feeling?”

“Clearer than I’ve felt in a long time.”

“Perfect. Let’s chat.”

Nearly five full minutes passed and not a word left his mouth. Emily was surprisingly unaffected by his silence, so I set up in the background with a clipboard in my hand and tried to look mild and unobtrusive.

When Jackson’s gaze kept flickering my way, I adjusted my mask higher and looked down so my black hair would fall forward and shield my eyes. I did my best to look nerdy and shit with my clipboard, but it took Emily explaining that I was her assistant and would simply be taking notes for her, to get him to finally snort derisively and talk.

“Look, I know you won’t believe me either, but I was set up.” He told Emily the story of that day, and it matched mine up until the point where the teacher shouted her warning. “I fired my gun, but it wasn’t in the teacher’s direction. We were taking heavy fire from multiple sides and my back was to Stone, Jenkins, and the teacher. It was impossible for me to hit her. It had to be Tom Jenkins.”

*Had* to be? That meant Jackson wasn’t actually sure it was Tom.

“You didn’t see Mr. Jenkins shoot?”

Jackson shook his head. “No. I hit two of three targets, and when I turned, Jenkins was on the ground with a bullet in his

shoulder, Stone had blood gushing from his skull, and the teacher was sprawled across his knees, eyes wide open and lifeless.”

“But you blame Mr. Jenkins?”

Jackson nodded so hard his body shook. “When I tried to plead my case during the investigation, they kept bringing up my mental health, asking questions about my position and how many rounds I shot. Didn’t take a genius to figure out that they were in search of a fall guy and it was gonna be me. But the thing is, these shootings happened all the time, so what was so special about this one to ruin my career? My life?”

That was a damn good question, one I would find out before this was all over.

“Are you aware that Mr. Jenkins was killed in an explosion recently?”

Jackson looked genuinely surprised. “Tom is dead? Well, that doesn’t exactly help me clear my name, does it?”

“He’s not delusional,” Emily mused when we were back in the car.

“I agree. And he’s right about where Tom was. There’s no way Tom shot her either. But she had been shot. I saw her take her last breath, Emily. I know she was shot.”

“You need those records.”

I agreed and pressed the Bluetooth button to call Jace, who launched straight into speaking without so much as a ‘hello’. “Jackson has a partner... or, well, former lover? I think. Maybe they’re on-again off-again, I’m not here to delve into his romantic drama. But his name is Ben Stark, and you won’t believe what he does for a living.”

My stomach dropped. “What?”

“Explosives. They met in basic training.”

“Son of a bitch.” That was just another suspect. “Jackson didn’t do it. He’s been in the hospital since prior to the murders.”

“I’ll have photos of Stark by the time you get back,” Jace said, and ended the call.

Jackson was angry, and rightfully so, but what I saw wasn’t a man with vengeance on his mind. He wanted Tom to make it right so he could have his life back.

What I saw of Jackson DeBerg, what I heard him say and what I knew of him previously, made one thing unmistakably clear.

Someone else killed Tom and Ella.



## Chapter Twenty-Two

### *Willow*

“Wow, what is that glow you’re wearing and how can I get one for myself?” Ivy threw her head back and laughed, the sound so welcome through the laptop speakers that my heart ached a little with missing her and Lottie.

I joined in on the laughter and gifted Ivy with an innocent look. “This? Probably that pregnancy glow I’ve been hearing so much about,” I told her, and stood so she could see the small but growing baby bump I now sported. “See?”

She gasped. “Oh, look at that little bump!” Ivy clapped excitedly. “How does it feel? How do *you* feel? Still sick?”

“It feels strange with the baby starting to move around. It started with little flutters but now it’s an actual human squirming inside of me. Thankfully, the sickness has mostly gone away, or maybe it’s because all I do is eat.” At least it felt that way.

“Clearly that’s not *all* you do,” Ivy said, her tone filled with mischief. “Spill those beans, Will.”

“You’re right, okay? Is that what you want to hear?”

Ivy laughed. “While that is always awesome to hear, no. I want details. What’s going on over there besides the beast with two backs?”

A loud laugh exploded out of me at her mention of our childhood phrase for doing the dirty. “I can’t believe you brought that back!”

“Hey, retro is always in fashion.”

It felt so good to laugh with Ivy like it was old times. Like nothing had changed. Like Tom and Ella were still alive and there weren’t plenty of people out in this world who would kill me just to kill this baby.

“Uh-oh. Where did you go?” Concern laced Ivy’s tone and I blinked to focus on her face.

“Just overthinking, as I tend to do.” I shook off all the thoughts that swirled through my head and focused on Ivy. “How are you feeling?”

After a short narrow-eyed glare through the screen, Ivy gave me the reprieve I silently requested. “I’m good. Really good, actually, thanks in part to the angel your lover boy sent my way. Caleb has been a godsend helping me navigate all the new treatment options, how to get into testing trials and all that. It makes my head spin, but he’s been incredibly supportive.”

I smiled. “That’s great to hear. Explains *your* glow, or is that because of Eros?”

“He is hot, but then again, they all are, aren’t they?” She rolled her eyes as a nervous laugh escaped. “But Caleb is kind of my doctor, and I’d like a man who doesn’t see me as my sickness. Let’s just say it’s nice to have options.”

“Fair point. You got the money I wired for your meds?”

“I did, but, honey, you sent too much.”

“I’m not sure how long all of this is going to be going on, and I didn’t want you to have to wait on me just in case something happens.” I’d been reluctant to share the details of my ordeal with Ivy because she already had a lot on her plate. “They might have narrowed down the suspects, but that list includes some highly skilled people.”

“Oh shit.” Her eyes widened and her mouth formed a shocked O. “So, like, big-time baddies?”

“You could say that. But it makes things easier to know that you’re taken care of for a few months.” Charlie had really come through with the first two payments from Tom and Ella’s estate so that Ivy wouldn’t have a gap in her medication.

“Willow, you’re scaring me.”

“I know, and I’m sorry, but what matters to me is that you and Lottie are taken care of, and right now you can’t work.

Right?”

She nodded. “I’ve been looking into online work that I can do from home.” Her smile was half-hearted and I knew what she was thinking.

“Stop beating yourself up about things you can’t change, Ivy. Use some of that money to help achieve your goals. That’s just as important for Lottie to see as anything else.”

“You’re gonna be such a good mom, Willow, if that’s what you choose.”

It was a loaded statement even though I knew she didn’t mean anything by it. I hadn’t decided officially to keep the baby yet, but the thought of giving him or her up made me physically ill. “Thank you, Ivy.”

“Is Shane willing to take you with the baby?”

I shrugged. “I’m not sure yet. He said he wants me today and tomorrow and all that, but he didn’t mention the baby.”

“Mama,” Lottie called out, and Ivy sighed.

“Get ready for having zero moments to yourself.” She smiled and turned over her shoulder. “Just a second, please!”

“Okay, Mama.”

I smiled. “I miss my little buddy.”

“She misses her auntie too. But she’s also hungry and on a schedule, so I have to go. I miss you, Willow.”

“I miss you too. Both of you. Having Cornflake here helps some.”

“Talk soon?”

“Love you both,” I said, and disconnected the video chat. I missed my sister and my niece, our little house, and the life we’d worked hard to build together.

Shane walked inside the apartment and my heart clenched because I badly wanted to build a life with this man.

Something troubled him, based on the dark expression on his face. He slammed the door and took his time to engage all

three locks on the door with more force than the task required.

“Shane. Is everything all right?”

He shook his head but his gaze never met mine. “No, Willow, everything is the exact opposite of all right.”

I went to him and took his arm to guide him to the sofa, but Shane kept moving past the sofa towards his room. “Talk to me,” I said as I trailed behind him, “even if it’s just to get it out in the open.”

He shook his head and dropped down on the foot of his bed to untie his boots. “There is no way Tom would do what Jackson is accusing him of. No fucking way. He wouldn’t let another man take the fall for his own shortcomings. He never did before.” He sighed and glanced up at me as he toed off his boots. “Alec and I fought about it. He believes the evidence, which is hard to deny.”

“You know Tom beyond the Navy. Your relationship with him was different.”

“Yes. But what if I’m the one deluding myself at the risk of you, the baby, the truth, and my team?”

“So you think Jackson did it?”

“No. He wanted Tom to admit the truth and he can’t do that now, can he?”

“Good point. I think we need to think of this from all angles.”

“Not now, Willow.” Shane fell back on the bed with an anguished sigh. “My head is throbbing.”

Shane didn’t admit weakness easily, and those four words meant he was truly hurting. I grabbed a pillow and slipped it under his head. “Keep your eyes closed and try to relax.”

He laughed but it lacked all amusement. “I’ll do my best.”

I rushed from his bedroom and made my way to the kitchen to boil some water for a mug of the tea he’d shared with me to ease my morning sickness. I added a bit of fresh ginger and lemon to the mug, and a few slices of toast on a plate just in

case the headache worsened. I shuffled around the kitchen for a few minutes until everything was ready.

I stood in the doorway and watched Shane—his eyes were close but his face was twisted in agony. So much pain, both mental and physical, was contained within this one handsome package. He was hurting and I wanted to do whatever I could to help.

“Shane? I have some tea for you.”

He opened one eye and looked at me with a small smile. “My tea?”

“Yes. Are you okay to sit up?”

Instead of answering, Shane pushed himself up to a seated position and rested his forearms on his knees. “You didn’t have to do this, Willow.”

“I wanted to. If someone I care about is hurting and I can do something about it, I will.”

“The memories came back to me again and again on the drive home, but focusing on the road while Emily gave me her professional opinion took a lot out of me. And now, I can’t stop the day from playing over and over in my head.”

I stepped inside, walking slowly towards him with the tray. “You’re trying to see if Tom could have done what he’s accused of?”

“I am, and no matter how many times it plays, Tom knocks us to the ground, taking a bullet in the process. He flips over on his back to return fire, *away* from us. He didn’t do it. He couldn’t have.”

I believed him. “Then we need to look at it from another angle. What if Tom didn’t shoot her but someone else thought he did? Or what if it was someone else altogether?” I gently pushed the tea towards him, encouraging him to drink it.

