

A black and white close-up portrait of a man with short, dark hair, a goatee, and intense blue eyes. He is looking directly at the camera with a serious expression. He has extensive tattoos, including a large, intricate design on his left shoulder and chest, and a smaller one on his right shoulder. The background is plain white.

K. C.
CROWNE

放
VEGAS

Daddy

VEGAS DADDY

AN AGE GAP ROMANCE

K.C. CROWNE

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DESCRIPTION

Warning - Do Not Spend Your Holiday Drinking in Vegas.

May cause you to wake up married to a domineering single daddy...

It all started with me running away from the altar of h*ll.

And ended with the most erotic night of my life in the city of Sin.

Zane is older. Ex-military. And a HOT single dad.

But our fairytale came to an end - with the cartel on my tail.

Months later we meet again.

My ruthless father just hired bodyguards to watch me like hawks.

In walks the head honcho. And my heart starts to race.

It's Zane!

Now I'm about to tell him three VERY important things...

- 1. I never got over our night of passion.*
- 2. My father sold my hand in marriage to a deadly cartel leader.*
- 3. I'm knocked up and Zane is the daddy.*

CHAPTER 1

WILLOW

Today will end in either marriage or murder.
My preference is murder.

“It’s bad luck for a bride to cry on her wedding day, you know,” Claire, my cousin three times removed, says with a scowl as she dabs at my running mascara. She’s only making things worse. “You should count yourself lucky. Just think of it, a Christmastime wedding!”

It took the makeup artist almost two hours to get me ready, and an hour still of fighting with Claire as she shoved me into my dress. She scratched me one too many times with those acrylic claws for it to be an accident.

My cousin clicks her tongue for the sixth time in two minutes before sighing in resignation. “This is your duty, Willow. Suck it up.”

I grind my teeth so hard my molars squeak. “You’re not the one being married off to that son of a—”

“Quiet!” she hisses, throwing a frantic look over her shoulder.

One of Esteban’s men stands in the doorway, deliberately putting his hands on his hips so the front of his suit jacket pulls back to reveal the cold, hard metal of the gun in his shoulder holster. He says nothing. He doesn’t have to.

I know besmirching my fiancé’s ‘good’ name is a punishable offense. Maybe that’s why I’m so adamant about pushing him. If I’m lucky, he might put me out of my misery.

“Don’t give me that look,” I grumble at him.

“The ceremony is in twenty minutes,” the guard states flatly, coldly.

I’m convinced the men who follow Esteban’s every word aren’t human. They’re not even dogs, because at least dogs can feel. No, my future husband and head of the Becerra Cartel only hires robots. They comply with his orders without hesitation. They break, they threaten...

They kill.

Claire shoos him away. “She’ll be ready by then. Hurry and pull the car around.”

The guard nods once. “Yes, ma’am.”

“And trip down the stairs while you’re at it!” I shout after him.

My cousin smacks my shoulder. “What’s wrong with you? Do you really want a bullet between your eyes?”

“Yes,” I lie.

My answer couldn’t be further from the truth. I’m just tired of Esteban and my father believing they can step all over me. I’m tired of them controlling every aspect of my life, treating me like a prized possession instead of a human being.

All my life, I’ve dreamed of leaving. Unfortunately, my father has an iron grip on my financial situation. I’ve been forbidden from going to college. I’m not allowed to get a job. Without an education or money of my own, my father ensured my entrapment. Reliant. And in twenty minutes, when I’m forced to walk down the aisle, I’ll inevitably be reliant on Esteban, too.

That’s what they think, anyway.

Because in twenty minutes, I’m going to be long gone.

I gently grasp Claire by the hand and give her fingers a light squeeze. “I’ll fix my own makeup,” I tell her. “Head on down without me. I... need a few moments to collect myself.”

Claire presses her lips into a thin line, squinting as she scrutinizes me from head to toe. “Okay,” she finally mumbles. She doesn’t leave immediately. Instead, she quickly wraps her arms around me in a tight hug and whispers in my ear, “You’re doing the right thing, Willow. Marrying Esteban will absolve all your father’s debts. It’s honorable.”

I force a smile.

Honorable my peachy behind.

I learned a long time ago that my father is a hypocrite. He may be good at controlling my wallet, but he certainly has no control over his own. I won’t pretend to know what sort of business he gets up to for the cartel. All I know is that it’s illegal and incredibly volatile work. The only consistent thing about my father’s dealings is he owes a percentage of it to Esteban Beccerra. Business hasn’t been kind to him in recent years.

Hence getting married against my will.

Taking a deep breath, I rise from my seat and hastily rush over to the vanity mirror. I grab a handful of makeup wipes and start scrubbing at my face like it’s covered in mud. Twenty minutes isn’t a lot of time, but it’s the only window of opportunity I can manage.

Behind me, the door opens softly and shuts quickly after with a soft *click*. In the vanity’s reflection, I watch as Marianne slips into the room with a large backpack and a change of clothes.

“It’s me,” she whispers. “They think I’m bringing you tea. The guards are all waiting downstairs. It’s now or never, Ms. Allegra.”

Marianne is one of the maids. She’s a mousy little thing, with her beady black eyes, pointed nose, and small mouth. But she’s one of the good ones. Discreet.

Right now, discretion is everything.

I wouldn’t describe us as being particularly close, but she’s the only one who has ever shown me an ounce of kindness. In

this prison of a house, she's the closest thing I have to a friend. I'm more than a little aware of how sad that is.

We move silently and swiftly. She unzips the back of my wedding dress and throws me a pair of jeans, a grey shirt, my winter coat, and a pair of sneakers. My heart pounds in my throat, adrenaline tingling in the tips of my fingers and toes. I feel like I'm dying with every passing second. If I mistime my escape, I'm as good as dead.

"It's all in here?" I ask her, grabbing the backpack.

Marianne nods. "I swiped your father's safe combination from his black book last night. I grabbed everything I could. Roughly three thousand in cash."

I let out a shaky breath. It's a miracle my father even has the good sense to keep a squirrel fund considering how in the red his accounts are. If Esteban knew he was holding out on him...

Well, I suppose it doesn't matter now. Three thousand dollars isn't enough to start my life over completely, but it's better than nothing. I reach into my bag, pull out the wad of bills, and count out a thousand. It only leaves me with two thousand, but it's a small price to pay for her silence.

I shove the money into Marianne's hands. "You speak of this to no one."

"W-what if they find out it was me?"

"They won't," I assure her. "Once they realize I'm missing, they'll think I broke into my father's safe. I promise nothing will happen to you."

"I hope you know what you're doing, Ms. Allegra. If they catch you..."

"They won't." I pull the hood of my coat over my head, concealing my ruined up-do. "Stick to the plan. I've only got one shot to make this work."

"Yes, Ms. Allegra."

We get to work trashing the place. I toss over the coffee table while Marianne opens the window as wide as it will go.

My father thought keeping me locked away in my fourth-floor bedroom before the wedding would deter me from jumping—and it totally has. Shattering my legs will probably hinder the running away portion of my plan.

Once I'm convinced my room is properly destroyed, I walk over to Marianne and ruffle up her hair and clothes.

“Slap me for good measure,” she suggests. When I give her a quizzical look, she says, “It'll make it look more convincing.”

I suck in a sharp breath, raising my hand. “I'm so sorry. Please put ice on it later, okay?”

“Yes, yes. Go on! Before I change my mind.”

I bring my hand down and strike her hard across the cheek, my handprint already reddening her skin. Marianne winces, tears in her eyes. I feel awful, but she's totally right. If we're going to sell our act to the guards, I can't afford to do this in halves.

I hide on the other side of my large mahogany wardrobe closest to the door, my back pressed against the wall to keep out of sight. “Okay, I'm ready.”

“Good luck, Ms. Willow,” she whispers. Marianne gives me a supportive nod before she takes in a big, sharp inhale. “GUARDS! Guards, she's escaped! Ms. Willow has escaped!”

Their thunderous stampede echoes up the stairs, low voices barking orders as five armed men rush into my bedroom. Marianne wails, a hand pressed to her swelling cheek as heavy tears stream down her face. She points at the window, frantically trying to talk while hyperventilating.

She would have made a wonderful actress in another life. I know it's fake, but even *I* feel bad for her.

“She attacked me!” Marianne cries. “She attacked me and pushed me down! Then she went out the window and—”

I don't stick around to listen to the rest of her prepared speech. The guards have their backs to me, offering me the perfect opportunity to quietly slip out the way they came.

I hold my breath as I rush down the stairs, careful to keep my footsteps as light as possible. My heart pounds so loud and so hard I'm worried it might burst out of my chest. Every muscle fiber in my body burns with fear and desperation.

There's no time for second guesses, no room for doubt. I keep going until I reach the main floor of the house, sticking to the shadows as I sprint for the back door. There's only one guard on duty here; the rest are up front with the cars or upstairs trying to figure out how on Earth I supposedly managed to jump.

The guard doesn't see me coming, doesn't have time to process what's going on when I throw myself at him. We both go tumbling down, his head smacking against the polished marble floor.

"I'm sorry," I wheeze, meaning every word. I may be the daughter of a cartel lieutenant, but I didn't inherit my father's taste for violence or inflicting pain.

The poor guy is out cold beneath me, but at least he's breathing. He'll likely wake up in a little while with a headache to end all headaches.

I swallow my unease. There's no time to feel sorry for him. I reach beneath his suit jacket and feel around for his holster. They all have the same standard issue Beretta on their person. I take his gun and shove it into the waistband of my jeans behind my back before moving on, not bothering to shut the door as I race outside.

The sky above is an inky black, the moon only a sliver. The cool air soaks into my skin, nipping at the tip of my nose. I'm thankful it probably won't get any colder than this. Los Angeles isn't known for its cold winters, but I'm not abandoning my coat any time soon. There's no telling where I'll end up sleeping tonight, and I'd rather not risk hypothermia.

Behind me, the sound of frantic shouting.

They're looking for me.

I can't stop.

While the guards search the front of the property, I escape by climbing the fence in the backyard. I make my way to the street, walking for about five blocks at a brisk pace. I throw a cautionary glance over my shoulder more than once. Nobody's following me. The coast is clear.

For the moment.

I walk and walk until the arches of my feet are sore. Nobody even blinks an eye when I stride past, but it's a liberating feeling instead of a lonely one. It takes me a minute to figure out where I'm going. I didn't bring my phone with me because my father can easily have it tracked. I'm not worried about getting lost. Anywhere I end up is better than being shackled to that madman Esteban.

It's a little past ten in the evening by the time I wander past a Greyhound bus station terminal. The wedding should have happened by now. I've no doubt thrown a massive wrench in my father's plans, but I don't care. I'm out and free, a world of endless possibilities to discover.

I walk up to the ticket booth, still jittery from my getaway. "Excuse me?" I call to the clerk behind the desk.

The man gives me a disgruntled once over, looking very stupid in his red Santa hat corporate probably forced him to wear. "What can I help you with?" he asks flatly. Buddy *clearly* loves his job.

"I need a ticket."

He huffs, resting his elbow on the counter before jerking a thumb up at the screen above his head. "I'm gonna need to know where, sweetheart."

I study the destinations listed with wide eyes. I've never been allowed outside of my home, let alone Los Angeles, without an escort. Now I'm paralyzed at the thought of going to Phoenix, San Diego, Anaheim, Salt Lake City, or maybe even San Francisco. I could go even further if I wanted to, but...

I only have two thousand dollars to work with. Even then, I won't know how far I need to go to escape the Becerra

Cartel's reach.

The clerk clears his throat. "I don't have all day, toots. Shit or get off the pot."