“Thank you, Willow. This is great, all of it.”

“You’re welcome. I think we make a good team, Shane.”

“I do too.” He smiled and sipped his tea.

I felt bold, brave in the moment, and I laid a hand on his knee. “In fact, I think we might really have a future together.”

He swallowed and nodded. “I do too. The three of us.”

I blinked in surprise. His words were music to my ears. “You mean that?”

“Of course, I do. You’re a package deal and I’m all right with that. More than all right.” He set the mug down carefully and turned to me, taking my hands in his. “I would love to be at your side, Willow, every step of the way, helping you raise that baby. Our baby.”

I shook my head, not from a lack of desire for that very thing, but out of disbelief. “Seriously?”

“Too soon?”

“No, I just thought, or rather assumed, you didn’t want a ready-made family.”

“If it’s with you, then I want it.” He pulled me close before he captured my mouth with his. The kiss seared my lips and heated up my insides, and that was even before his tongue swept inside and carried me away.

I wrapped my arms around him and pressed my body against his, savoring his hardness, strength, and warmth. Would I ever get enough of this man? I hoped not, because every kiss felt new and exciting, every new pleasure zone discovered thrilled me, made me eager to find another. My hands slid under his t-shirt to feel the hardness of his abs and pecs, the slender corded tendons of his oblique muscles. “Shane,” I moaned against his lips, and pushed my hips toward his.

He nipped my bottom lip. “You’re better than any cup of tea or painkiller, babe.”

I laughed and leaned in to kiss him again, but before our lips touched, the doorbell rang.

Instantly, Shane was back in protector mode. He set me aside and sat up straight as he made sure his firearm was at his side. It wasn’t, and he got it before he marched slowly to the

front door. I watched from the doorway of his room in simple fascination as he scanned the room while he walked, his mind making dozens of calculations in those short moments.

A panel in the wall opened with the flick of a button to reveal a small monitor that showed Alec with a parcel in his arms. Shane dropped his hand from his holster and opened the door. “Yes?”

“Delivery for Willow Evans,” Alec said with a smirk of amusement on his face. “A signature is required.”

Shane rolled his eyes and snatched the parcel from Alec’s hands.

“It’s from Charlie’s office.”

“Thanks,” Shane muttered, “see you later.”

When he shut the door in Alec’s face, I saw through the monitor as the blond threw his hands in the air, and I heard his voice through the door scoff, “*Rude.*”

Shane’s gaze landed on mine as I came out into the living area. “I need to check it first.”

“Sure, go ahead.” I was expecting these from Charlie, and with an idea of what was inside I knew that I had no problem with him reading them.

But as he scanned the first page, his expression grew darker and darker before he looked up at me. “Is this for real?”

I opened my mouth to answer, but before I could say another word he turned on his heel and headed straight to his room.

“What the...”

I walked to his door and tried the handle, but it was locked. “Shane?”

No response.

Feeling suddenly insecure, vulnerable, and extremely confused, I stared at the door as a pit opened up in my stomach, and felt my eyes well up with tears. “Shane! What’s going on?”

But I got no response.



# Chapter Twenty-Three

## *Shane*

*Un-fucking-believable.* I paced the length of my room, my temporary room across the hall from the temporary woman in my life. After everything we'd been through these past few weeks, and after I spilled my heart and my secrets to her, Willow went and showed me her true colors.

It didn't make sense.

I stared at the paper in my hand for a moment longer; a contract written up to transfer custody of the child to Jane when it was born. I snorted in anger and dropped the paper and parcel onto my bed in disgust.

Why would she have papers drawn up to give custody of Tom's child to his mother? That wasn't what Tom wanted, it sure as hell wasn't what I wanted, and it wasn't what would be best for Jane *or* the baby. We'd talked about this. How many times had Willow mentioned that Jane was too old to be a full time mother now? And she was right about that. Jane was getting on in years, and it would be too hard for her to be a single mother at her age. So why would Willow do this? And what's more, why lie about it?

"Shane?" Willow, the traitor, knocked on my door again, but I continued to pace and ignore her. Eventually, she got the hint and walked away, although I thought I heard her sniffle with tears as she left.

I shoved down the pang in my chest at the sound of her distress, and glared at nothing.

Was she sad at having been caught out in her lie? She knew that this envelope was from Charlie, so she must have known what was inside.

I just didn't understand. Why pretend? Why act like she wanted to keep the baby? Did she want to put up a front of

goodness that wasn't truly her? Did she think that if I thought she'd keep the baby of someone who was so close to me, I'd put more effort into protecting her?

It didn't make sense, but I was too pumped full of anger to sort through it. Ignoring the slice of hurt that raced through me at the shattered mental image of Willow, myself, and Tom's child living together in a family unit I'd never truly thought I would have, I whirled away from the sight of that contract.

I had to get the hell out of here and think. Right now.

I shoved my feet into my shoes, tied them tight, and yanked the door open. My determination to leave had a momentary pause as I watched Willow rolling out dough in the kitchen, her back turned to me. She was fucking cooking, as if nothing at all was wrong.

"You're leaving," she said simply, without looking at me. It wasn't a question, just a statement.

"I am." Was that all she was going to say? It wasn't enough, dammit. "Did you mean any of what you said to me? Or did you just talk about wanting a future with me for shits and giggles?"

Her shoulders fell, and she finally turned her face to me. Her eyes were red-rimmed, but I ignored that. "What? Of course I meant it. Have I done anything to make you think otherwise?"

"Yeah," I grunted. "You have. I want to know why."

"Why *what?*" She finally turned around and put a floured hand on her hip, blond brows dipped in confusion. "Shane, you're not making any sense."

A sharp lightning bolt of pain shot through the right side of my head, and my eyes slammed shut. Both hands instinctively went to press against my temples, the only move that seemed to stop the pain, no matter how temporary.

"Shane," she cried out, and rushed to my side. "Shane, are you all right?"

I shrugged off her touch because it hurt too much right now. “You can stop pretending now, Will.”

She sucked in a shocked breath, her big blue eyes wide and wet with unshed tears. Once her shock faded, Willow kept moving backwards, away from me. “Oh. Right. I got it. This is you pulling back now that you’ve gotten what you wanted.”

I laughed but there was no joy in it. “That’s rich, coming from you.”

“I have no idea what you are talking about, Shane. None. What could possibly be in that envelope that would make you act like this?”

“As if you don’t know,” I growled, and shook my head, which sent another sharp bolt of pain through it and down my spine. “I have to get out of here. Don’t go anywhere.”

She snorted. “As if I have anywhere to go.”

Those were the last words I heard before I stormed out of the apartment, slammed on Alec’s door, and waited with agitation until he answered. “I’m leaving. Get in there with Willow, make sure she stays put. Please.”

“Everything okay?” Alec asked, brows pulling in confusion.

“No, it’s not. I just need to get out of here for a while and then things will be fine.” I hoped.

“Fine. I’ll keep an eye on her. Do what you have to do, Shane.”

I left before Alec asked any more questions to satisfy his curiosity. I made my way down to the underground parking area and looked around because despite my inner turmoil, there was still a threat and I couldn’t afford to be careless. The garage was empty and I proceeded to my vehicle, settling behind the steering wheel with a frustrated sigh.

I had nowhere to go and nothing to do, so I sat and stared out the windshield while I tried to let go of the future I thought I had laid out. A future that included me and Willow and the baby. A future with someone who wasn’t a *liar*, with a baby

she apparently had no plans to keep. To love and to raise as Tom and Ella had wanted.

I didn't understand why I was so fixated on the image of that little, imagined family unit. Probably because I was thinking about what would be best for the baby and its grandmother, unlike *someone*.

The contract said it all, no matter how innocent Willow pretended to be. I saw it with my own eyes, and it was from my own damn lawyer. I started the car and turned on the Bluetooth. "Call Charlie."

The phone rang six times before she finally picked up. "Shane. What's up?"

"What's up? How can you ask that so casually after what you did? Why didn't you tell me Willow planned to give the baby to Tom's mother?"

Charlie said nothing for such a long time I thought maybe she'd ended the call.

"Well? What do you have to say for yourself?"

"I wasn't aware that Willow or the baby she's carrying was any of your concern, with all due respect, Shane."

Dammit, she was right about that. "Well, it is."

"In that case, let me clue you in, boss. Willow reached out to me because she wanted to know her options, specifically how she could keep the baby and provide visitation rights to Tom and Ella's parents if they were interested."

"What?" Another sharp pain shot through my head because Charlie wasn't making any sense and I was still too damned close to Willow. I pulled out of the parking garage and drove around the city to clear my head. "Charlie?"

"I'm here," she said with a hint of amusement in her voice. "Are you having a meltdown?"

"No," I growled. "Just tell me everything that led up to the contract you had delivered today."

“Well,” she said slowly, “Willow said she was unsure about what to do. It’s probably just because this is a lot to dump on someone who thought they were just carrying a baby and have now been tasked with raising it, loving it, and caring for it. It’s a lot, so after a brief conversation with her about her options, I sent along two contracts that would suit her needs depending on her decision.” Then she paused with a slight chuckle. “Although she kept speaking about how unsure she was about which decision to make; to keep the baby or not, if you ask me, she’s going to keep it. The only questions she asked me, the only concerns she really had, were about what her life would look like, from a legal perspective, if she were to become the sole caretaker.”

I listened in dumb silence, unable to properly process her words.

“You still there?” Charlie asked, and I cleared my throat.

“There was only one contract in that envelope.”

“Incorrect. There were two envelopes inside one larger envelope, to keep things from getting mixed up. Why are you snooping through her paperwork...oh my God, are you and the pretty surrogate *a thing*?” The way she whispered the last part had me suppressing a frustrated groan, and I ran a hand over my face.

“That is above your pay grade.”

She hummed, and I could hear the amusement in her voice. “Interesting.”

“Charlie...”

“Okay, okay,” she laughed. “Look, since it’s above my pay grade, let ask you something. Did you or did you not blow a gasket at her when you read legal papers *not* meant for you?”

I sighed. “I... may have.”

“Lord, save us all from presumptuous men!” Charlie laughed again, and it took some of the sting off the fact that I’d been a massive asshole to Willow and owed her the biggest apology I could come up with. “Good luck fixing it. Call if you need anything related to the law.”

“Will do,” I mumbled gruffly, and ended the call. At the next light, I turned right to head back to The Towers. The phone rang and Zac’s name appeared on the center console. “What’s up, Zac?”

“Good news. Remember Jackson’s possible-ex-lover-but-maybe-still-current-boyfriend we were looking into?”

“Ben Stark,” I said, “of course I remember, idiot.”

“Well, we got more than a photo on him—we found his car. His abandoned car. Grab Alec and meet me, I’m sending you coordinates now.”

“I’m not at the apartment. Tell Alec yourself so he’ll prep, and send Dewey over to guard Willow. I’ll swing by for Alec and we’ll head down.”

“I’m not your fucking secretary,” Zac grumbled, but when I snapped his name in a warning tone he sighed and said he’d get it done.

My apology—and grand gesture for Willow—would have to wait.

For now, we had to get on this lead with Stark before it blew cold.

# Chapter Twenty-Four

## *Willow*

“What a pigheaded asshole!” I paced the length of the apartment between the living room and the kitchen in an effort to calm myself down, but it didn’t seem to be working. Neither did heading into his room and checking the contents of that envelope, to make sure it wasn’t some crazy, unexpected... *something* that might make him act the way he did.

No, that had only made it worse. Because all I’d seen was the opened contract Charlie had sent me to pass over custody of my baby to Jane, and the *unopened* one that would solidify me as its mother and allow full rights to Jane as the biological grandmother.

Shit, did I just think of this baby as *my baby*?

I guess that was an answer to my earlier dilemma...

But with one worried feeling settled, another had only worsened. Because now I had to deal with Shane thinking I was some flake ready to go back on my word in an instant.

“I mean, to actually think that I would pretend to have feelings for him just to get his protection? What the actual fuck, Cornflake?”

Cornflake meowed mournfully and stared at me with her big kitty eyes.

“Exactly,” I sighed. “I knew you would understand.”

“Uh, Willow?” Alec murmured from where he stood by the kitchen counter, staring at me as if I’d grown a second head. “Is everything alright?”

I ignored Shane’s friend, because his presence just reminded me of the stupid man who had made my already hormonal mood swings rise to crazy annoying heights. Instead, I focused on Cornflake’s fluffy ginger body.

It didn't take the intelligence of a cat to see that Shane was clearly off his rocker. "Not that it matters," I continued down to my now uninterested cat. "He didn't just not believe in me, he wouldn't even give me a chance to explain, or tell me the details of why he was so mad to begin with."

"Meow."

"Okay, Cornflake, you are officially no help at all."

She responded by lifting her leg and licking at her crotch.

So I finally whirled to Alec, who took half a step back at my expression.

"Your stupid friend is *stupid*, did you know that?"

"Uh..."

Possibly against his will, I gave Alec a quick rundown of what had gone down in this apartment just before he'd arrived.

"And now he's just stormed off without another word! I am so mad I could scream. I mean, he actually accused me of saying what I needed to just to get his protection! Is that what he really thinks of me? That because I couldn't pay you guys with money, I'd try and bribe him to keep protecting me with sex?"

"That doesn't really sound like Shane," Alec said, looking like he had no idea what he was supposed to be doing in the face of my tirade.

"That's what he implied! He said it with his own stupid mouth!"

"Willow, let me just, um..."

Alec went to grab his laptop, and I started pacing again as he set up a video call with Ivy. When the call went through, I wouldn't take the laptop off him as I gave another heated explanation to my sister, so Alec just stood there holding the screen up for me, looking extremely awkward.

"I mean, I finally find a guy who makes me think about the future, who makes me want to think about the future and he



flips out like this?” I shook my head. “Whatever.”

“Come on, Willow, cut the guy some slack,” Ivy said in a reasonable tone, instead of immediately siding with me and cussing Shane to hell and back.

“He has been through a lot,” Alec chimed, but when I sent him a withering glare he sealed his lips and held the laptop higher for me.

“Why should I cut him slack? He was the one who jumped to conclusions and left without giving me a chance to respond. What kind of relationship can we possibly have if his first instinct is to run when there’s trouble?”

“Okay, so you have some kinks to work out,” Ivy said. “That’s something you can do together. He’s been stressed as hell with finding who killed his friends and protecting you, not to mention running his business. And then there’s the other stuff you haven’t told me about, but I can guess.” The sympathy in her eyes cooled some of my anger, but only some of it.

“All that is true and I know that, but this is our first fight and I didn’t even get a chance to participate. What if this is how he is? Quick to anger, slow—if ever—to forgive? Unwilling to listen?” I couldn’t upend my life for a man so mercurial.

“That *does* sound like Shane,” Alec murmured, before quickly lowering the laptop. “I mean the quick to anger part. And maybe the listening... But not slow to forgive, I’m sure he’s already realized that he screwed up and is driving around trying to figure out the best apology gift he can find.”

“Alec!” I snapped, “I need you to stop being so reasonable right now!”

“Seriously, I didn’t even realize you two were in this deep,” he muttered, but when I opened my mouth angrily he once more lifted the laptop, this time to completely hide his face, and all but squeaked, “Ivy! Talk to Ivy!”

“I’m sure he’s not wrong,” my sister quickly put in, looking partially amused and partially sorry for what I was going

through. “He knows Shane well, after all. I bet he’s thinking of how best to apologize to you as we speak.”

That sounded nice and I really did want that to be true. “But what if it’s too late?”

“What if it’s not?” she asked in return. “Look, Willow, Shane isn’t just a hot body and a gorgeous face.” Alec snorted at that, which I chose to ignore. “It seems to me like he’s got a beautiful soul and is kind and generous, with a protective streak the size of the Pacific. He is the man your heart chose, which means he’s the best man to have at your side as you become a mom for the first time.”

I pointed at the screen and shook my head. “Don’t you dare try to use my overworked pregnancy hormones against me. I’ve cried enough and I’m done for today. And tomorrow. Maybe the whole damn week.”

Ivy suppressed a laugh, and then pretended to cough to cover it. “Okay, fine, I won’t. But maybe he’s doing that guy thing where instead of crying and admitting he was worried about his heart, he gets all growly and angry so that he can feel macho instead of upset?”

“Sounds about right,” Alec muttered from behind the laptop.

“He walked out, you guys!. I want to be with someone who thinks I’m worth staying for, worth fighting it out with because we are so good together that it’s worth wading through the bullshit. Together.” I was a little sad that we were over before things really got going, but I would move on. Eventually.

“Just give it some time, Willow. You both need too cool off and let the dust settle a little before you make a final decision.”

“Here, here!” Alec crowed, before poking his head out from behind the screen. “For all it’s worth, I think you two are cute as pie together. God knows that man needs someone as good as you.”

I tried to hide the blush Alec’s compliment sent to cheeks, and he winked, shrugged, and ducked back behind the laptop.

“It’s true.”

I wasn’t sure if some time to cool off would change anything, but some space might give us both time to think. “Yeah, maybe...”

“There is no maybe about it,” Ivy said. “I am totally right. Listen to your big sister and all will be well. Trust.”

I laughed, although tears found their way into my eyes again at the same time. “Thanks for listening, Ivy. What’s up with you?”

“Nothing worth talking about right this second. Go soak in a hot bath, clear your mind, and be ready to listen when your man comes back.” Ivy waved and ended the secure video chat, and Alec clicked the laptop shut.

“Alright, so...are you done shouting at me?”

I sniffled and offered him a lopsided grin. “Yeah.”

A hot bath sounded good. My skin tingled at the idea of sinking into a hot bath, relaxing, and letting my mind wander until I was too worn out to think. I headed for the bathroom to fill the tub with water and coconut-scented bath bubbles.

Yes, a bath was just the thing I needed to wash away, well, everything. It would certainly wash off the scent of Shane that seemed to linger on my skin. It would wash away the tears that had fallen off and on since Shane evacuated the apartment like it was on fire. It would drown out the dreams I had of the future—our future—as a happy couple. One thing would complete the hot bath fantasy, a candle.

Alec ran off to use the bathroom before I took an hour long bath, and while he was in there, I went in search of a candle I’d remembered seeing in one of the kitchen cabinets. I hoped it wasn’t one of those tea candles Ivy and I used when the power went out during summer storms, but even if it was, it would be better than a bath with no candle.

A knock sounded at the door, startling me. It wasn’t Shane because he never knocked, while Zac or Adrian tended to use their entire bodies to knock on the door and Dewey always accompanied his knocks with a “Miss Willow?”. Thankfully,

I'd been shown how to use the surveillance monitor, so I took my time getting to the door and stopped to expose the monitor and check it.

Based on the knee-length shorts and matching shirt of the man holding a huge bunch of flowers in front of his face, it was a delivery man. Could the bouquet be from Shane?

Likely. I took a step towards the door and froze. Even angry, Shane wouldn't do anything that would bring a stranger to the door. Would he?

No. Not in a million years.

"Uh, Alec?" I called.

"Nearly done, give me a minute! Had Mexican last night and it's done a number on me..."

Gross. Too much info.

I turned back to the monitor and tapped the button on the wall. "Can you just leave the flowers at the door? Thank you." I watched the man set the vase on the floor, wondering if it was another of Shane's men wearing some type of disguise because that hair looked like a wig.

I waited until the man walked out of view of the camera before I unlocked the door. He'd placed the flowers at an awkward distance, which was annoying, so I took a couple steps out to grab them. It was a beautiful bouquet filled with stargazer and Casablanca lilies.

"Gorgeous." I picked up the vase and spun it in my hands in search of a card, but there was none. "Strange apology." I turned to get back inside to safety, when a hard *thwack* landed on the back of my head. My knees buckled as my vision blurred, and I felt the vase slip from my grasp.

I hit the cold hard floor before everything around me turned black.