His vulgarity makes me wince. "What's your cheapest ticket?"

"Vegas. It's thirty bucks one way. Next bus leaves in ten minutes."

The information echoes around inside my skull.

Las Vegas. Everything I know about the city is based on what I've seen in movies. Big, bright, boisterous. Lots of people, plenty of places to stay, easy to get lost in the crowd. The fact that it's only going to cost me thirty dollars out of my remaining two grand is also an attractive bonus. Not to mention that leaving the state might help me escape Esteban's clutches.

"I'll take it," I say, reaching into my backpack to pull out my wad of cash.

The clerk eyes me up and down, no doubt suspicious. In the end, though, he doesn't ask unnecessary questions. He probably doesn't get paid enough to care. Besides, this is a simple exchange. I give him the money; he gives me the ticket. I'm on my merry way.

I board the bus in a hurry, choosing one of the seats in the back. When I sit, the hard outline of the gun tucked away under my shirt startles me. I'd almost forgotten I was carrying it.

Quickly glancing left and right to make sure the coast is clear; I pull it out and shove it into the bottom of my backpack. I consider ditching the thing entirely, but I'd rather play it safe.

It isn't until the bus pulls out of the terminal and hits the road that I finally allow myself to relax. Exhaustion races through me, relief soaking into my bones. Soft Christmas jingles play over the bus speakers, but the rumble of the engine is so loud I can't quite hear. It doesn't really matter.

In another few minutes, I'm fast asleep with the taste of freedom on my tongue.

CHAPTER 2

“The buy-in is five thousand dollars, sir,” the blackjack dealer informs us.

Heath claps me on the back with a hearty chuckle. “What do you say, big bro? Feel like losing five K?”

Knox, my youngest brother, rolls his eyes. “Shouldn’t you be saving this money for your honeymoon? Maybe a house? I’m sure Darlene would love a house.”

Heath grasps Knox by the shoulders and shakes him. “We’re in Vegas for my bachelor party, my man! Quit being such a stick in the mud. We’re here to have *fun*. Ever heard of it?”

“I don’t know what Darlene sees in you.”

Heath pouts. “Zane, tell Knox he’s being an ass.”

I don’t say anything. I reach into the inside pocket of my suit jacket and pull out five of the purple casino chips I’ve been carrying around. There’s plenty more where that came from, but I’m silently hoping Heath doesn’t intend to burn all our money in one place.

“Knock yourself out,” I tell him. “But if you lose it all, I’m cutting you off.”

Heath beams, his smile brighter than the sun. “This is why you’re my favorite brother.”

Knox huffs. “You shouldn’t be encouraging this behavior. Blowing that kind of money—in this economy?”

“Relax,” I tell him. “Our first contract starts the day after New Year’s. We’ll be making five grand an hour.”

He shifts his weight from foot to foot, stuffing his hands into his pockets. “I still haven’t changed my mind, Zane. This client... I don’t think he’s good news. All my preliminary reports—”

“I know, I know.”

“Do you?”

“Look, we’re not protecting him. Just his wife. Phillips Security will have nothing to do with any of his... *dealings*.”

Knox, ever the worrywart, gives me a pointed look. “You’re really willing to turn a blind eye?”

I set my jaw. Our situation isn’t ideal. After returning home from serving several tours in Afghanistan, my brothers and I have always struggled to readjust to civilian life. I thought I could do it, but it ate away at me. The stillness. The mundanity. It was enough to drive me crazy sometimes. I could tell Heath and Knox were struggling, too.

Our foray into private security made sense. Not as intense as active duty, but certainly better than taking up construction or accounting or whatever it is normal people think good, honest work is.

Heath was the one—in all his hyperactivity and restlessness—who suggested starting up Phillips Security. Knox—the wisest and most cynical of us Phillips brothers—knew how oversaturated the market would be. Everyone and their mother seems to have a security firm these days, but I was determined to see it through.

It took longer than I wanted, but I finally managed to get everything in order. As head of our operation, I secured the appropriate licenses and signed a gazillion different forms. My brothers and I landed our first client not even two nights ago. At the time it felt fortuitous.

Until we dug a little deeper.

“It’s not our job to judge,” Heath argues as he takes a seat at the blackjack table. “Just to keep the woman out of harm’s way. Everyone deserves to feel safe, don’t they?”

Much to my surprise, Knox doesn’t have a response prepared. Instead, he mumbles something about needing a drink before wandering off.

Heath sighs. “I hope he comes back in time to watch me double my money. That way I can really rub it in his face.”

“Maybe the kid has a point,” I state firmly. “They’d probably pay us in blood money.”

The dealer gives me a look, suspicion and wariness in her eyes. It probably isn’t smart to be tossing words around so casually.

“Kid?” Heath chuckles as his cards are dealt. He gets a ten of hearts and a two of diamonds. The dealer only has a queen of clubs showing face. “Knox turned thirty-six this year,” my brother continues. “He’s hardly a kid anymore.”

“He certainly acts like he’s a kid with all his whining and foot stomping.”

“You’re just bitter about pushing forty. You’re no longer a part of the cool crowd.”

I snort. “Shut up and play.”

“Hit me,” he says to the dealer. He draws a four of spades. “Speaking of kids, how’s yours doing? I was kinda gutted that Anna didn’t RSVP.”

The mere mention of my daughter’s name makes me smile. Anna is my pride and joy; currently attending her third year at Princeton studying computer engineering and astrophysics with aspirations of one day joining NASA. Since she was a child, Anna’s dreamed of building spaceships and launching satellites to explore the infinite cosmos.

“Don’t be dramatic,” I tell him. “Your invitation was short notice. Besides, we agreed she’d spend Christmas this year with her mother in Florida.”

“Ah, the witch who shall not be named.”

“Teresa isn’t that bad.”

“She took you for half of everything.”

“I *gave* her half of everything.”

“And I still have no clue why.”

“Because,” I tell him with a firm expression, “we may not be together anymore, but I still respect her. It’s my duty to take care of my daughter and her mother.”

Heath smirks at me. “You know what your problem is? You’re too noble for your own good.”

“I fail to see how that’s a bad thing.”

The dealer clears her throat. “Would you like to hit or stay, sir?”

“Hit me, baby!” He’s dealt a ten of spades.

“Bust,” the dealer announces, gathering up the cards and the chips. He only has four thousand remaining to play with.

Heath waves a hand dismissively. “You know what? Go grab a drink with Knox. You’re throwing off my groove.”

I frown, but there isn’t any real heat behind it. I leave my brother to his fun and venture off in search of my youngest, navigating the rows upon rows of slot machines and tables. It’s surprisingly crowded considering how close to Christmas it is, but I suppose not everyone subscribes to more traditional forms of holiday celebration.

They design these places like mazes with no windows in sight—a deliberate choice to keep casino-goers more or less unaware of the passage of time. They pump fresh oxygen in through the vents to keep guests alert, figuring the longer they remain awake, the more they’ll want to spend their money. The sound of bells and the stimulating flash of lights are constant, giving the people a taste of what it would be like to win a jackpot themselves.

I personally have no need for any of it. I don’t need to rely on Lady Luck to make my dollar. Everything I have comes

from hard work and dedication, not wishful thinking and risky bets.

I spot Knox at the bar, grumpily sipping on his no doubt overpriced beer. At least a dozen different spots are available to grab a refreshment on this floor of the casino alone. I'm about to join him when out of the corner of my eye—

A woman. She anxiously looks over her shoulder at some unknown danger as she walks up to the reception desk. This casino, like many others on the Strip, is also part-hotel. Against the backdrop of all the glitz and glam of Vegas, she stands out like a sore thumb. I normally wouldn't pay any mind. It's not polite to stare, but something about her shifty nature and wide, frightened blue eyes makes me pause.

Curiosity gets the better of me.

I take a few steps in her direction, leaning against one of the many decorative pillars lining the hotel lobby. The ceiling is painted a light blue, accented all around with bright lights to give the illusion of an open-air dome.

"I need a room," she says to the hotel receptionist working the desk. Her voice is shockingly soft, almost angelic. The sound makes my heart drum a little faster.

"For how many nights?"

"Just one. The cheapest one you've got."

The receptionist types quickly into his computer. The entire time, the woman continues to throw cautious looks over her shoulder. She reminds me of a rabbit on the lookout for a fox, ready at a moment's notice to sprint in the opposite direction. She hasn't noticed me, and a part of me doesn't want her to. The last thing I want is for her to spook and run.

I watch her from a few feet away, stunned silent by her beauty.

She's dressed conservatively in a pair of jeans and a baggy coat, so I'm unable to make out her silhouette. Her eyes do me in. Electric blue, so rich and vibrant I can clearly see them from where I stand. The woman has a cute button nose and full lips, her arched brows pulled together into a worried frown.

A strange sensation stirs in my chest.

I want to know what's troubling her. I want to make sure she's safe, but I have no clue why. It's really none of my business, and if she's as scared as she looks, I doubt she'd want help from some random man she's never met. In this day and age, there is no such thing as the kindness of strangers. Though it's obvious that's what she needs—someone to be kind.

“That'll be a hundred and nine dollars,” the desk clerk says. “How would you like to—”

The woman pulls out a thick wad of cash and quickly slides the money over.

A sick feeling churns in the pit of my stomach. Something isn't right. Everything about her radiates *distress*, from her disheveled clothes to her flightiness to the slight quiver of her bottom lip and the quickened pace of her breathing.

“May I trouble you for your name?” the desk clerk asks. “To have on file.”

The woman slides an additional fifty dollars over the counter. “That's for you. To make something up.”

The man is obviously confused at first, but his features quickly melt into a polite smile. “I hope you enjoy your stay, Ms. Doe. Here's your keycard.”

The woman is surprisingly fast considering her small stature. She snaps up the key and immediately heads to the elevators.

As do two men, tailing her a few paces behind.

My body reacts before my brain does. I follow them down the hall, stepping around other guests trying to check in and check out. I arrive just as the elevator doors slide open, the four of us cramming into the elevator car together. The woman presses the button to the top floor, my first clue that she's aware of the danger she's in. A penthouse suite is worth way more than a what she handed over.

She's buying herself time.

Not a single word is spoken, nothing but soft *dings* over the speakers counting every floor we pass. I stand at the back of the car, silently sizing the men up.

They're double her bodyweight and twice her size, dressed in fitted black suits and polished leather shoes. To the untrained eye, they could easily be mistaken for businessmen, but their ugly mugs and visible neck tattoos are a clear indication that they're probably not here for the big pharmaceutical convention on the ground floor.

We pass Floor 28...

Floor 29...

Floor 30...

The doors slide open. There's nobody in sight; just a lonely maid's cart left unattended.

One of the men puts his hand on her shoulder. "Ms. Allegra, you're coming with us."

The woman whips around in an instant, nailing the man square in the groin.

"The fuck I am!" she hisses before barreling out of the elevator.

CHAPTER 3

WILLOW

I knew I was being followed the second I got off the bus. It was just a feeling, the weird tingle of eyes on the back of my neck from afar. When I got to the hotel casino, I spotted them in an instant.

Two of Esteban's guards, both following me to the elevator. They weren't even discreet about it. They made a B-line for me like freaking linebackers.

I have no idea who the third guy is, though. Probably some random casino guest, but it's also very likely that my fiancé decided to bring in the big guns to ensure my safe, albeit unwilling, return.

Because he is—big, that is.

If I weren't in the middle of fleeing for my life, I would have taken the time to admire his handsome features a while longer. Dark chocolate brown hair, an aquiline nose, deep green eyes that remind me of the dense canopy of a tropical jungle.