When I woke up it was dark, and I knew I wasn't at the apartment inside The Towers. I was somewhere else and I wasn't safe.

The room was so dark that I felt slightly disoriented, so I kept my eyes closed to stop the wave of nausea that swept over me. I could hear footsteps in the distance, but not too far away.

“Hello?”

There was no answer, but the footsteps stopped.

“Hello?” I called out, louder.

The footsteps got closer until they stopped suddenly behind me. For a moment, I was too nauseous to turn.

“Hello.” The voice was deep and masculine, with a hint of culture. “Something I can do for you?”

I tried not to wince at the mischief in the man’s voice. I opened my eyes, but it was too dark to get a good look at him. “Who are you?”

“I am Ben Stark, and you are Willow Elizabeth Evans. Any more questions?”

“What do you want with me?”

He laughed, but it was a fake laugh. No, not fake, more like menacing. “With you? Nothing. It’s that rotten fruit you’re carrying that I’m interested in.”

My hand instinctively went to my swollen belly. “This is just a baby. He or she hasn’t done anything to deserve whatever you have planned.”

“Yes, well, my best friend, my love, my Jackson...he didn’t deserve what happened to him either, yet here we are. All of us victims of other people’s actions. Or inactions.”

“Jackson is your man?”

Finally the footsteps rounded to my front, and Ben crouched in front of me. He had dark brown hair with a slightly receding hairline, a thin, neatly trimmed mustache, and a crisp, short-sleeved button down shirt tucked into brown pants. I struggled to sit up, and he did nothing but watch me with dark eyes partially hidden behind the sheen of a pair of wire-rimmed glasses.

“Tom Jenkins and the good ol’ boys of NCIS ruined Jackson’s life.” Ben said without answering my question. “They accused him of having mental problems and dishonorably discharged him. Do you know how impossible it is to get a decent job with that black mark on your record?”

I looked up at the low bulb shining above, flickering a weak light over the two of us. “No, I don’t, and I’m sorry for him. For you both.”

“NCIS may have inflicted the wounds, but it was Tom Jenkins and his inability to stand up and do the right thing that finished him off. They ruined his life, which effectively ruined our life together. The future we had planned was gone—poof!—in an instant. And I’m sorry for you, Willow, but this is going to hurt.”

“Wait, Ben. Mr. Stark, please think about this.”

“Oh, I have, honey, believe me. I haven’t thought about anything but this since I found out that Tom and his precious little wife were blown to bits. Revenge. Sweet fucking revenge will be mine when I cut that rotten fruit out of you.”

“So it wasn’t you who killed Tom and Ella?”

“No, but then a little birdie told me you were carrying his seed and I’ve been searching all over this city for you. Now,” he grinned, and his teeth were perfectly white and perfectly straight, “here you are. Right where I want you.”

My eyes widened at the sight of the giant hunting knife he held in his hand, smiling at it like it was the love of his life, Jackson DeBerg. Ben was a man on the edge. He’d lost everything he held dear and he blamed Tom, but Tom was dead, so me and the baby were the next closest target. I had to do something. I had to at least try to save our lives, because who else would save me?

“Wouldn’t your time be better spent trying to help Jackson get better?”

“Once you and that baby have been eliminated, I’ll dedicate all of that energy to Jackson. Until then, you get all of my attention, lucky girl.”

“Lucky me,” I mumbled.

Ben laughed. “A sense of humor will make your last hours pleasant, Willow. Good for you.”

This guy was completely out of his mind. I had no experience with how to deal with a man like him, but this was literally life or death, which meant I had to figure it out.

This baby was counting on me.

# Chapter Twenty-Five

## *Shane*

Alec rushed out of the building with a dark, worried expression on his face. “Shane. I’m sorry.”

“What happened?” I swallowed down the fury that gripped me at his words.

Alec jumped into the passenger seat with a grunt. “Turn left at the light and hit the gas,” he instructed with an urgency I couldn’t disobey. “Look, man, we’re seconds behind the asshole—Ben Stark—who took Willow.”

My heart skidded to a stop. “What do you mean he *took* her?”

Alec raked a hand through his thick blond hair and blew out a long, regretful sigh. “I went to the toilet. I had Mexican last night, man, you know I always eat that shit. It’s never fucked with my system, but today...”

“I don’t care about your fucking bowels,” I growled, flooring the gas and screeching around the corner. “Tell me what happened.”

“I was talking to her through the door, she was right fucking there! By the time I came out, she was silent again. I thought she was on another call with her sister. I called out to her, checked her bedroom, yours, the whole apartment—nothing. That’s when I realized the front door wasn’t clicked fully shut, and there was a huge bundle of crushed flowers on the floor. He fucking took her, Shane.” He shook his head again, mentally beating himself up. “I wasn’t even five minutes on the toilet, *fuck*.”

I took several deep, deep breaths, and tried to contain my emotions.

“I checked the footage, someone was at the door. She knows not to open to strangers, and she told the guy to leave...but she



ruined it all by waiting and then opening it anyway, instead of waiting for me! He clocked her over the head as she grabbed the flowers. Fuck. *Fuck, fuck, fuck.*”

I couldn't speak, couldn't even lift my fingers from the wheel with how hard I was clutching it.

Alec looked at me, worry plastered all over his face. “I did see a car booking it suspiciously fast down the road when I looked out the window, so I have half an idea who to look for.”

“Zac found Stark's abandoned car,” I said through gritted teeth. “He wants us to meet him there.”

“I know,” Alec muttered. “I saw his message.”

We drove in silence for half a minute after that, nothing but the roar of the engine and my beating fucking heart in my ears, until a call came through the Bluetooth in my car.

“Where the fuck are you guys?” Zac's impatient tone was expected since time was an important factor in trying to figure this all out.

“Change of plans. Alec is with me. Stark has Willow and I'm trying to catch up with him.”

“Jesus fucking shit,” he said, frantic in a way I had never heard him before. He was always cool under pressure since he handled explosives on a regular basis, so his tone now put me on edge.

“What?” My heart thumped against my chest as I pressed harder on the accelerator. “Zac,” I barked. “Talk to me.”

“I just finished looking inside the car and it's not good. Discarded zip ties, a bottle of chloroform, multiple pairs of handcuffs, and a bunch of other shit that doesn't bode well for Willow.”

I clenched my jaw harder. “All right, I'm trying to catch up to him now and I'll give you the details when—”

Alec leaned forward, interrupting me. “Gold sedan, four doors, no more than five years old with Washington plates. There,” Alec pointed to the car he just described making a right turn towards the highway, far down the road. He rattled

off the plate to Zac before he ended the call, and I watched the car disappear into the fray of traffic. “Sorry, no time to relay the message.”

“As long we keep Willow safe, we’re good.” The thought of Willow not being safe, of being harmed by Stark, took hold of my brain. “I’m such an asshole,” I said out loud, a white-knuckled grip on the steering wheel. “This is all my fault.”

“If this is anyone’s fault, it’s mine,” Alec shot back.

“No. I should have been there with her, but I walked out because I was angry. If I had stayed and talked to her, this wouldn’t have happened. And we might have Stark right now. Dammit,” I smacked the steering wheel again as I sped up to try and catch Stark on the highway.

“He’s going to take the next exit,” Alec said. “Get over now.”

Sure enough, a quarter mile later, Stark took the exit at the last minute. “Good looking out, man.”

I did my best to get closer to him, speeding well above the limit, but by the time we got off the highway and into the suburbs, I couldn’t fucking see him anymore.

The phone rang in the car and I answered Zac’s call immediately. “Update me.”

“I found where he’s going,” he said, and rattled off an address. “It matched the registration on the abandoned car, but it wasn’t the address listed as his primary. Best bet that’s where he’s going.”

Alec was already plugging the address into the navigation system. “On our way.”

The address led us out of the tree-filled neighborhood and into the much poorer side of town. I still hadn’t caught another glimpse of Stark on the roads.

“Zac says he’s at the house, watching from the back. Telling us to pull in from the front when we arrive,” Alec said as he read off his phone.

I followed the navigation instructions at full speed until we landed in front of a squat brick house with a dark green roof and a matching door.

“It looks so benign,” Alec said, and exited the car, his focus on the gold car already parked in the driveway. “Fuck, that’s his. It’s empty,” he called out to me, but I was already focused on the layout of the house.

“There’s a basement,” I said with certainty. “That’s where he’s put her.”

A text came in from Zac. *The place looks rigged.*

I relayed the message to Alec, who stepped back from the front door. “We need to come up with a plan of action and then move in to get Willow.”

I growled. “Anything could happen to her, any second now.”

“And we could fuck it all up by running head-first in there and getting our heads blown off,” Alex snapped, and I sucked in another deep breath to try and calm myself, lifting my fingers to press into my temples to try and diminish the migraine that was building.

Exactly thirteen excruciating minutes later, we had a plan. According to Zac, the place had indeed been rigged to alert Stark of our presence—or possibly, blow everyone and himself into bits—and when Zac finally managed to successfully disable the cords, we entered..

The home was mostly unfurnished, and I knew exactly what that meant. “He only rented this place for this part of his plan.”

Zac entered through the back door and clapped me on the back, whispering, “We’re here. Your woman will be safe in a matter of minutes. Promise.” He crept across the living room and paused at the sound of raised voices.

“I don’t give a damn! Tom was a rotten piece of shit and that baby in your belly is rotten too!”

“Stark,” I growled, and made my way towards the door that led to the basement. “He’s unhinged.”

“This baby has nothing to do with your issues with Tom.”

“Issues?” He shouted the words at her, so loud he sounded insane. “My issues, little girl, are that Tom and the Navy ruined my life. They ruined Jackson’s life, his career, and his mental health, which, in turn, fucked up mine. That’s not just *issues*.”

All three of us looked at each other. Zac nodded and slowly opened the basement door where the voices grew louder and clearer. “Alec, check for another way into the basement just in case we need it.”

Alec gave a sharp jerk of his head and left.

Willow’s voice sounded shaky and afraid. “So you’re all right with killing me, which would, in effect kill my sister and leave my niece orphaned, all because your boyfriend got a raw deal? Sounds like you’re no better than Tom or the Navy.”