It doesn't matter how jaw-droppingly sexy he is.

If he really is one of Esteban's men, I'll give him a piece of my mind all the same.

By the time we reach the top floor, I'm hopped up on adrenaline and barely remember to breathe. There's no avoiding it. I'm going to have to fight my way out of this. The elevator doors slide open...

One of the men puts their grubby hands on my shoulder. “Ms. Allegra, you’re coming with us.”

I spin around and drive my knee straight into his balls. “The fuck I am!” I shout before immediately sprinting down the hall.

I chose the top floor on purpose. If they want to drag me out of here, they’ll have to do it while I’m kicking and screaming all the way back down. *Someone* is bound to see or hear me calling for help, and I have the descent of thirty floors to do it.

They’re in hot pursuit and gaining.

I shove an unattended maid’s cart at them as I race forward, sending all manner of toiletries flying. The second guard trips and stumbles, face planting into the burgundy-colored hotel carpet. I can’t spare any sympathy, choosing instead to continue my race toward the stairwell exit.

Vertigo slams into me when I make the mistake of looking down the spiraling stairs. The steps seem to go on forever while the cement walls that support the stairwell close in on me. I don’t know which is more prominent—my fear of plummeting to my death or my claustrophobia.

Behind me, loud and heavy footsteps continue. They’re still after me, but I’ve come too far to give up now. I suck in a sharp breath through clenched teeth and hop the rail, dropping down the center of the stairwell to the next floor.

“Holy shit!” one of the guys shouts. “She jumped!”

“Don’t just stand there! Go after—*Argh!*”

“Who the fuck are—”

I drop from floor to floor to floor until I’ve put roughly five levels between us. The muscles in my forearms burn, and my hands shake like crazy. If I miscalculate or hesitate, I might end up smacking my ribs against the rails—or worse, crack my skull open.

I stop on the twenty-third floor and escape into the hotel hallway, panting hard as my heart drums loudly in my ear.

According to the signs posted on the walls, there's an ice room here. When I reach the door, I run inside and slam it behind me, nothing but the electric hum of the ice machine to keep me company in the dark.

Out in the hall, I can only hear the slow, careful strides of one person. Did they split up to cover more ground?

The footsteps slow just outside the ice room's door, a heavy shadow visible beneath the small gap in the doorframe. I don't move an inch, too afraid to give away my position. I pray that if I'm quiet enough, buddy will move on. If not...

If not, I'm in for the fight of my life.

"You can come out now," a deep voice rumbles just on the other side. "They've been taken care of."

Confusion swirls inside my chest. Taken care of? Who is this guy?

Regardless, I remain hidden and still.

There's a polite knock on the door, three soft raps from the back of someone's knuckles.

"Ms. Doe, right?" he asks. "I don't know what's going on, but you can trust me."

The hairs on the back of my neck stand on end. Was he listening to my conversation with the hotel clerk? Had I really been so careless as to let Esteban's men get that close?

"Damn it," I grumble under my breath before I yank the door open.

I lunge at the man with a vicious cry, digging my nails into him like a feral jungle cat. I kick and I punch, but he's a solid wall—an immovable object to my unstoppable force. The man easily takes hold of both my wrists, pivoting his hips so I stumble over my own feet. He expertly maneuvers me like I'm nothing more than a sack of flour, pinning my body against the wall with his own up against mine.

"*Relax,*" he growls. "I'm not going to hurt you."

“I’m not going back!” I scream in his face. “You can’t make me go back! I swear to God, I’ll kill myself before I’ll ever let that man—”

He cuts me off with a kiss.

It’s so startling and out of nowhere that I gasp. Lips crashing against lips, tongues sliding over tongues. I’m surprised how quickly it goes from being harsh and frantic to tender and slow. A soft moan pulls itself from my lungs as he deepens the kiss—my first ever. Everything about his touch is delicious and divine.

I like the roughness of his stubble, the commanding nature of his lips. He smells woody with a hint of citrus. The hard press of his body against mine awakens something inside me, a wet heat pooling between my legs as I relinquish control.

I know in an instant this isn’t one of Esteban’s men because no one would *dare* touch what he considers his.

So who the hell *is* he?

He pulls away slowly, his face hovering a mere inch away from mine. I can feel my own breath ricochet off his cheeks as he stares deeply into my eyes. Good *Lord*, he’s handsome. Unfortunately, in my experience, I’ve learned the handsome ones’ intentions require the most questioning.

“Who are you?” I whisper, my voice a raspy, foreign sound in my own ears.

“I was about to ask you the same thing.”

“Answer me or I’ll scream.”

The corner of his lip twitches. “I wouldn’t want that.”

“Something amusing?” I reply pointedly.

He shakes his head. “Zane Phillips, at your service. And who might you be?”

I lick my lips, missing the taste of his mouth more than I probably should. “Claire,” I answer.

“Try again,” he says.

My heart skips a beat. “Marianne.”

Zane clicks his tongue. “The truth this time.”

I can’t stop staring at him, equal parts amazed and confused and alarmed at the way he makes me feel. “Willow,” I finally answer, hating how easily I let my walls crumble for him.

“Willow,” he echoes. My name rolls off his tongue like a prayer, the sound of it sending a light shiver up my spine. “Willow, why were those men after you?”

I *almost* tell him. I don’t know what it is about Zane, but I suddenly want to tell him every single secret I’ve been holding onto. My father and his debts. The cartel boss I was promised to. The life I’m trying to run away from—though I’m starting to worry it’s inescapable.

“What did you do to them?” I ask him. “Those men.”

“Took care of them.”

“What’s that even supposed to mean?”

“Knocked them out. Stuffed them down the trash shoot.”

“Are you joking?”

He doesn’t respond.

Shit. I don’t think he’s joking.

Just like that, whatever magical spell he’s used to turn my mind all hazy dissipates. I don’t know who the hell he is or what his intentions are. I don’t care if he helped me or not. For all I know, he could be lying to me to lull me into a false sense of security. What better way to haul me back to Esteban when I’ve made the mistake of allowing myself to trust?

I distract Zane with another kiss. It works like a charm, his eyes fluttering closed.

Then I pull my gun on him, pressing the tip of the barrel to his abdomen. I’ve had it tucked away in my jacket pocket this whole time, having pulled it out of my bag just before I got off the Greyhound. I’m not actually going to shoot him; I just need him to *think* I will if he continues to push his luck.

“Take a step back,” I order.

He does so, a strangely endearing glint of amusement in his eyes.

“Now turn around and get on your knees,” I say sternly.

“That’s supposed to be my line.”

I kick him in the back of the calf. “Shut up,” I grumble, absolutely hating the way my voice quivers and my face suddenly heats by a thousand degrees. I find my resolve and take a deep breath. “If you move a muscle, I’ll shoot you right here, right now.”

Zane chuckles. “I believe you.”

“Stop laughing at me!”

“Go on,” he says, though not unkindly. “Get out of here, *Ms. Doe.*”

I’m off in an instant. This man is dangerous, and I mean that in more ways than one. If he really did take on two of Esteban’s men all by himself, he’s clearly powerful. And the fact that he so easily caught me off guard is another reason to be concerned.

I need to put as much distance between us as possible and ignore whatever this feeling in my chest is telling me to wrap myself around him.

CHAPTER 4

WILLOW

I do end up staying the night in Vegas, but at a different hotel at the very edge of the Strip. The smart thing to do would probably have been to hitchhike the hell out of Dodge, but I am exhausted and hungry. I doubt I'll get very far if I'm sleep-deprived and starving to death. I figure I have at least a couple of hours before Esteban realizes the men he sent are missing and decides to send more.

A part of me wonders if Zane really did shove them down the trash shoot.

The seedy motel room I rent for the night costs me an additional twenty bucks. It's the worst sleep of my life. The mattress is lumpy, the bed sheets questionably stained at the corners. A definite one out of five stars on Yelp. The second I see the sun peak in through the crack in the dingy curtains, I'm out of there faster than I can blink.

My stomach is a growling, cramping mess. I need food in me—stat. Thankfully, Las Vegas is practically a living, breathing smorgasbord. With half a dozen all-you-can-eat buffets within a ten-block radius, I'm about to help myself to a queen's share of delicious food.

I walk into the first restaurant I come across. I've never been a particularly picky eater, and something about *Nana's Greasy Spoon & Grill* feels right to me. A quick look at their menu posted outside and I know this is the perfect place to grab breakfast before hitting the road.

Apart from the hostess, nobody seems to notice me slip in through the front doors and make a mad dash to the buffet. I grab a plate and load up on fluffy scrambled eggs, silver dollar pancakes, sausage links, at least six whole strips of crispy bacon, and a generous helping of dinosaur-shaped chicken nuggets meant for kids—because why not?

I tuck myself into a corner booth near the back of the restaurant, stuffing my face with table manners that would definitely earn me a scolding if I were back home. Except I'm *not* home, I have to remind myself. My father isn't here to breathe down my neck and micromanage every calorie to pass my lips.

Watch your waistline, he'd say to me at the tender age of eleven. Your future husband won't want you to look and eat like a hippo.

Screw him. Screw all of them.

From here on out, I'm the kind of woman who eats whatever the hell she wants and loves her curves while she's at it. So what if I've got a fuller chest and a nice pair of thighs to go with it? My father might have spent my formative years treating me like a doll to put on display, but for the foreseeable future, I'm a free woman. Nobody is going to tell me what to do ever again, and that is a promise.

"I can't believe you tripled your money," a man in the booth behind me says. "The odds are supposed to be against you when you bet against the house."

"What can I say, Knox?" a second man replies, a playful smugness dripping from his tone. "I'm a lucky, lucky man."

"Oh, Heath," the voice of a woman coos. "I think we should splurge on an extra-large wedding cake. Don't you think that would be fun?"

"Darlene, baby, I'll buy you *a thousand* wedding cakes if it'll make you happy."

"You're being impractical," the first guy, Knox, grumbles under his breath.

“And *you* are being a stick in the mud. Ain’t that right, Zane?”

I freeze.

Surely, it’s a coincidence. It’s not exactly a common name, but I’m hoping *this* Zane and the one who kissed me last night aren’t—

“Leave me out of it.”

The deep, rich timbre of his voice makes the hairs on my arms stand on end. I can’t tell if the rush I feel is the result of my coffee or the natural adrenaline coursing through my veins. It’s him. Without a shadow of a doubt, it’s him.

What the hell is he doing here?

I make the mistake of turning to look at him. I’m not sure why I do it since my only focus should be self-preservation, but my body moves on its own. It’s drawn to him, this inexplicable pull I feel between us impossible to fight against.

Our eyes lock in an instant.

Oh.

Oh, God.

It should really be illegal for someone to look this sexy first thing in the morning.

Zane rises from his seat and steps over. “Ms. Doe. It’s a pleasure to see you again.”

I grip the edge of my table, more than aware of all the eyes on me. I can’t very well make a scene, so I settle for being aloofly polite. “Uh... Yeah. You, too?”

The woman at the table—a busty strawberry blonde with bright red lipstick—smiles wide. “Who’s your friend, Zane?”

The man she has her arms around, Heath, gives Zane a smug pump of the eyebrows. “Is this the reason you disappeared for an hour last night? Didn’t know you had it in you.”

“Don’t be crass,” Zane warns.

“Why don’t you join us?” Darlene asks me, her invitation feeling genuine and sweet.

I shake my head. “Oh, that’s okay. I really wouldn’t want to impose.”

“Nonsense!” Heath explains. “Come on over. Nobody should have to eat alone. There’s a reason they make these booths extra wide.”

“You’re making her feel awkward,” the other man, Knox, says with a roll of the eyes.

“You’re welcome to join us,” Zane tells me. He hasn’t looked away once. The intensity of his gaze makes my cheeks fill with heat, his attention equal parts thrilling and confusing.

The voice screaming at me from the back of my brain wants to decline, to leave. I can shove whatever I haven’t managed to eat into my backpack and find a ride out of Nevada.

But my heart begs me to stay. I don’t know what it is about him, but Zane makes me feel... *protected*.

“I guess I could join you for a little bit,” I mumble.

I vacate my own table and sit next to Zane on the outside of the booth. I wonder if this is a conscious decision on his part, a silent reassurance that I have a way out should I need it. Either way, it settles my nerves knowing I can escape at a moment’s notice.

“So, how’d you meet your new friend, Zane?” Darlene asks as she pops a slice of apple into her mouth. There’s a relaxed lean to her body language, pressing against Heath with comfortable familiarity. One glance at her giant diamond engagement ring and her prior discussion of wedding cakes tells me everything I need to know.

“I got a little lost,” I say, hoping to control the narrative. “I was, um... applying for a job at the casino. Got a little turned around on my way out of the interview.”

“Oh, are you a local?” Darlene asks sweetly.

“Yes,” I lie.

“What job are you hoping to land?” Heath questions.

“Honestly, anything. You know how it is in this economy. Beggars can’t be choosers.”

Knox huffs. “I couldn’t agree more.”

“I bumped into Zane on my fourth loop around the casino floor. He was kind enough to give me directions.”

“It took you a whole hour to give directions?” Heath says to Zane with a light chuckle.

“I saw her to where she needed to go,” Zane lies fluidly. “In case she got lost again.”

Darlene giggles. “Can’t help but get a little bit of bodyguarding practice, huh?”

I tilt my chin up to look at him. “Bodyguarding?”

“My brothers and I,” he says without any ounce of showboating, “we’re in the personal protection business.”

I stare at him for a little longer than I mean to. I admire his big, hulking frame and the width of his biceps. Everything about him—from his straight posture to the partial scowl he wears—screams power and strength. It’s no wonder I feel so safe when I’m with him.

And now I really *am* worried he shoved Esteban’s men down the trash shoot.

Worried and impressed.

“I had no idea,” I say softly, poking at one of my sausage links with the tip of my fork.

“We had to channel all our Navy SEAL energy somewhere after retirement,” Knox says. “It was either the police force or start our own security company.”

I blink, mesmerized by this brand-new information. Zane doesn’t acknowledge his brother’s comment and instead takes a big sip of his coffee.

“Ooh,” Heath gasps. “They’re bringing out the chocolate fountain.” He turns to his fiancé with a big, goofy grin. “What

do you say, sugar? Want to come with me to grab some fresh fruits? Maybe a whole bowl of pineapple for later? They say it's supposed to make things taste *real* sweet, if you know what I mean."

Knox grimaces. "Gross."

Heath ruffles his brother's hair. "Don't be such a party pooper. Come on, let's go."

"Why do I have to come with?"

"Because I just saw them bring out chocolate chip pancakes, and I know they're your Achilles heel."

"Can't argue with that," Knox grumbles under his breath.

"We'll stay here," Zane says. "To keep an eye on our things."

Heath, Darlene, and Knox slide out of their side of the booth and head over to the buffet, leaving Zane and me behind to stew in our own silence. Oddly enough, it isn't as uncomfortable as I thought it would be.

"You were a SEAL?" I ask him quietly, the gears beginning to turn slowly in my brain.

He nods just once. "I don't like to brag about it."

"And now you're a bodyguard?"

"Not officially. We don't take on our first client until next week after the new year."

I chew on the inside of my cheek. "How much do you charge?"

Zane lifts his coffee mug, the rim hovering just in front of his lips. He pauses for a moment, glancing down at me. "For you? Pro bono."

"Are you serious?" I ask, suspicion crawling along the surface of my skin. "Why?"

"Because it's obvious you need help."

"No, I want to pay you. I don't want to owe you anything."

He leans back against his seat casually. “I’ve seen how much cash you’re carrying, Ms. Doe, and believe me when I say you can’t afford me.”

My cheeks burn with indignation. Zane’s right. I don’t have much left to my name; the money I have on hand is my only lifeline. I literally can’t afford to spend it so freely.

“I need to lie low for the next couple of days,” I whisper even though he’s the only one within earshot. “The people who are after me... They’ll probably think I’ve skipped town already. I figure if I stay a couple more days and bide my time, they’ll lose track of me.”

Zane hums, the sound a low grumble in his chest. “Clever. They’ll pass right on through, and the entire time you’ll be under their noses.”

“Do you think it’ll work?”

“It might. But there’s really only one thing that can guarantee your safety.”

“What’s that?”

“Sticking with me.”

I laugh softly. I don’t even know why I do, but I’m at ease in his presence. I can’t remember the last time I laughed—let alone smiled.

“If we’re in agreement, I’m going to need to know a couple of things,” he says.

“Such as?”

“Who’s after you?”

I shake my head. “I can’t say.”

His jaw ticks. “I need to know what I’m up against.”

“They’re dangerous.”

“So am I.”

I laugh again, giggling around a mouthful of crispy bacon.

“What?” he asks, the corner of his lips ticking up into a grin.

“Sorry, that was just... so badass but also kinda corny?”

“I’ll be sure to work on my delivery.” Zane turns slightly in his seat to look at me directly. “Seriously. I need to know exactly what kind of trouble you’re in. Did you steal something from these people? Are they an organized group, or just a couple of angry men?”

“You seem awfully convinced *they’re* the bad guys. What if I’m some serial killer who murdered their families, and now they’re seeking vengeance?”

The smile that stretches across his lips knocks the air from my lungs.

“Are you?” he asks. “A serial killer.”

It’s like he can see straight through me. I’ve never felt more exposed. All my life, people have treated me as an object—something without agency or thought. My father always said I was to be seen, never heard. Now that someone is actively listening to me, my nervous heart is going through a loop.

“No,” I grumble. “I’m not a serial killer. But I can’t tell you who they are.”

He sighs. “Can you at least tell me why you’re running?” His expression darkens. “You said you’d kill yourself if you had to go back. Tell me why.”

“Did I say that?” I genuinely can’t remember. I might have said a lot of things in the heat of the moment.

“Willow.”

I look deeply into his eyes. His concern is almost touching, but I have to be careful about how much I say. I know Zane wants to help, but the less he knows the better. The more he knows about Esteban and the Becerra Cartel, the bigger the target on his back.

“I was supposed to get married,” I say. “But I... got cold feet. My would-be fiancé has sent some of his, um, *friends* to bring me home.”

It's a load of crap, and I can tell he knows it. I thank the stars above when he doesn't push any further.

"How far away do you need to get?" he asks me.

"Ideally? A different country entirely."

"Do you have a passport?"

I shake my head. "I left in a hurry."

Zane polishes off his coffee and sets the mug on the table. It's hard to tell what he's thinking. "I can help you with that," he says eventually. "But you're going to have to stay with me from here on out.

"You want me to stay with you?" I ask, flustered at the thought. I've never been allowed to interact with men before. My father always made sure a maid was in the room with me at all times—probably because I was always a flight risk, but also because he didn't want any of the guards to get the wrong idea. The prospect of sharing a room with a man I've only just met is daunting.

And really exciting.

"No funny business," he promises. "And if you ever feel unsafe with me, you can always use that gun of yours."

My guts are tied up in impossible knots, the butterflies in my stomach making it very hard to enjoy my breakfast. This is all things crazy and fast, but I suppose desperate times call for desperate measures.

"What would we tell your family?" I ask, noticing Heath, Knox, and Darlene about to return to our table.

Zane shrugs. "I'll think of something. What happens in Vegas, stays in Vegas and all that good stuff."

I return my attention to my plate of food as the trio rejoins our party, talking loudly about some magic show they want to see before meeting with the wedding planner. I listen in silence, unused to the chaos and clamor of eating a meal with other living, breathing human beings.

The entire time, I'm more than a little aware of Zane's protective arm slung over the back of our seat behind me.

CHAPTER 5

She has nothing but the clothes on her back and that ratty old backpack of hers. I don't know why I'm tempted to max out my credit cards to buy her every article of clothing from one end of the Strip to the other. Something tells me she wouldn't appreciate it.

The poor woman's a stranger to kindness.

Willow is a cautious creature, stepping into my executive suite with wide-eyed wonder and a jittery constitution. Every little sound makes her jump. She picks at her fingernails and hunches over a little, curling in on herself as though she wants to take up as little space as possible.

"I need to take your picture," I tell her.

"W-why?"

"For the passport. I know a guy. He'll probably charge an arm and a leg for the holiday rush job, but he can get you a new passport within a week."

"Oh, right. A picture."

I gesture to the blank white wall just to her right. "Let's do it here."

Willow sets her backpack down on the living room area's glass coffee table, hastily combing her fingers through her hair before attempting to smooth the crinkles of her shirt. I pull out my phone and snap a couple of shots. The lighting isn't ideal, but Andy's a genius when it comes to faking IDs. More importantly—he's discreet.

He left the SEALs not long after my brothers and I. Took a government job at the passport office. Fun fact: government employees are criminally underpaid. For the right price, my former bunkmate can expedite the production of any passport with no questions asked.

“When are Heath and Darlene getting married?” she asks as I scroll through my phone’s photo gallery, deleting any duds.

“Christmas morning,” I tell her. “They’ve been on the waitlist for months.”

“They’re really sweet together,” she mumbles. “How’d they meet?”

“She hit him with her car.”

Willow peers up at me through her long lashes. “Are you serious?”

“He was crossing the intersection while on his phone. Wasn’t paying attention. She was turning right on a red and clipped him.”

“That’s one hell of a first impression.”

“I think we have them beat, though.”

A smile finally brightens her face, her eyes glinting with amusement. I take her picture.

Willow bashfully glances down at her shoes, trying to hide her grin. “I thought you weren’t supposed to smile in passport photos.”

“This one’s just for me,” I say, adoring how the tips of her ears burn bright pink.

Once I have a handful of images to choose from, I send them off and put my phone away.

“Feel free to make yourself at home,” I tell her. “You can take the bedroom tonight.”

“And where are you planning to sleep?”

“The couch.”

Willow shakes her head. “No, that’s not right. I can take the couch.”

“I’ve spent weeks sleeping in a foxhole. The couch is a luxury to me. Besides, you’re my principle now, which means your safety and comfort are my top priority.”

A small smile ghosts across her lips. “I guess I probably shouldn’t argue with my bodyguard.”

“No, you shouldn’t.”

Willow combs her fingers through her hair again, a nervous tick. “Would it be okay if I use your shower? The place I stayed at last night had terrible water pressure.”

I gesture to the other end of the suite. “As I said, make yourself at home.”

“Thank you, Zane. For all of this.”

“You don’t have to thank me, Willow.”

She nibbles her bottom lip sheepishly before scurrying off to the bathroom, closing the door firmly behind her. I don’t make a move until I hear the rush of water and the hum of the bathroom fan.

I take a seat, my mind in overdrive.

This is a mess.

I’m glad I was able to convince Willow to stay, but I’m basically working in the dark here. It’s clear there’s more going on than meets the eye, but I’m worried she’ll clam up on me—or even leave—if I push her too hard. For now, all I can do is help her keep a low profile until the heat fizzles out.

My phone rings.

At first, I think it’s Andy getting back to me about the passport, but then I see my daughter’s name and picture pop up on screen.