“Shut up! I am twice the man that asshole will ever be!”

“If you say so,” she told him, her voice scared but still sarcastic.

She was buying for time. *That’s my girl.*

“I do! Do you know that he didn’t even go to bat for Jackson when it all happened? Not one fucking word!”

“That doesn’t sound like the Tom I knew. He was the kind of man who went out of his way to do the right thing, even when it’s hard. Maybe you need to do a little more digging before you start killing folks.”

There was a loud bang, and I wasn’t sure if Stark was punching a wall or throwing Willow into it. I lunged forward, but Zac threw a hand against my chest and stopped me.

“Be cool. If we go in there with our guns blazing, he will kill her.”

I nodded, knowing he was right.

“Let’s go down slowly,” he said, and I was grateful to Zac for taking the reins, knowing that I was too emotional with Willow’s life on the line.

I followed him down the steps with my heart in my throat, listening as Stark railed at Willow.

“Let Willow go,” Alec said, and drew Stark’s attention to the other side of the room, which allowed Zac and I to descend the stairs unnoticed by him.

The angry man turned and raised a blade that was at least six inches in length and jagged on one side. “Stay back,” he shouted frantically, and lunged for Willow. “Stay the fuck back or I will slit her throat.” He yanked Willow to her feet by her hair. “I mean it.”

“He’s insane,” Willow deadpanned to Alec.

“So I gathered,” Alec responded with a smile. “You all right?”

“Scared and hungry, but so far unscathed. Unless whatever knockout drug he used to keep me down after he hit me harms the baby, I’m fine physically.”

“Hungry?” Stark shouted, his voice warbling as a strange laugh bubbled out of it. “Don’t you realize you’re about to die, girl?”

Alec sighed and put his hands on his hips. “All right, Ben, you’re pissed because you think Tom is responsible for what happened to Jackson, right?”

“I don’t *think* it, I know it for a fact. I hacked into the records that haven’t been redacted to high hell and it showed the truth. It was Tom’s bullet that killed that teacher and he said nothing when they blamed Jackson.”

“Hacking?” Alec frowned. “I thought you were an explosives expert?”

Stark waved the knife around haphazardly. “Let’s just say an interested party helped out in that regard.”

That was something I was interested in knowing more about. “It said Tom Jenkins’ gun killed her?”

Stark whirled around with a gasp, the knife aimed at us, which was a damn sight better than having it aimed at Willow. “That part was redacted.”

“That’s what I thought.” I stepped forward until just a few feet separated me and Stark. And Willow. “You all right?”

Willow nodded but said nothing.

“She’s fine. For now,” Stark growled, He was still holding her by the hair. “If you come any closer, I will cut her from the bottom of her stomach to the chin. Her and the baby will die.”

My fists clenched at his words and the fear that flared in Willow’s eyes. “I’m staying right here for now, but only if you lower that damn knife.”

He lowered it a few inches and that was good enough for now. “You here to sell me the same story as her? That Tom was a good man, an honorable man who could do no wrong?”

I nodded. “That was my experience with him, yes. But since you killed him, I’ve been looking into that mission and I’ve found out some things. The truth, if that’s what you’re really interested in hearing.”

“I know the truth!”

I told myself to stay calm. Riling up this unstable man now would only put Willow in harm’s way. “You know the truth based on what you could access with your *interested party*. But I managed to access the unredacted file, so if you want the whole truth, I can give it to you. At a price.”

Stark shook his head. “I’m not letting her go. Talk. Now.”

My gaze landed on Willow once again. I needed to gauge how she was feeling in this moment, to make sure that only fear was her overriding emotion. Despite our earlier fight, we managed a silent conversation where she assured me she was all right, for the moment. The ‘be quick about it’ came through loud and clear.

“Talk,” he shouted, and swung around to press his blade to the delicate skin of Willow’s throat.

“You’re right, Jackson told the truth about killing the teacher. He was completely innocent, ballistic tests proved it. But Tom didn’t shoot her either.”

“Bullshit!”

“Tom didn’t shoot the teacher, and he had no part in the coverup. In fact, he did stand behind the fact that Jackson was shooting in the opposite direction. He did go to bat for Jackson, but forces outside of his control had their thumbs on the scale.”

“Stop lying to me!” He was coming unhinged. He licked his dry lips and lifted the knife momentarily from Willow’s throat to push up his glasses, which were half-unhinged due to his erratic movements. Stark was close to losing it completely.

“He’s not lying,” Zac added, even more calm than me. “Tom had nothing to do with the coverup at all, it was someone else with a lot more power than a Navy SEAL.”

Stark’s brows dipped in confusion and he shook his head angrily. “Give me a fucking name!”

Zac nodded. “Does the name James Jenkins mean anything to you? He’s the head of the House Armed Services Committee.”

“Tom’s father?”

Zac and I both nodded. “He saw the report and assumed Tom was at fault for the teacher’s death, so he ordered the coverup so it wouldn’t interfere with Tom’s chances of becoming an admiral.”

He shook his head fiercely. “That’s stupid. You’re lying. All of you.”

“The truth doesn’t matter,” Willow said softly, almost dejected. “It never did.”

“The truth is that Jackson is the love of my life and Tom, the Navy, *and* his father took him away from me. I have no one left. I’m just trying to rectify that the best way I know how.”

I laughed bitterly. “By killing an innocent woman and child?”

Alec crept in closer and closer to Stark and Willow while I kept him talking.

“How is that not even worse than what Tom did? Even if I believed your story, the Afghani teacher’s death was an accident. One that still lives with me every damn day of my life.”

“Bullshit,” he shouted.

“It’s true. She died in my arms after saving my life. That day is marked on my brain forever.” And on my worst days, it’s a day that I couldn’t stop from playing on a loop in my mind. “I am determined to get to the bottom of who killed Tom and Ella. They were like family to me.”

“Yeah, well, Jackson *was* my family. He meant, *still means*, the goddamn world to me.”

“And Willow means the world to me. She’s innocent and she’s in your clutches based on a lie. Should I take up your method and kill you here and now, and then break into Whispering Oak to kill Jackson in retaliation?”

Stark pressed the knife harder into Willow’s skin until one bright red drop of blood appeared. “Don’t threaten me.”

“I’m not. I don’t make threats, Ben. I only fulfill promises.”

Then, Stark lifted his knife away again to once more push up his glasses. In that split second before he could swing the knife back around, Alec and I lunged forward. I reached out for Willow and Alec tackled Stark to the ground while he ranted and raved about the unfairness of it all.

“He stole everything from me and I just want this one thing. Just this one thing.” His anger shifted to sadness as big, body-shaking sobs wracked his torso. “I just wanted to take one thing from him.”

I stared at him and clutched Willow in my arms, feeling that something was very off about this situation. I kissed the top of her head. “Are you all right?”

She nodded and pressed a hand to her neck. “I’m fine, it’s just a little bit of blood. What about him?”

I smiled at this woman with the oversized heart, able to give a damn about a man who had just drugged and kidnapped her



and planned to kill her. “What about him?”

She sighed. “I don’t think he killed Tom and Ella.”

“Me either.” I sighed and pulled her closer. “But he will have to pay for his role in all of this, particularly kidnapping you.”

“I know, but it’s all just so sad.” Willow shook her head and leaned into me, sought refuge within the comfort of my arms.

I wasn’t naïve enough to think this meant all was forgiven, but I hoped it was a start.

# Chapter Twenty-Six

## *Willow*

I stepped from the shower and sighed after the day's excitement. It was terrifying and there were times I really thought I would die, but Shane and his team had come through. They'd rescued me from the clutches of a very damaged, very sad man. I was glad to be out of danger, but it had solidified at least one point of uncertainty for me.

This baby. I wanted it, wanted him or her to be a part of my life forever. I wanted Shane too, but that wasn't up to me.

I dried off my hair and wrapped a large towel around my body, allowing myself to savor the comfort of being safe inside my temporary home. Physically, I was safe, but my heart was another matter, one I wasn't ready to tackle yet. For now, I just wanted to get in bed and enjoy ten hours of dreamless sleep.

"Oh. Excuse me." Distracted, I ran smack into a hard, wide, bare chest that I knew well. "Sorry."

Shane reached out and took my wrist in his hand. "Don't be."

I didn't know what that meant. Was he trying to apologize or was he just horny? "Shane..." I sighed, and took a step back.

"We need to talk, Willow."

I laughed bitterly and skirted around him, making my way to my bedroom. "Oh, now you want to talk? Why not just run away again, I'm sure that will fix *everything*." I scanned the room, distracted by the sight of a shirtless Shane, in search of the clothes I laid out, and found them on the foot of the bed where I'd left them.

"I deserve that," he said. "I'm sorry that I left and that you were vulnerable because of that. I'm sorry I jumped to

conclusions and walked out. Next time, I promise to stay and talk.”

“Next time?” I whirled around to face him, totally unconcerned with the fact that I was in nothing but a towel. “Bold assumption.” My heart raced underneath the bravado I didn’t mean, but I was hurt. “Tell me, Shane, did you really think I would be able to give up this baby after everything that’s happened?” My heart ached at the fact that he truly thought so little of me.

“Willow,” he began and shook his head, raking one hand through his hair as the other scrubbed down his face. “I’m an idiot. Worse, an asshole.” He explained how he’d gotten it all wrong, jumped to the wrong conclusions, and walked out. “In my anger, I convicted you without confronting you, and it’s not like me to be such a coward.”

That much I knew was true. “And giving the baby to Jane would upset you?”

He nodded. “In my head, I’d created this life we would have together, you and me and the baby, all the things we would do together, and when I saw that you were planning to give up custody, all those dreams vanished and I was...hell, I was heartbroken.”

My heart lurched a little at his words. “I can understand that. It’s exactly how I felt when I watched you run away from me, angry and silent.”