“Hey, Dad!” she greets in her usual sing-song manner. In the background, the electric whir of a blender and a TV set at the highest volume. “Just wanted to call to say hi! Mom and I

are having a mojitos night. We're putting candy cane bits in them."

"Sounds festive," I reply.

"What about you? Are you living it up in Vegas? I hope Uncle Heath is keeping out of trouble."

"You know for a fact he isn't. I'm pretty sure he's made it his goal to give Uncle Knox at least one heart attack by the end of our trip."

"Are you at least having fun?" my daughter asks me. "I know you're an all-work-no-play kind of guy."

"It's been... eventful."

"Ooh, sounds like you have a story. I need details, Dad! Let me guess—met a pretty lady at a strip joint?"

I clear my throat. "If I did, you'd be the last to know, sweetheart."

Anna giggles. "Lighten up, Dad. I'm only teasing you."

"Did you get the Christmas gift I sent you?" I ask, changing the subject.

"It arrived earlier today. Thank you *so* much. You really didn't have to get me a new laptop. Those new MacBook's cost an arm and a half."

"You're starting your final year of college. I want to make sure you have everything you need to make it as easy as possible."

Even though we're miles away, I can easily picture Anna's smile. "You're the best, you know that?"

"I'm hoping to get another *Dad of the Year* mug to add to my collection."

"It's already in the mail," she says with a light laugh. "Oh, I have to go. Mom just got back from the store with ice."

"Tell Teresa I said hi."

"Will do. Love you, Dad!"

"Love you too, sweetheart."

The call ends just as I hear a loud thump from inside the bathroom. I spring to my feet, my fight or flight instincts kicking in. I hurry over and knock on the door.

“Willow? Are you okay? I heard a noise.”

The sound of her sniffing sets off the alarms in my head. What if she’s hurt? What if, on the off chance, someone managed to sneak into my suite to attack her when I was least expecting?

I burst in without a second thought and find her almost completely naked.

She is drop dead gorgeous. I know this isn’t the proper time or circumstance, but I can’t seem to rip my eyes away. Her skin is smooth and silky, the dip of her hips and the cinch of her waist accenting the roundness of her perky breasts and ample ass. I pause for a little too long to admire the sight of her, beads of moisture dripping down from her shoulders and her stomach.

I should definitely *not* be ogling my principle right now.

And I earn a hard shove for my indiscretion.

Willow shrieks, pushing me away before pulling her towel over her chest. “What are you doing?”

“I thought I heard—”

“I dropped the shampoo bottle,” she says in a hurry. “You can’t just barge in here!”

“I thought you hurt yourself. I heard you crying.”

“I’m fine.” She hastily wraps herself up while combing her fingers through her wet hair. “I’m fine,” she repeats, except she doesn’t *sound* fine. She steps toward me, her eyes glossed over and red with the threat of tears. “I’m totally, totally *fine*.”

Willow presses her forehead against my chest, leaning against me as she holds back her sobs. The only thing I can think to do is wrap her in a careful embrace. I’m alarmed to find her trembling.

“Are you okay?” I ask.

“I’m s-sorry,” she rasps, quickly wiping her eyes. “I’m so sorry. It’s just... It’s been a really long time since anyone’s hugged me.”

Her confession breaks my heart. My fury knows no bounds. How can the world be so cruel and unfair? When I look down at Willow, I’m blown away by what I see. Someone who has to fight every second of every day. Someone who is rough around the edges out of necessity, not by choice. She looks exhausted and exposed, a wounded bird looking for shelter from a storm.

Maybe I can be that shelter.

Even if it’s only for a week.

“Do you want me to let you go?” I ask her, noticing how—despite her shivering—she clings to me like a lifeline.

Willow shakes her head. “Can we stay like this for a little while?”

Even if I wanted to, I can’t bring myself to deny her. I wrap my arms around her a little tighter, drinking in the scent of her hair and the soft press of her body against mine.

“Of course,” I murmur. “Anything you need.”

She tilts her chin up slightly to look at me, her gaze flitting down to my lips. “Anything I need?” she whispers, a deep hunger darkening her eyes.

I’m suddenly overcome with the urge to lick every inch of her exposed skin. She smells too good, feels too soft, sounds way too sweet to stay away. Willow’s hands roam down my chest, slowly sliding down to palm my hardening erection. She watches me with intense interest.

“Are you sure this is what you want?” I ask her. “I don’t want to take advantage.”

“I’m *telling* you to.”

“You’re in distress.”

“I told you, I’m fine.”

“Are you lying?”

She shakes her head, squeezing my cock lightly over the fabric of my pants.

I grunt when she teases me with the tips of her fingers. “I’m trying to be a good guy here.”

“Maybe I don’t want a good guy.”

“Willow—”

“Kiss me again. Just like you did yesterday. You want to be a good guy? Then help make me feel good, Zane.”

I take her chin in my hand and dip down to crash my lips against hers.

CHAPTER 6

WILLOW

Zane is a force of nature.

He's almost ferocious, ripping off my towel before picking me up like I weigh nothing at all. Zane kisses like he's desperate for air, sucking on my bottom lip and searching my mouth with his tongue with such need that it's almost overwhelming. It *is* overwhelming.

All at once, I'm surrounded by him. His hands have a mind of their own, gliding over my body like he's committing every peak and valley to memory. We don't even make it to the bedroom, too consumed with the idea of unraveling together to get farther than the living room.

He sets me down on the edge of the couch, kneeling before me on the carpet. My pussy throbs with wanton heat, so wet and ready it almost aches not to have him inside me. I rake my fingers through his hair, moaning against his lips when he moves down to suck on my nipples. The low growl that escapes him makes me wetter. Knowing he wants me, needs me, teetering on the brink of insanity for me arouses me to no end.

It's almost unfair that he's still completely clothed. I try to rip off his tie and undo his buttons, but I'm so excited and downright feral my fingers are reduced to a clumsy, unhelpful mess.

"Zane," I whine. "Zane, take your shirt off. I want—"

He clasps his hand over my mouth, sucking a mark against the side of my breast. I whimper into his palm, my hips

bucking involuntarily against him. “You listen to me very carefully, Willow,” he says, deliciously low and deep. “I’m going to take my time savoring your sweet little pussy. I won’t be rushed, do you understand?”

I let out a shaky breath and manage a nod.

“Good girl,” he hums before pressing a line of kisses down my belly and settles between my legs. He pushes my knees apart and licks his way up my inner thighs. When he finally licks a stripe up my folds, I can’t help but let out a scream of delight.

“Oh, *God!*”

“No God here, darling. Just me.” Zane licks his lips. “Fuck, you taste so good. I can’t wait to fuck this tight little body.”

“Z-Zane, wait,” I rasp. “There’s something you should know.”

“What is it, baby?”

For a brief moment, I contemplate not telling him. What if I ruin the mood? If I tell him, he might change his mind. My cousin Claire once told me men always get weird when they find out a girl is a virgin.

Zane grips my hips in his big hands, looking up at me patiently. “Well?” he prompts.

I swallow hard, my throat terribly dry. I should tell him. He needs to know. “I’ve never done this before.”

He pauses. I fully expect him to freak out when he gets my meaning, but he does no such thing. Instead, Zane licks his lips and smirks.

“You’re telling me this pretty pussy’s all mine?”

I nod, my breaths fast and hard.

“No man’s ever touched you before?”

“I was told to save myself. For my wedding day.”

“But you ran away.”

“I did.”

“Which means I’m...” His smirk transforms into a proud smile. “Fuck,” he breathes. It sounds like a prayer. “Hold on tight, darling. I’m going to fuck you so good you’re going to feel me in your bones.”

Zane dives in, teasing my swollen clit with the tip of his tongue. He expertly draws tight circles against me, sucking and licking like it’s the only thing he knows how to do. An electric heat pools in the pit of my stomach, growing hotter and brighter with every one of the ministrations. I like the rough scrape of his beard against my thighs and the heat of his breath against my folds. Jolts of pleasure burst inside me, my knees trembling on either side of his head as a warm dizziness washes over me.

“*Zane*,” I moan, my voice growing tighter and tighter. “Zane, I’m so close!”

He redoubles his efforts like it’s some sort of challenge, teasing me until I’m up against the edge and barely hanging on. The tight heat that’s been gathering deep within my core suddenly explodes, pleasure sweeping through me in wave after massive wave. I’ve never experienced anything like it before, my mind so consumed by ecstasy that it takes me several minutes to finally come down from my high.

“Wow,” I breathe. Rasp. Whisper. My voice is a ruined mess, and I can’t say I mind.

“I’m not done with you yet, darling. C’mere.”

Before I have a chance to protest, Zane pulls me closer to the edge of the couch. I feel the blunt press of his finger against my entrance, slowly collecting my slick heat as he dips back down to mouth at my clit. He sinks his finger into me slowly, my walls fluttering around him as they adjust to the stretch.

It’s a foreign feeling, but not an unwelcome one. Zane moves carefully and considerately, never once rushing me before I’m ready.

“Is this alright?” he asks against my thigh. “You have to tell me if it’s too much.”

“N-no, don’t stop,” I plead. “It feels really good.”

He crooks his finger in a beckoning motion, sweeping over a spot inside me that causes stars to burst across my vision. Every inch of my body is suddenly a live wire, electric and tense and thrilling. His mouth and finger work in tandem, the same heat from before blooming deep within my core. I grip the edge of the couch cushions like I’m holding on for dear life.

When he adds a second finger, I’m a goner.

I’m not sure if the noise I make is even human. I can’t bring myself to care. I come on his fingers while his mouth continues to tease me senseless. My skin is alight and just shy of too sensitive, but it’s an addictive kind of feeling. A release. I’ve been tense for so long that I’ve only just realized what it’s like to take a moment to fully relax.

The light jingle of his belt and the metallic rip of his zipper pulls me back to reality.

There’s still more pleasure to be had.

Zane finally takes off his clothes. His shirt goes first, abandoned to the floor like the inconvenience it is. I prop myself up on my elbows and drink in the sight of him. His hulking shoulders and impressively wide chest are covered in tattoos. Military. Some I’m able to identify, others not so much. Zane is a lot to take in all at once—literally and figuratively—but a part of me sincerely hopes I’ll get a chance later to really study the beautiful ink marking his skin.

“See something you like?” he asks, cocky.

“Pull your pants down and we’ll see,” I reply coyly.

He does so, pushing his pants and boxer briefs down together so his cock can spring free.

My mouth suddenly waters.

Good *Heavens*.

“There’s no way that’s going to fit,” I mumble, dazed and in awe by his impressive length.

“You can take it,” he says. I can’t detect a trace of arrogance in his tone. “We’ll go slow, alright?”

I nod. “Right. Yeah, okay.”

“Stay right here.”

“Where are you going?”

“I need to get a condom.”

I almost smack my own forehead. “Right. Of course. How silly of me.”

Zane kisses the corner of my mouth. “Be patient. I’ll be back in a sec.”

I almost follow him when he leaves, suddenly missing the comforting press of his weight and his warmth. He disappears into the bedroom for a moment, but he returns just as promised with a rubber already on.

“Get comfy, darling,” he says as he joins me on the couch.

I do so, circling his neck so there isn’t an inch of space between us. I part my legs for him, eagerly rolling my hips against his own with a contented sigh.

“I’ll ask you once more,” he says. “Are you sure you’re alright with this? We can stop at any time.”

I press a tender kiss to his lips. “All my life, I’ve never had a choice,” I tell him. “I’m telling you now, *this* is my choice. I want this, Zane. I want this more than anything.”

He kisses me back, an almost possessive growl escaping his throat. “This might hurt a little bit, but only for a moment.”