“Shit, Willow. I’m so sorry.” He shook his head, silently berating himself for his mistake, which I appreciated. “I’ve never been in this position before, being in love with a woman, never mind one I was supposed to protect. I reacted poorly and all I can do is tell you how damn sorry I am and vow that I will spend the rest of our lives together making it up to you.”

“Wait,” I said, and held a hand up to him. “Are you saying that you’re in love with me?”

His thick brows knitted into a frown. “Yes, that’s what I’m saying. I love you, Willow. I don’t know when it happened, but somewhere along the way I fell in love with you.”

My heartrate started to gallop at full speed until it thudded so hard in my chest I swore I could hear it. “Really?”

His lips pulled into a lopsided grin. “Yes, really. Is that so hard to believe?”

“I don’t know. Yes. No. Maybe?” I sighed in frustration because I sounded like a head case. “I love you too, Shane, but I never imagined that you would return my feelings. You’re pretty good at keeping your emotions under wraps.”

“It’s a hazard of the job, I suppose. But I love you, Willow. I want a life with you, one that includes you and the baby. Possibly a few more babies, which is something we can discuss later. If it’s something you want, too.”

“You think I don’t want the beautiful life you painted of us together, you and me and our baby?” I shook my head. “It is exactly what I want, and you, my handsome, stoic SEAL, are exactly the man I want it all with.” My heart relaxed in relief at telling him exactly how I felt and what I wanted from him.

“Holy shit, babe.” His big body relaxed as he wrapped me tightly in his strong arms. “I don’t know what to say. You’ve just made me so damn happy.”

I laughed and buried my face in his bare chest. “Me too. I don’t know when I fell in love with you either, Shane. Maybe it was when you made me that tea or helped me stretch, or maybe it was just getting to know the man underneath the mask, but I love with you with my whole, entire heart. I want you and the baby. No one has ever made me feel as safe as I feel when I’m with you, not just from danger, but safe to be myself, to share my hopes and dreams and fears.” I swallowed down tears and laughed again, this time nervously, and flashed a sheepish smile. “That’s a big deal for me.”

“Me too.” I could feel his heart beating hard against my chest. “You hit me like a ton of bricks, Willow, and I will never, ever be sorry for that.”

I hated that I found this man from the worst thing that ever happened to me, the death of Tom and Ella and being left pregnant and in a state of uncertainty, but I couldn’t hate that I

found him. “Love me,” I whispered, and cupped his face in my hands.

“Always,” he promised, and pressed his lips to mine in a fiery kiss that shot my temperature up a thousand degrees. Heat suffused my skin and goosebumps skittered up and down my body as his hands ran over my exposed flesh. We kissed in the middle of my bedroom like it was the end of the world and it was the last time we’d ever see each other.

Soon enough, the towel pooled around my feet and Shane’s pants were right next to them as we fell together on the bed. Shane was careful with me, falling just to the side of me, so careful of the baby and my delicate state. His big hands caressed my sensitive breasts and down to my slightly swollen baby before they settled between my legs. “Shane,” I moaned, and arched into his touch.

“Willow, babe, you’re so wet.” His lips curled around my nipple and a loud cry escaped me.

“What can I say,” I panted, “something about you really does it for me.”

“Yeah?” he asked, and kissed his way down my body, slowly, lazily as if we had all the time in the world. We didn’t, but I savored the way he loved me, the way he growled when he licked at me as if the taste of me on his tongue was the best damn thing in the world.

“Oh yeah,” I moaned, and tangled my fingers in his thick hair, smiling at the feel of his stubble on my inner thighs. “Shane, my love.”

He growled and the sound reverberated against me, triggering my first orgasm. “You are so damn beautiful when you come.”

I smiled and pulled him up so we were face to face, kissing him and loving the taste of my honey on his mouth. “Want to see it again?”

He grinned and thrust deep into my body, one long thrust that pushed me to the edge, and he pumped and pumped until I scratched at his back, until I arched into him and clung to him.

“Willow,” he grunted, and nibbled my earlobe, pounding so deep into me it felt like he was touching my soul.

“Yes, Shane. Yes!” My body lit up as his hips increased in depth and intensity, pushing me closer until I was perched on the edge of pleasure and looking down, breath held, waiting to fall.

“Love you,” he growled, and thrust harder and deeper, and moments later I fell over and floated in long, eternal moments as pleasure overwhelmed my body and my senses. My nipples were so hard they ached and Shane took one in his mouth as he chased down his pleasure in fast, punishing strokes that triggered a half dozen aftershocks.

It was pure madness, the way we came together, and when we finally fell back to earth, we fell asleep in a tangle of sweaty limbs.

It was the first of many lazy, love-filled afternoons, I hoped.

# Chapter Twenty-Seven

## *Shane*

“Are you sure this is what you want to do?” Willow wrapped her arms around me as we snuggled, a heavy blanket thrown haphazardly over us. She placed a kiss over my heart and sighed. “You don’t have to do this.”

I sighed and pressed a kiss to her forehead. I understood her worry, and she was right, I didn’t *have* to do it, but it needed to be done. “This is the last of it, I promise.”

She looked up at me with those big blue eyes, her blond hair messy as it fell around her shoulders, my arms, and the pillows beneath us. “I believe you, Shane. I just don’t know if this is going to give you what you think it will.” She shook her head and placed a hand over my heart. “You have the answers you need.”

“Yeah, but I don’t have all the answers. I have some theories and guesses.”

She pushed away from me and hurried off to the bathroom. When she returned wrapped in a robe, Willow tilted her head and smiled at me. “If you think Congressman Jenkins will give you those answers, I wish you luck, my love.”

After a quick shower and breakfast, I made my way to the Continental Hotel where the congressman was holding a fundraiser for the upcoming midterm elections. The man was glad-handing and flashing his best beauty pageant smile when I found him. The moment his gaze landed on mine, his smile faded and all the color drained from his pale face, which only confirmed part of what I suspected.

“Shane, didn’t realize you had business in Seattle.”

“Why not? I’ve been looking into Tom’s death, as we discussed at his funeral.”

“Of course. Of course. You’ve always been a good friend to my boy.” His gaze darted all around the room to make sure no one attempted to approach us, or worse, overhear our conversation. “Did you find anything?”

“From the expression on your face, I think you know that I did.”

I had to give the congressman credit, his expression gave nothing away to those who might be looking from a distance. Up close, I could see the beads of sweat that formed at his hairline and the way his pulse nearly doubled. “I don’t know what you think you know, Shane.”

“You may have friends among the Navy brass, but I *am* the Navy. I know Tom didn’t shoot that teacher and I know that *someone* made sure Jackson DeBerg took the fall for a crime they suspected was committed by Tom.”

His face turned a sickly shade of ashen gray. “Okay, yes, all right. The preliminary reports seemed to point the finger at Tom and I made a few deals to make sure the fingers pointed somewhere else.”

I nodded. “And you ruined a man’s life in the process. Tom wouldn’t have approved.”

“I know. When he found out the whole story from that DeBerg fellow, he was apoplectic. Threatened to tell the whole damn thing. He had an appointment to clear the air the week after his murder.” He sighed and pinched the bridge of his nose, the weight of his actions finally showing signs of life. “He was going to take the blame himself, anything to clear DeBerg’s name.”

“It wasn’t DeBerg who killed Tom, and it wasn’t his partner either. So, Congressman Jenkins, who was it?”

“I don’t know. Not for certain.”

“But you have your suspicions,” I accused, and gripped his arm to move us away from prying eyes.

He nodded. “I do.” His stoic expression crumbled and the truth spilled from his lips. “It wasn’t me who pressured the Navy brass. Hell, I would have preferred they simply didn’t



find an answer, but the guys I hired, Huntington Security, they like to make sure things are tied up neatly.”

“Huntington Security? Are you fucking kidding me?”

“No. I was desperate to save Tom’s career even if he didn’t care about it as much as he should. Once I hired Huntington, things spiraled out of control. They blackmailed a few people into closing the book firmly on the woman’s death.”

“Jackson was that book.”

He nodded. “It was unfortunate, but it was done and out of my hands.” His shoulders sagged and for the first time he looked like a grieving father instead of a scheming politician. “And then Tom went to see DeBerg and opened it up all over again. I didn’t know what they would do, Shane. I swear it.”

“Be specific,” I ordered him, my anger so close to boiling over that I took a step back.

“Huntington,” he answered, his voice cracking. “The moment I heard of Tom and Ella’s death, I knew they were involved.”

“They killed Tom to stop him from uncovering their dirty deeds.” It all made sense now. “Yours too.”

James looked up with a worried expression on his face, but gone was the grieving father and in his place, the calculating politician had returned. “I had nothing to do with my son’s death.”

“Not directly, no, but your need to protect Tom’s *reputation*, and by extension yours, put this all in motion. You hired them, knowing their shady methods. Hell, that’s probably why you hired them.”

“I hired them because you and Tom are close and you were on that mission.”

I nodded at the truth of his words. “Yet you kept silent even after Tom and Ella weren’t just killed, they were blown to bits, James.”

“I know that!” he roared, then collected himself. “Every damn day I have to think about that, about the role I played in

all of it, and whatever you think of me, it's eating me alive.”

“Good. The FBI is investigating it now, Tom and Ella's death, the blackmail of the rear admiral and the captain, and all the things that befell Jackson DeBerg. It'll be better if you cooperate. You can look like a grieving father.”

“Shane.” His voice was filled with worry. “Please.”

“Look at the position you're in, with the FBI, your job, and even Huntington Security. As soon as they get wind of the new investigation, you won't be safe. They'll want to close off all loose ends, which is exactly what you'll become.” Cooperation was his only guarantee of safety.

“There's no place out of their reach, Shane.”

“Then your first call should be to Agent Farnsworth. She's the lead special agent assigned to this investigation.” He looked so dejected, so scared, and I felt nothing but satisfaction that all his machinations were finally catching up to him. “Tom never wanted to be an admiral, you know. That was your dream, and look at where it got us all.” Disgusted, I walked away before I said—or did—something I would regret.

I had a life now, a complete life with a successful company, friends who were like family, and most of all, a woman I loved dearly. Unlike James, I wouldn't risk it all for a brief moment of satisfaction.