I wrap my legs around him. “I can take it.”

“I know you can, darling.”

The blunt tip of his cock presses against my entrance. Zane’s movements are controlled and steady as he slowly slides into me. The burn of the stretch is far more prominent than with his fingers, but I’m so wet and relaxed that my walls

part for him easily. I gasp as he buries his cock deep inside me, so full I feel like I'm going to burst.

I half-laugh, half-moan. "Yes. Yes, just like that."

"You're alright?"

"I need more." I curl my fingers in his hair. "Please, I need *more*."

He rolls his hips against me, pressing in before pulling out. His thrusts start gentle and slow, but as we adjust to the feel of each other's bodies, his cadence picks up into something wild and desperate. We breathe each other in between deep kisses, grasping at one another like we're each other's anchors to reality.

We're all things sweat and sex and heat. We move together like it's a dance. Everywhere Zane leads, I happily follow. The couch creaks and groans beneath us in protest, but we don't stop. We can't. Not until we find pleasure together.

The head of his cock sweeps over my sweet spot again and again. I may be inexperienced, but I can tell this is a different kind of climax waiting for me on the horizon. This is something soul-shattering, bone shaking, an experience of a lifetime.

When I come undone, it's with a frantic, breathy shout. I don't know which way is up and which way is down. As long as Zane holds onto me, I know I'll be able to ride it out.

"That's it," he grunts against me with every thrust. "Fuck, so nice and tight."

"Z-Zane!"

"That's my girl. Come on, baby, take it."

I'm amazed when I come again, my walls clenching around his shaft as he pistons in and out of me. I lose myself in the sensations, in the sounds. Zane's voice is naturally sexy, but I'm on a whole other level of divinity when he moans loudly in my ear.

"*Fuck*," he hisses as he finishes inside me.

We lie together for goodness knows how long, our breathing and beating hearts in sync. Exhaustion quickly grips me, pulling my eyelids shut as a fuzziness floods my veins. I didn't know it, but this was exactly what I needed. This catharsis, this chance to open up and simply *trust*. I can't even begin to describe this connection I feel to him.

When I'm with Zane, I feel whole.

Complete.

I'm interrupted from my thoughts when my stomach suddenly grumbles.

Zane laughs. "Did I give you that much of a workout?"

I tuck my face into the crook of his neck, embarrassed. "Shut up. I was thinking about the buffet specials I saw downstairs, that's all."

"How about a quick nap and then we can check it out together?"

I can't help but smile. "Yeah," I mumble gently. "I'd really like that."

CHAPTER 7

She eats like a horse, but I'm not complaining. Far from it, in fact.

There's something immensely satisfying about watching Willow devour an entire plate full of food. I obviously don't know much about her home life, and I seriously doubt she'd tell me even if I asked, but I get the sense she isn't allowed to let loose very often—if at all.

Still, I'm good at studying people. A couple of minutes of observation can afford me several pages worth of information. In my line of work, these small details can be the difference between life and death. While she eats, I quietly take stock of what little I can ascertain.

I wonder if she's a local. She's packed lightly, and she said she escaped her would-be wedding only a matter of days ago. Given all the highways and bus lines leading to Vegas, there's a good chance she might be from a neighboring state.

Willow has an air of refinement about her. It's in the way she sits, her posture poised and her movements graceful. She may be on the run, but her clothes are a dead giveaway to her social status. Yes, she's in a pair of jeans, sneakers, a shirt and a winter coat, but they're all designer labels.

Her sneakers are Puma. Her coat is Burberry. There's always the possibility she stole these clothes, but I don't believe Willow is a thief in addition to being a runaway. They fit her too well to have been pulled from some random clothesline or store.

She's from a richer family, then. One where arranged marriages are apparently not uncommon.

You can't make me go back! I swear to God, I'll kill myself before I'll ever let that man—

My nostrils flare at the memory.

I want to know who she was promised to... and then immediately smash the bastard's face in. She told me she got cold feet, but I think it's more than that. She's running scared. Whoever her fiancé is must be a dangerous man. Resourceful, too, if he's able to send men after her.

But until she tells me the truth, it's all conjecture.

Hell, I don't even know her full name.

"Willow?"

"Hm?" She looks at me, half a jalapeño popper stuffed in her mouth. She's been sitting there enjoying her pyramid of snacks with a silly grin on her face, even *wiggling* in her seat because she's so happy with her meal.

"Feel like going shopping?" I ask her.

She arches a brow. "I don't have any money."

"It's on me. And before you try to object, it's my job."

"It's your job to go shopping?"

"You're wearing the same clothes you wore when you left home, right?" I ask gently, noting how easily Willow's cheeks turn pink. "We need to get you something new to wear. Change up your look. It'll keep the folks who are after you guessing."

She chews on the inside of her cheek. I've noticed she does this when she's deep in thought. Willow quickly glances from her plate to the exit, then back to me. When she does, there's a resilient fire behind those baby blues.

"Maybe you have a point," she says. "But what about your brothers?"

"What about them?"

“Won’t I be getting in the way of your vacation time? You’re here to prepare for a wedding, aren’t you?”

“Heath and Knox are big boys,” I say dryly. “They can last a day or two without me. Besides, the whole point of having a Vegas wedding was because it’s simple or whatever. Heath and Darlene are probably getting a head start on their honeymoon somewhere between the slot machines, and Knox is probably off being grumpy in a dark corner like the gremlin he is.”

This earns me a laugh. It’s a beautiful sound. Angelic.

“Well, if you’re sure,” she says.

“I am.”

“Are you particularly close with your brothers?”

“Thick as thieves,” I tell her with a grin. “There’s only about two years between each of us, so it was pretty easy to get along.”

“And how old are you?” she asks, sitting on the edge of her seat.

I pick up my mug of coffee, bringing the edge to my lips. “I don’t know if I should answer that.”

“We’ve seen each other naked, Zane. I doubt learning your age is going to change my opinion about you.”

I take a sip, the bitter acidity coating my tongue. “Forty,” I answer. “Thirty-nine and three-quarters, if you want to get technical. You?”

“Twenty-one. And a half. You know, for technicality.”

I already knew she was young. It doesn’t bother me.

But now that I know Willow is exactly the same age as my daughter...

“Hm,” is all I end up saying.

Willow laughs, so sweet and soft. She smiles at me sheepishly as she nudges my leg with her foot under the table. “Don’t get all shy on me now.”

“Finish your food,” I tell her, hiding my grin behind my mug. “And then we’ll go shopping.”



Despite it being the middle of December, Nevada is as hot as ever. The second we step out of the hotel-casino, we’re met with a blast of warm, dry air. It’s definitely not as scorching as it would be during the summer months, but it’s the furthest thing from frigid.

The streets are packed with all manner of tourists, cameras and cellphones in hand to take pictures of the neon vibrance of the Strip. Scalpers are out and about, pedaling their tickets to those who are interested in catching last-minute shows. Traffic is crazy, too, cars lined up bumper-to-bumper with people coming to test their luck—and some leaving with those who have lost it all.

A handful of boutiques are crammed along the main road, but most of the clothing stores can be found inside the massive casino complexes. They’re more than just a place to bet your hard-earned penny, but entire entertainment centers designed to keep you too amazed and hypnotized to leave. There’s a little bit of everything for everyone here in Las Vegas. Shopping malls and food courts and movie theaters next to the slot machines and card games and strip joints and free-pour bars, all within walking distance.

Willow and I wander into the Venetian, waltzing straight into one of the clothing boutiques next to the fake water canal they’ve built into the building. The whole place is designed to reflect the romantic atmosphere of Venice, complete with gondola pay-per-rides and vaulted ceilings painted blue.

As much fun as it is to see Willow genuinely enjoy herself, I’m also on high alert. I’ve made extra sure we haven’t been followed. So far, the coast is clear, but I can’t afford to let my guard down. There’s no telling who might be watching, or from where. With every store we visit, I make a mental note of the exits we can take, formulating new escape routes

everywhere we go. If something happens, I need to be able to get Willow out of here in a matter of seconds.

Sometimes a second is all that stands between life and death.

“What do you think about this one?” Willow asks me, holding up a red dress she’s plucked from the shelf. “Actually, it might be a little too bold. I’ve never been allowed to wear something like this.” Her wistful tone strikes my heart.

“Do you like it?” I ask.

“It *is* pretty, but—”

“Try it on.”

“No, it’s really alright.”

I take the dress from her and gesture to one of the store’s employees. “We’d like a changing room.”

“Of course, sir.”

“Zane—”

“What else do you like?” I ask her, dipping down to whisper in her ear. “Whatever you want, Willow. I mean it.”

She chews on the inside of her cheek. “Maybe that blue sweater over there?”

“Good idea. It matches your eyes.”

“Bodyguard *and* fashionisto? Well, aren’t you a package deal?”

I chuckle, giving the small of her back the lightest of pushes. “Go on. Try them on for me.”

She grins, the corners of her eyes crinkling as a mischievous look takes over her pretty face. “For you, huh?” she mumbles before slipping into the changing rooms.

I remain out front, going through my usual security checks. The doors are clear from obstruction, there are less than four other customers in the store, and I have a clear view of my surroundings. Nobody strikes me as particularly suspicious, but it’d be a mistake to typecast. If I’m going to do my job

properly and ensure Willow is well protected, I can't afford to underestimate anyone.

Everyone and everything are a potential threat, and only a fool would let their confidence go to their head. I take my job very seriously. And because it's *her*, maybe more so.

Whoever's after Willow clearly has connections, power, and money. That means I can't relax, not even for a second.

My phone dings in my pocket with a text from my youngest brother, Knox.

Heath wants to go clubbing.

You've been appointed designated driver.

I sigh heavily as I message him back.

I don't get a say in this?

When do you ever?

Bring your new friend with you.

Darlene says she "wants a gal pal."

I feel gross that I even wrote that out.

Gal pal. Vomit.

"Zane?"

Willow's soft voice reaches my ear like a gentle summer breeze. I turn to find her standing at the entryway to the changing rooms, the bright red of her dress drawing my attention like a beacon. Without thinking, I take a step toward her—very much a moth to her flame.

“How do I look?” she asks sheepishly, fiddling with the strap of her dress. The silky fabric hugs her curves in all the right ways.

I reach out and tuck a strand of her hair behind her ear. “How do you feel about nightclubs?”

“I’ve never been, but it sounds exciting.”

I smile down at her, lost in her pretty eyes and even lovelier smile. “Exciting indeed.”

CHAPTER 8

I'm a fish out of water.

The music is a touch too loud and the flashing lights are a massive distraction, but I can't deny there's something thrilling about the atmosphere. It's *especially* thrilling getting to walk into the club on Zane's arm.

We literally turn heads as we head to the VIP section, men and women alike turning just to get a good look at us. I'm not sure if it's because of the low back of my dress or the way Zane looks drop-dead sexy in his all-black suit.

Is this what it feels like to be a power couple?

Not that we're a couple, of course. My brain's getting ahead of herself. Still, it's a very intoxicating knowing that all eyes are on us.

Growing up, the guards were never allowed to look at me. Hell, they weren't even supposed to *talk* to me. My father once beat a guard senseless for telling me the time when I asked. I don't know what ended up happening to him. Needless to say, the guard never came back.

I learned a very important lesson that day—keep to myself at all costs. If I don't, other people will get hurt. And while I'm very much enjoying my time with Zane, I can't shake the feeling that—sooner or later—something terrible is going to happen.

He seems to sense my unease as we climb the lit steps to the mezzanine, wrapping a protective arm around my waist.