# Chapter Twenty-Eight

## *Willow*

“I wish you didn’t have to go home tomorrow.” Even though I was confident in my relationship with Shane, my heart ached at the thought of going to sleep tomorrow without his strong arms wrapped around me. We sat inside a dimly lit restaurant with a romantic atmosphere, enjoying our last meal before he went back to San Francisco.

“Me too, but it’s only temporary. Right?” His green gaze seared through my body, imploring me to give him the answer we’d discussed at length over the past couple of weeks.

“Yes, right. Now that Charlie has settled things with Tom and Ella’s estate, there’s a lot I need to do, starting with setting up a medical trust for Ivy.” Tom and Ella had a lot of money and they’d left a huge trust for their child, not to mention most of their estate to whomever cared for the child in the event of their deaths. “I have to catch up on my doctor’s appointments here, and then find one in San Francisco.”

His smile widened. “So you’ve been making plans?”

“Of course.” I rubbed my belly that felt as if it was growing bigger by the day. “I can’t wait until we’re living together under the same roof, sleeping together and waking up together every morning.”

“Excellent.” He sipped at his drink, gaze focused completely on my face. “I cannot wait until we start our lives together, Willow. For real.”

I swooned a little. “I love you, Shane.”

“I love you too, Willow. More than I ever knew I could love another person. You and *our* baby.”

Our food arrived and we stared at each other for a long time, two fools in love, too scared to look away just in case this was

all a dream. The smells overwhelmed me and eventually hunger got the better of me.

“Hungry?”

“Starved,” I answered on a laugh, and dug into the steak dinner. “It’s nice, to be able to be out in public again. Are we really safe, though?”

He sighed and I knew I wouldn’t like the answer. “You are safe, but we all still need to take precautions. Luckily, you’re not in a position to appear to know anything that would make you a threat to Huntington Security, but your connection to me might put you in danger.”

“I don’t like that answer,” I told him honestly.

“Me either, but I have to get back and you have to stay here for now, which means we need to be cautious. Jace has installed a top-of-the-line security system on the property and you’ll have a constant but discreet security detail when you leave home until we are reunited.”

I sighed. “I love you for thinking of me and wanting to keep us safe, but that’s too much.”

“It is not enough,” he growled. “I would do anything to keep you safe. Anything, Willow.”

“I don’t want you donating your company resources to me, especially at the risk of your business.”

He reached across the table and held my hands in his. “I love you even more for saying that, but I’m firm on this. You will have protection until you are safely with me in our home.”

“Our home,” I sighed. “That sounds wonderful, Shane. Just perfect.” I couldn’t wait to move to San Francisco and start our lives together. I would miss Ivy something fierce, but I still had months to convince her to come with me, to start new in California.

Together.

“You’re perfect, Willow. Perfect for me in every way.”

“Right back atcha, handsome. Thank you for being the kind of man to overcome my hesitations about love and relationships, for making me want to take a risk on love with you. It has, so far, been everything to me.”

“And to me too.”

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### *5 months later*

“Keep whisking until stiff peaks start to form. Faster, faster,” the professor said as she whipped egg whites in a clear Pyrex bowl. “Yes, just like that. Keep going until each peak sits up tall with a hint of a swoop. Perfect,” she shouted as each student, one by one, slowly set down their bowls of stiff, beaten egg whites.

I sat my bowl down too and put one hand to my overgrown belly, watching with delight as the white peaks stayed right where they were. “Yes!” I gave a little fist pump in the air, ecstatic that my peaks had finally set after days and days of sinking.

It was only my second month of culinary school. For the first few weeks I’d felt like a constant failure, unable to complete the most basic tasks because all of my culinary training was even more basic. Now, though, I’d found my groove and I felt like I belonged here with the other students, ranging in age from twenty-one to sixty-three.

“Good job, Willow!” Ed, a forty-year-old divorcee smiled at me with pride.

“Thanks, Ed. You did wonderful too, and fast.”

He grinned. “That’s mornings spent at the gym,” he said, and flexed a bicep in my direction.

I laughed. “Now I know your secret and I’m totally going to use it.”

“Be my guest, please.” He gave me a thumbs-up and we both turned our attention back to the teacher.

I took notes because pregnancy brain was a real thing, and it made it difficult to retain new information. I worked hard day

and night because I was determined to fulfill my dream of becoming a professional chef. Shane had been so supportive about me chasing my goals, so much so that I cried a little whenever I thought about it.

We'd been living together for the past three months, two of which had me spending my days between doctor's visits, learning my way around San Francisco, and attending my culinary classes. When I had downtime, I made my way to the second floor of the building where Shane owned a penthouse suite and visited with Ivy and Lottie, who had ultimately chosen to upend their lives so that we could all be together in California.

I was eternally grateful to my sister for making that choice, and she'd found her footing in this gorgeous city with a job helping to organize parties and other events for charities and other non-profit organizations. Regular treatments and medicine meant she had no problems with her heart and the damp air seemed to reinvigorate her each day. It was a welcome relief to years of constant worry over her illness and the cost of treatments.

That worry seemed as if it was a lifetime ago.

"Class dismissed!" The teacher clapped her hands three times in rapid succession, a wide smile on her face as the students filed out of the kitchen.

I rubbed my belly and smiled. "This is happening because of your mama and your daddy, little one." I loved talking to the baby, who was due in seven weeks. It made me feel close to her, which, in turn, made me feel as if Tom and Ella were still here in some fashion.

"Is everything all right, Willow?" The concern in the professor's voice pulled me from my thoughts and musing.

I blinked and looked at her with a smile. "Yeah, just thinking about the fact that I'm here and in culinary school."

"Pretty fantastic, huh?"

I nodded. "Unbelievable, actually." It was another way in which Tom and Ella had made my dreams come true. They

brought Shane into my life, gave me a child that I already loved to pieces, and they were the impetus for me going after my goals.

I sent a thanks up into the universe and bid the teacher farewell as I stepped out into the windy day in the Bay Area with a smile. This was my life now, a life I shared with Shane in a lovely penthouse apartment.

His sleek black car pulled up to the curb and the passenger window slid down to reveal his wide, teasing smile. “Did you order a ride, beautiful?”

I leaned forward with a supportive hand on my stomach. “I did, but my boyfriend is jealous and dangerous, so you should just keep on driving.”

Shane laughed, a sound I loved more each time I heard it. His laugh was deep and rich, smooth like whiskey and well used. My man was a man who enjoyed his life. “Dangerous? Me?” He shook his head and jumped from the driver’s side to help me into the car like the loving boyfriend he was. He even fastened the seat belt around me and brushed a soft kiss to my lips.

“Good day?”

“Better now. I missed you.”

I smiled and my heart fluttered against my chest. “Missed you too. You were gone when I woke up this morning.”

He nodded. “A new case came in and it’s personal for Zac. We needed to meet about it ASAP.”

“Is everything all right?”

“Not quite,” he answered honestly. “But it will be. Hungry?”

I looked down at my swollen belly and grinned. “What do you say, baby? Are we hungry?”

She kicked and I groaned in response as I turned to Shane. “Yes, my love, we are both hungry. Starved, in fact.”

“Perfect. I know just the place,” he said, and maneuvered the car towards my favorite restaurant in the city.

The Jade Pearl made the best Chinese food I’d ever had, both buffet and a la cart, and I honestly couldn’t get enough of it. “Oh my god, I couldn’t love you more. I dreamt about seafood shumai all night.”

“After our night, you dreamed about food?” he asked, incredulous.

I nodded. “Does it help to know I dreamed about eating it off your body?”

“Some,” he said with a teasing grin. “I’ll make sure we get some dim sum to go.”

He parked and helped me walk into the restaurant. The friendly hostess with blue-tipped hair led us into a private room big enough to seat twelve.

“Are we expecting more dinner guests?”

“No,” he whispered in my ear. “It’s just us.” Before I could ask if this was a special occasion, Shane pulled me close and his mouth crashed down on mine in a kiss that was so hot, so fiery that I melted into his broad chest. I didn’t know how long we stood in the middle of the room kissing like teenagers, but eventually we both pulled back and stared at each other like it was our first time seeing each other. “You look beautiful.”

I laughed. “I look sweaty and hot and twenty months pregnant, but you, my love, you look like you just walked off the cover of *GQ Military Edition*.”

He growled and pressed his forehead to mine. “When you say things like that it makes me want to bend you over the table and thrust into you until you coat my cock with your juices.”

I fanned my face. “Tell me it’s pregnancy hormones that has me considering that right now.”

Shane laughed and brushed another kiss to my lips. “It’s pregnancy hormones?”



We shared a laugh as a waitress came in with two brightly colored drinks. “Two Shanghai margarita mocktails,” she said, and as she set them down, her gaze landed on my belly with a smile.

I turned to him with wide eyes. “Mocktails? Shane, you are the best boyfriend ever!” I dotted his face with kisses as he guided me to the table where we took our seats. “This is so sweet.”

“It’s the least of what I would do for you, Willow.”

I put a hand to his face and sighed. “And I love you for wanting to do anything for me, but I hope you know I would do anything for you, too.”

He nodded. “Good. I’m glad to hear you say that, because there is something that I want from you, Willow.”

I quirked a brow and flashed a wide, toothy grin. “Whatever you need.”

He sighed and scrubbed a hand over his head. “Willow, I love you, and with each day that passes, I love you even more. I am so damn grateful that you love me enough to pack up your life and move here with me, and seeing your face when I wake up each morning is a fucking dream come true.”

“I like what I’m hearing so far.”

“What I want, what I need from you right now, is something more.” He reached into his jacket, and my heart was stuttering in my chest even before he pulled out a ring box. He flipped it open to show off a gigantic, emerald cut diamond engagement ring with two small diamonds on the side and dark blue gems on the band. “Willow Elizabeth Evans, the love of my life, will you make me the happiest man alive by becoming my wife?”

I looked deep into his green eyes and felt my heart swell with happiness and hope for the future. My eyes stung as I blinked at the ring and then at Shane’s face, filled with anticipation. “Shane, really?”