He speaks with his actions, his body placed just behind me as if to say: *I've got you.*

“They’re here!” Darlene exclaims, shooting out of her seat like a drunk jackrabbit. She rushes over to me and hugs me tightly. I stiffen, but only because I’m not used to this level of affection from someone I can only call a passing acquaintance.

I’m just not used to people being...*nice* to me.

Darlene, Heath, and Zane all seem pleased that I’m here.

Knox, on the other hand, does not.

“I’m so glad you could make it,” Darlene says to me, tugging me along by the hand. We’ve been given the corner table in the VIP section, which is more secluded than the general area. A lovely platinum blonde bottle girl in a skimpy black dress that leaves little to the imagination is our waitress.

“What can I get for you, babe?” she asks me.

“Oh, uh...”

I’ve never had an alcoholic drink before. My father never allowed it, though he could always be found with a whiskey in hand. The hypocrisy wasn’t lost on me.

“I’ve always wanted to try a Long Island iced tea,” I admit over the heavy bass notes blasting over the club’s speakers.

The bottle girl winks at me. “You got it, babe. And what about you, handsome?” She bats her faux eyelashes at Zane with just about as much subtly as a neon warning sign. I don’t miss or appreciate the way she deliberately bends over and squeezes her breasts together by pressing her arms close to her chest.

I’m not jealous. I swear I’m not. It’s not like Zane and I are a couple or anything. We’re just two people who happened to find each other in the craziness that is Las Vegas, and now we’re enjoying our week of fun until I can flee the country for good. That’s all. There’s no need for me to be seeing green.

Yet...

“Nothing for me,” he answers. He doesn’t even look her in the eye when she speaks. His attention is solely on me as he casually slings his arm over my shoulder.

“How’s the job hunt going?” Darlene asks me, sipping on her rainbow-colored cocktail with a comically massive umbrella and pineapple wedge.

“It’s, uh... it’s good,” I answer with a polite smile. “I’ve got a couple interviews set for next week.” I’m obviously lying. This time next week, I’ll hopefully be long gone and starting a brand-new life halfway across the world.

“Oh, so you’ll be here for Christmas, then?”

“I believe so, yes.”

“If that’s the case, I was wondering if I could ask you a very important question.”

“Sure.”

Darlene kisses Heath on the cheek. “Babycakes, can you go get me a refill? And take Knox with you. He’s stinking up the whole place with his negative vibes. Maybe help him find a nice girl to brood with.”

“I don’t stink,” Knox grumbles, but he stands up. “Doesn’t matter. I need to talk to you, Zane.”

I throw Zane a quick glance. The only reason I agreed to come to the club was because I thought Zane would be by my side at all times. It’s the only reason I feel safe enough to come to such a public space.

I’m completely transformed, it’s true. I’ve felt like I needed to dye my hair, but Zane said not to. Instead, I used a wash-out dye that only lasts for a few days. I dabbed on a bit of makeup, and my dress compliments every curve of my body. Hell, I almost didn’t recognize myself when I looked at my reflection in the mirror, so Esteban’s lackeys will probably have to do a double take to realize it’s me, but still. The thought of being without Zane makes my stomach churn anxiously.

“I’ll be right over there,” he whispers in my ear as if reading my mind. “Don’t worry. There’s only one way into the VIP section and I’ll stand where I have a clear line of sight of you. Darlene’s good company. You should let yourself to have a little fun.”

A part of me appreciates his clear line of communication. I know it must look so silly on the outside. I’m a grown woman too afraid to be left alone, but I think that’s what happens when you’ve been trapped in a cage for as long as I have. After twenty-one long years of being told how to dress, where to go, who to speak to, what to eat, who to *marry*—I suddenly find myself with so much freedom it’s paralyzing.

It’s a terrifying thing, all this overwhelming choice.

But Zane... Being near him makes everything a little easier, like the fight isn’t mine alone to bear. A salve to my weary young soul.

It’s honestly crazy how at peace I feel when I’m with him. I’ve spent all my life silently fighting the chains of my father’s expectations, but now I’m finally free to let go. Relax. Entrust my safety in the hands of someone I know I can trust. I know it’s only been a few days, but I trust Zane with my life.

“Okay,” I whisper back to him.

The Phillips brothers leave our table and make their way over to the VIP bar. Just as he promised, Zane stands where he can see me.

“You two are cute together,” Darlene comments.

“Oh, it’s...” My face flushes with heat. “It’s just a little fun.”

“Well, I personally think it’s great. That just means I get to invite more guests to the wedding.”

The bottle girl arrives with my drink, as well as a refill for Darlene. I take a sip, my face curling up slightly at the after taste. It’s a lot more bitter than I was expecting. I cough around a drop of my drink when I say, “You want me at your wedding?”

“I know, I know. Knox thinks it’s silly that I want you there. But you know what? Screw what Knox thinks. He’s just grumpy because he’s still single and *not* thriving.”

“I mean... That’s really sweet of you, but are you sure?”

Darlene nudges me with her elbow. “If my future brother-in-law likes you, then I like you. Besides, it’s a celebration of our love. Why the hell not? Come, eat, get wasted. It’s going to be the best Christmas to ever Christmas.”

I find myself smiling wide. Is this what it’s like to have a friend? Darlene has an amazing energy about her, ever bright and cheerful. It feels wonderful to be a part of something bigger than myself. To feel like I actually belong.

“You know what? I’d be honored to come to your wedding.”

Darlene squeals. “Oh, wonderful! Don’t worry, I won’t force you to do any of that annoying bridesmaid crap with the matching dresses and having you run around like some kind of lapdog.”

“I didn’t realize that was a thing,” I reply, taking another sip. My drink is starting to grow on me.

“Haven’t you ever seen *My Big Fat Greek Wedding* or *The Proposal* or literally a hundred other wedding-centered movies?”

I shake my head. “My father never allowed me to watch TV. I don’t think I’ve ever seen a movie.”

Darlene gives me a quizzical look. “Oh. Well, that sucks. The point is they always look like a chaotic mess before the big sweeping resolution. My wedding is going to be nice and simple.” She giggles, smiling at me like she’s about to share a massive secret. “We’re going to have an Elvis impersonator marry us. Ain’t that cute?”

“It’s definitely... unique. Unforgettable.”

“That’s what I said. I knew I liked you for a reason.”

Zane and Heath return to rejoin our party. Knox is notably absent.

I toss him a questioning glance, but Zane only shakes his head in response. I figure it's probably best if I don't push the subject.

"Zane!" Darlene says. "I was just talking to Willow about how she's never seen *My Big Fat Greek Wedding*, or any movies at all."

His eyebrows rise a little. "Is that so?"

"Well, that sucks," Heath says. His hair is slightly disheveled, and his face is a bit pink. He seems irritated, his usual sunny disposition nowhere in sight.

Darlene pats her fiancé on the knee. "That's what I said."

"We'll have to rectify that," Zane says. His voice and face are perfectly calm, but his posture is stiff and rigid. I can tell something is off, but I can't put my finger on it. If I had to guess, I'd bet it has something to do with Knox. Maybe his foul mood rubbed off on his older brothers.

Zane doesn't give me much time to speculate. He takes my hand and guides me down the steps of the mezzanine to the dance floor. We're surrounded on all sides by partying club goers, dancing to the electric beat. The music is so loud I can feel the sound waves vibrating in my chest. Flashing lights and lasers are timed to be in sync with the music, the hypnotizing sights and sounds easy to get lost in.

I allow Zane to hold me close. Closer than any man has ever held me. In the dim lighting of the club, nobody pays us any mind. We are free to feel the press of our bodies, the heat of our skin, the warmth of our breath as we sway in time to the melody. I feel alive at this moment, my skull buzzing with the effects of my drink.

The entire time, Zane watches me with fondness in his eyes. He's a lot bigger than I am, his body practically blanketing me. I lean into his touch eagerly, trusting if I do get lost in him, at least I'll feel right at home.

His face is close. *So* close. This connection between us, one I swear is as tangible as the floor beneath my feet and the roof above our heads, thrums with delicious heat.

This time, I'm the one who steals a kiss. I tilt my chin up and slot my lips against his, exploring the shape of his mouth with the tip of my tongue. He moans against me, the hard press of his cock nudging my hip as clear a sign as any that we ought to find some place more private.

"Let me take you back to the hotel," he says. "We can rent a movie."

I smile up at him, wrapping my arms around his neck. "I'd love that."

CHAPTER 9

We do not, in fact, rent a movie.

Willow and I are too busy kissing each other senseless to worry about anything else. I enjoy the way she kisses. There's a hint of shyness and inexperience, but an overall drive and possessiveness that tells me she's willing to learn. She's clumsy sometimes, nibbling a bit too hard or forgetting she's allowed to take her time, but I find everything about endearing.

It's a good thing I'm an excellent teacher.

I carry her into my hotel suite with ease. She weighs next to nothing in my arms. I don't bother with the lights, moving swiftly to pin her back against the wall. My hands roam of their own free will, slipping under the fabric of her dress to greedily grasp at her thighs.

"Zane," she pants against my ear. "Zane, please..."

"What is it, Willow? Tell me what you want, and I just might give it to you."

"I want it rough," she admits, desperately trying to undo my tie. "I want to feel you on every inch of my skin. I want you to drive me crazy."

I chuckle. "My girl gets what she wants."

Willow rolls her hips against me, deliberately grinding against my throbbing erection. I want her so badly I can hardly put it into words. The next thing she says is what drives me over the edge.

“Fuck me, Zane.”

I am downright feral for her.

I rip her out of her clothing, moving in to ravenously suck hard marks against her exposed skin. I tear her out of her bra and panties until she is totally and completely on display for me. The sounds of her languid moans make me that much harder. My cock is desperate for attention, but not before I devour her whole.

I pick Willow up and toss her over my shoulder. She giggles in delight as I clap her on the ass.

“Where are you taking me?” she asks, breathless.

“Wherever the fuck I want, darling. You’re mine, after all. I’ll fuck you wherever I damn well please.”

She half-laughs, half-moans as I carry her to the bedroom. I toss her onto the mattress, the springs creaking in protest. Before she has a chance to right herself, I hook my hands beneath her knees and pull her to the edge of the bed, kneeling so I can settle between her lovely thighs.

Her pussy is wet and ready for me, and I find great pleasure in eating her out. She tastes so nice and sweet, and the sounds she makes are the cherry on top. There is nothing more satisfying than bringing her to completion with just my tongue, her knees shaking as pleasure courses through her.

“You’re going to give me five.”

“W-what?” she mumbles, barely able to catch her breath.

“That was one,” I say before diving right back in.

She gasps, body trembling beneath my touch as I slip a finger inside her. Her pussy clenches around me, so wet and warm I can hardly wait to feel her around my cock. Willow’s hand shoots down to tangle in my hair, her own head thrown back as loud moans escape her. I’m only partially worried we’ll get a noise complaint from one of our neighbors, but I don’t give a shit. Nothing is going to stop me from worshiping this woman the way she so deserves.

The second time she comes is louder and stronger than the first. Her back arches off the sheets, her fingers and toes curling as pleasure claims her for its own.

“Two,” I count.

Willow blinks once, twice. She pants heavily as she stares in wonder at the ceiling. “Zane, wait—”

I don’t give her time to breathe. I’m at it again, adding a second finger to stretch her that much more. I’m not a prideful man, but my fingers hardly do my cock justice. If Willow’s going to take me as deep and as hard as she wants it, then I need to make sure she’s ready for me.

She climaxes with a silent scream, her hips bucking uncontrollably as her head lolls to the side. I can tell she’s dizzy with ecstasy. That’s good. I prefer it that way.

“Three.”