He nodded. “Of course, really. I want you to be my wife, Willow. I want to make our love, our life, our family official.

Legal. What do you say?" he asked, and pushed the ring box towards me.

"I love you, Shane, and I look forward to becoming your wife and your partner in whatever we do next. But not until I can be a sexy bride." If I was going to marry the man of my dreams, then I wanted to look like the woman of *his* dreams.

"So we can set a wedding date after the baby?"

His hopeful expression made me laugh. "Exactly." I wiggled my finger and he slipped the engagement ring on it. "It's beautiful, Shane. I love it."

"But not as much as you love me. Right?"

"It's not possible to love anything more than I love...you!" A sharp pain tore through my abdomen and I folded over.

"Babe, what's wrong? Talk to me." One hand clutched mine and the other rubbed soothing circles on my back. "Willow?"

I couldn't speak, no matter how hard I tried. Another wave of pain ripped through me and I knew exactly what was happening. "Shane. I think...I think the baby is coming!" Before I even got the words out, another contraction barreled down and I was grateful that I was sitting because my legs felt boneless. "Shane!"

"It's all right, Willow." He motioned for the waitstaff to wrap up the food they'd prepared for us and helped me to my feet. "We'll get you to the hospital right away."

I shook my head and gripped his hand tight. "It's too soon. We have seven weeks to go."

He flashed a heart-stopping grin. "Tom always said if you arrive on time, you're twenty minutes late. This counts, right?"

I laughed but it was interrupted by another contraction. "They're coming fast. Too fast."

"Then let's get you to the hospital faster," he said with confidence as we headed to the car, and he fastened me into the passenger seat, reclining it to make me more comfortable. "Just breathe, Willow. Breathe."

I nodded and did as he said, inhaling and exhaling deeply the way they taught us at our birthing classes. “I need to let Ivy know.” I reached for my phone, but Shane stopped me.

“Text message,” he said in a firm voice. “To Ivy and phone list number one. Willow is in labor. Meet at Stanford Healthcare. ASAP. Bring gifts.” The giant screen in the console typed his message perfectly. “Send.”

“My fancy little fiancé.” I practiced my breathing with both hands on my belly. “I can’t believe she’s coming early. What if something is wrong?”

He reached over and squeezed my leg. “What if nothing is wrong other than she’s eager to get here to meet her mom and dad?”

“I’m not ready,” I admitted between deep breaths.

“You’re ready, Willow. We both are. Even the nursery is finished. The closet is packed with baby clothes and toys. And diapers and onesies. If we were more ready, the baby would be six years old already.”

Too soon, we arrived at the medical center and they wheeled me straight into a delivery room. I shoved down my anxiety and pushed through labor and sweating and some other things I will never ever mention again, and two and a half hours later I was holding my baby.

Our baby.

“She is beautiful,” Shane said as he looked down at our daughter with love in his deep green eyes.

“She is and she is all ours.” She would always be the biological child of Tom and Ella, but she was our baby girl in all the ways that mattered. She had her mother’s eyes and her father’s wavy brown hair and I knew exactly what to call her. “Tommie.”

“What?”

“What we should call her. Tomasina Ella Stone, but we’ll call her Tommie. What do you think?”

Shane brushed a finger across her forehead and sighed. “Hey, Tommie girl. How do you like your name?”

She let out a few baby noises and we shared a laugh.

“I think she likes it, don’tcha Tommie?” Her tiny little hand curled around my finger and my heart was so full I thought it might burst. I looked up at Shane’s suspiciously shiny eyes and smiled. “Should we introduce her to her wild and crazy family?” I knew that Ivy and Lottie were out in the waiting room along with Jace, Adrian, Zac, Alec, and even Emily, along with all the other Griffin employees who weren’t away on a job.

“There’s never a good time to visit the zoo.” He sighed with an affectionate smile. “The sooner we do it, the sooner she gets used to the chaos.”

I couldn’t help but laugh at his accurate description of our family and waved towards the door. “Bring them in, then.” I was happy and excited for everyone to meet the little girl who had brought us all together and made us a family.

# Epilogue

## *Shane*

### *Six months later*

“Watch out, Alec, he looks like he’s gonna toss his cookies.” Zac smacked Alec’s chest and together they took a step back.

Alec laughed and shoved me towards the edge of the rooftop. “At least puke over the edge so the whole damn wedding doesn’t smell like last night’s bourbon.”

“I’m not nervous or sick,” I growled at my closest friends, but there was no heat behind it. “I’m just ready for Willow to be my wife.” I didn’t care about the pomp and circumstance the way she did, but Willow wanted her dream wedding and I wanted to give it to her.

Jace joined us on the roof of Griffin Security and Protection because that’s where Willow wanted to tie the knot. Adrian came in behind Jace, with our dad and Aunt Molly a few steps behind. Emily was one of Willow’s bridesmaids. “The fun brother is here, so please, let the festivities begin.”

Adrian shoved at his shoulders as they approached me, both with a congratulatory hug. “Ready for this, man?”

“More than ready.” The wait had been excruciating. Tommie had barreled into our lives seven weeks early, but that was months ago. Six long months of wedding planning. Six long months where I had to wait to make Willow my wife. We’d officially adopted Tommie because the surrogacy paperwork had clearly stated that she would not belong to Willow, and despite Tom’s will declaring her as the chosen guardian Charlie had insisted that we should seal the deal properly. There could be no doubt now that she was our baby girl in all the ways that mattered. “We on schedule?”

Aunt Molly nodded and came to me with teary green eyes. “Yes. The girls are all ready and Finn is on his way up now.” She patted my cheek and let out a huff of laughter. “I can’t believe you’re letting a billionaire officiate your wedding.”

“Willow thought it would give the ceremony some character, and he thoroughly charmed her when he came to meet Tommie.”

“Speak of the devil,” Zac said as Finn joined us on the roof, his arm linked with Tom’s mother, Jane.

“Finn!” I greeted my old friend with a warm smile and he gave me a back-breaking hug. “Glad you made it!”

“Where else would I be when one of my best mates is marrying such a lovely lass?” His Irish accent got thicker when he was charming the ladies, even when they weren’t present. “I found this lovely lady at the bottom of the staircase.” He motioned to Jane and pressed a chaste kiss to her cheek.

“Jane,” I wrapped her in a tight hug. “I’m so glad you’re here.” Jane had been a blessing to Willow and me over the past few months. Since neither of us had mothers, Jane had stepped into the role of grandmother willingly, spoiling Tommie and making a place for herself in our lives. “You look beautiful.”

She hugged me tight. “You look more handsome than ever in your dress uniform,” she whispered through her tears. “Thank you for letting me be here today, for making a space for me.”

“You’re family, Jane, it’s as simple as that. Grandma Janey, we all love you and want you here.”

She swiped her tears with a silky cloth that she shoved into the world’s tiniest purse. “Congratulations on finding love, Shane.”

Charlie interrupted with an uncomfortable expression on her face. “Grandma Janey, I have a present for you,” she said, and handed Tommie off quickly.

“See? You’re Grandma Janey to everyone,” I said with a laugh.

“It’s odd, isn’t it? All of these grown, incredibly accomplished men and women calling me Grandma Janey? Tom would have gotten a kick out of it.”

A moment of sadness fell between us as we thought about Tom and Ella, who should be here raising their child. Now it was up to Willow and me, and our extended families, to raise Tommie right and to make sure she knew just how wonderful her parents were. “He would love it.”

“I saw the trouble James is in.” She grinned. “I assume you had something to do with that?”

I straightened my tie and shrugged. “What’s going on with Congressman Jenkins?”

“You’re such a good boy.” She kissed my cheek before she took a seat beside Aunt Molly and Dad.

With everyone preoccupied, I slipped back downstairs and found my bride-to-be alone in her suite. “Willow, you look amazing.”

She turned with a gasp that slowly morphed into a smile. “Shane. You look hot as hell, babe.”

I grinned and closed the gap between her. “Are you ready for this?”

“I am beyond ready. Can we get Finn to rush through the vows and get to the partying part of the festivities?”

“I’m sure that could be arranged.” I wrapped my arms around her and nuzzled her neck. “You smell like heaven.”

“Mm, so do you,” she moaned, and kissed my jaw. “And you broke tradition by seeing me before I walk down the aisle.”

I pulled back and pressed a soft kiss to her lips. “I’m not a traditional kind of guy.”

“Neither am I,” she said on a sigh. “And I’m not upset about it.”

“Nothing about us has been traditional,” I reminded her of our whirlwind relationship. “Not the way we met.”

She laughed. “First man I aimed a gun at, and he asked me to marry him.”

“You had me at, ‘Step away from the window and I won’t put a bullet in your brain, asshole.’” My lips twitched as I thought about that day a year ago. She was bold and tough even as her hands rattled like crazy.

Willow laughed out loud and draped her arms around me. “Let’s vow here and now that we will never, ever do things the way people expect us to.”

“Never,” I agreed easily. “You are the road less taken, and I want to be on that road with you for the rest of our lives.”

“Aw, Shane.” She kissed me, then shoved me away from her. “You go back to the roof before you make me cry and I have to sit in that makeup chair again. Save those sweet words for after the ceremony.” She sighed at my bewildered expression and then she smiled that smile that was just for me. “I love you, future husband.”

“And I love you more, love of my life.” The strains of the wedding march started and I slipped out of the bridal suite and made my way back to the roof where Lottie tossed flowers on the aisle with Emily behind her in a silky bridesmaid’s dress.

As the march reached its crescendo, Ivy and Willow walked down the aisle, arm in arm, towards her future.

Our future.

**THE END**

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# About the Author

Aria Ray writes suspenseful, hot, and intense romance stories featuring powerful alpha-men and witty heroines, full of sacrifice, love, and happily-ever-afters.

Like the heroines of her novels, Aria has always had a crush on sinfully sexy bad boys – dark, controlling, irresistible, but tender and loving.

When she is not writing or daydreaming about new stories, she loves to spend time with her own gang of alpha males – a husband and twin boys.

But the real mob boss of the family is Don Corleone – the cat.

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