“Zane, I need— Give me a sec—”

“Is it too much?” I ask her. “Do you want me to stop?”

“N-no... No, I don’t want you to stop. But I need to catch my—”

I pull away and stand up, quickly shedding my clothes. I grab a rubber from the bedside table drawer and return to her before she’s even managed to finish her sentence. I lick her sweet juices off my lips before grabbing her by the hips and flipping her over onto her stomach.

She grips the sheets, sighing contently when I dip down to press a line of kisses down her spine. When I get to the curve of her ass, I suck in a sharp breath through clenched teeth as I grab two handfuls.

“So fucking beautiful,” I murmur. “I’m going to fuck you so deep you’re going to feel me for weeks.”

“Yes,” she whines. “I want you inside me, Zane.”

“Do you?”

“Yes!”

“Then be my good girl and beg.”

I watch her shiver, something ravenous and dark in her eyes as she looks at me over her shoulder.

“Please,” she rasps. “Please, *please* fuck me, Zane. I don’t want you to hold back.”

“I don’t know,” I tease her lightly. “Do you really think you can handle all of me?”

“I know I can.”

Her answer satisfies me. “I know you’re tough, darling. But you don’t have to be tough around me. I can give you everything you want. I can take care of you. Would you like that?”

Willow nods, her answer so soft and quiet and sweet, “I’d like that very much.”

I run my hand down the length of her back. “Trust me, Willow.”

“I do,” she whispers. “I do.”

Climbing onto the bed, I push her knees apart with my own. I stroke the head of my cock down her wet folds before aligning myself with her entrance. I press in slowly at first, sinking inch by careful inch, groaning as her wet heat surrounds me. I’ve found euphoria, her body a sacred place. I don’t stop until she’s taken me all the way to the base, the heat in the pit of my belly flaring with unmatched intensity.

Willow moans against the sheets, the walls of her pussy fluttering around my shaft. Her whole body spasms with pleasure.

I chuckle. “Don’t tell me you came already.”

“I’m just... so *full*.”

“Tell me, Willow. How many was that?”

“F-four.”

“Would you like one more? Does my good girl deserve one more?”

“Yes, *please*. Give me one more...”

I smirk. “Well, since you asked so politely.”

I lay down flat on top of her, propping myself up on my knees and elbows so I don’t crush her beneath my full weight. Our skin is so hot I can’t tell where she starts and where I begin as I roll my hips back—

Just to slam into her.

I fuck her hard just like she wanted, pistoning in and out of her at a cadence that leaves both of us panting. We are a tangle of arms and legs, a sweaty, passionate mess. I can feel myself unraveling, but thankfully so is she. Willow and I fall over the edge of unbridled pleasure together, desperately holding onto the other for dear life.

I’m quick to scoop her up in my arms, holding her close so I can pepper her hair and face with light kisses. Her smile is worth a thousand words, satiated and pleased and happier than I’ve seen her so far. She reminds me of a star, dim at first because of our distance. Now that I’m up close and personal, she is blindingly brilliant.

“That was amazing,” she murmurs against my chest. She traces one of the many tattoos on my arm with the tip of her finger. “I almost lost count.”

I chuckle. “I almost lost count, too. Probably would have kept going forever.”

“Now there’s an idea.”

We exchange a tender kiss. The rest of the world fades away. It’s just us here. We’re all that matters.

“Zane?” she asks.

“Yes?”

“Did Knox do something to upset you?”

My jaw ticks. I’d done my best to push the memory of our conversation out of my mind. My little brother has always been a massive pain in the ass, but I love him wholeheartedly. Where Heath has his good humor, Knox has always been

rougher around the edges. He has a temper, one he no doubt inherited from our father.

I don't like this, he said to me at the club. *You don't even know her.*

I sent Knox off with a stern warning. I understand that he means well, but I make my own decisions. It's true I know next to nothing about who Willow is, nor do I have all the details of her past, but I don't care. For the brief time I have her, I'm going to do what I can to protect her—no matter the cost.

And if Knox wants to be a little bitch about it, that's his problem.

"It's nothing," I tell her. "He's just anxious about the wedding."

"But it's not even *his* wedding."

"I know. He's always been a worrywart. Pay him no mind."

"Okay," she says slowly. "If you're sure."

"Is it true you've never watched a movie before?" I ask her, recalling Darlene's comment.

Willow grimaces. "My father was very specific about my education. I was homeschooled for the majority of my childhood, and then he made me get my GED when I was sixteen. I usually read a lot of books, but only the ones he's selected for me."

"That sounds..."

"Suffocating and controlling? Yeah, I know."

A nagging feeling tugs at my chest. What kind of father treats his child this way? When I think of my own daughter, my heart breaks. I'd do anything to give Anna the world and then some. Her success is my success, her happiness my happiness. The more I learn about how Willow was treated, the more I come to hate him. I don't know what the man looks like or where he is. Hell, I don't even know his name, but I *do* know I want to give him a piece of his mind.

“How about *Elf*?” I suggest. “It’s a comedy. I think you’ll like it. Have you heard of Will Ferrell?”

Willow shakes her head. “Is he an actor?”

“Here, hop up. We’ll order some room service and have a movie marathon.”

“That sounds like fun,” she says, a delightful glimmer in her eye. Willow gathers the blankets and fluffs the pillows, settling in comfortably.

“Oh, one more thing,” I say, caressing her cheek.

“What?”

“You don’t belong to anyone, Willow. You are, and always will be, your own woman. Remember that.”

Willow looks deep into my eyes before leaning forward to kiss me. “I’ll remember,” she says against my lips. “I promise.”

CHAPTER 10

WILLOW

Christmas morning in Vegas feels like every other morning in Vegas. Every casino, bar, buffet, shopping mall, and various other attractions remain open as usual. The sidewalks are crowded with tourists and the streets are filled with cars. The weather is mild, sunny with highs in the low sixties.

But even I cannot deny the magic in the air.

Maybe it's because I'm weirdly excited about Heath and Darlene's wedding.

I've never been invited to a wedding before. Not a real one, anyways. When I attended my cousin Claire's wedding, it felt more like a funeral than a celebration of love. Hers had been arranged just as mine had, to a high-ranking member of the Becerra Cartel. She got to wear a pretty white dress and delicate see-through veil, but there was no cake and no afterparty. It felt more like a business transaction, and I was an unwilling witness, my presence a formality.

So imagine my surprise when I walk into the Graceland Wedding Chapel, every inch of the place covered in cream white walls and beautiful floral arrangements. It's hard not to smile when the bride and groom give their vows in front of their Elvis impersonator. The whole thing is ridiculous and silly and wonderfully lighthearted; I can't help but feel warm and fuzzy all over.

Heath and Darlene look like the happiest couple alive, so committed to one another that the cheesiness of the venue

doesn't even phase them.

They exchange rings and are pronounced husband and wife.

"You may kiss the bride," their officiant says. "Thank you, thank you very much."

Darlene practically throws herself into her new husband's arms, bouncing with pure joy as they share their first kiss as a married couple.

"I got married!" Heath declares with a hearty laugh.

"Congrats, man," Zane says, patting his brother on the back.

"Good luck to you," Knox quips. His attempt at being serious is seriously undermined by sparkly sequin material of fake Elvis' jacket.

Darlene gives me a hug. "Thank you so much for coming."

"I'm so happy for you," I say, and genuinely mean it. "What's the plan now?"

"Heath and I are going to catch a flight to Hawaii for our honeymoon," she explains. "But first, a pitcher of margaritas and an all-you-can-eat buffet! Want to join us?"

I laugh. "Do I want to get drunk at ten in the morning? Of course, I do."

Heath shakes Zane by the shoulders. "Please say you're coming, too. Let me tell you, Drunk Zane is my favorite version of Zane. He sings karaoke if you get him tipsy enough."

I put my hands on my hips. "Color me intrigued."

Zane rolls his eyes. "It was *one* time."

"You're coming too, right Knox?" Darlene asks.

The youngest Phillips brother shakes his head. "No, I'm going home."

"What? Why?"

“Our security company, remember? We still have lots of work to do before we start the job with our first client.”

Heath frowns. “We’ve got plenty of time. C’mon, man. It’s my wedding day. Come celebrate with us.”

Knox steps away. “Don’t let me rain on your parade. Congrats on getting hitched. I’ll see you all back in LA.” He leaves without another word, bringing the mood down with him.

“What’s his problem?” Darlene grumbles.

“Don’t mind him,” Zane says, diplomatic as ever.

“Yeah, sugar,” Heath adds, cupping his wife’s face. “Don’t look so glum. We can always party it up without him. Ain’t that right, Willow?”

I nod, a comforting warmth washing over me. “Right.”

Heath takes a deep breath and shouts at the top of his lungs, “LET’S GET WASTED!”



Turns out, I’m a margarita gal. They are *de-licious*.

One turns into two. Two turns into four. Before I know it, I’ve forgotten basic mathematics because I officially lost count of how many drinks I’ve had.

Heath, I’m quickly realizing, is the life of the party. He’s constantly spit balling ideas, his brain running a mile a minute despite his very clearly inebriated state.

“You know what we should do?” he asks, slurring his words. “We should go bungee jumping. I think they have a bungee jumping attraction somewhere on the Strip!”

I shake my head. “Oh, no. No, no, no. Absho—*lutely* not. Mm-mm.”

“Are you *scared*?” Darlene taunts good naturedly. “I bet Zane would jump with you. Right, Zane?”

Zane doesn't *look* drunk. He sits upright perfectly fine, his expression impassable. The only reason I know he's as buzzed as I am is because he's the touchy-feely type of drunk. He showers me with plenty of hugs and kisses and praise. He especially likes to hold my hand, lacing his fingers between mine like he's afraid to let go.

"I'd jump," he says, his words perfectly clear. "I've jumped out of airplanes before. It's not that scary."

"Not that scary," I say with a huff. "You know what?"

"What, darling?"

"I don't believe you."

"I'd keep you safe."

"Safe jumping out of an airplane? Or bungee jumping?"

"Both."

I shake my head, resting my cheek on his strong shoulder. "I don't like doing scary things. Let's go to a petting zoo or something."

"They have petting zoos here?" Darlene gasps.

"I think you're very brave," Zane mumbles against my ear.

I giggle. His breath tickles my neck. "You're only saying that to be nice."

"No, no. I mean it. I think you're the bravest woman in the world."

I pat his cheek. "You flatter me."

Darlene coos. "You two are *sooooo* cute. Don't they look cute, Heath?"

He nods, eyes droopy with intoxication. "Yep. Cute, cute, cute. Practic'ly a married couple."

"You know what you should do?" Darlene asks, pointing a finger in our general direction. I don't think she can see straight enough to actually point us out.

"What?" I ask.

“You two should totally get married.” Darlene hiccups, takes a deep breath. Her cheeks and the tips of her nose are bright red. “They do drop-ins, y’know. Back at the chapel. Just throw them an extra couple hundred bucks and they’ll marry you on the spot!”

I laugh at such a silly idea. “Me? Married?” I mumble. “I ran away to avoid all that shit. If Esteban knew I ran away t’marry someone else, he’d send the *whole* cartel ‘fter me.”

Darlene laughs uncontrollably. “What’re you even talking ‘bout? You’re so *drunk*.”

“No, *you’re* so drunk.” I turn to face Zane. He looks at me lovingly. “What?”

“Let’s get married,” he says, sounding genuine and earnest.

The sane part of my brain tells me it’s a bad idea. A *stupid* idea. I’m clearly not in my right mind at the moment, nor is Zane or anyone else at the table.

Except my sixth margarita finally hits me (I think it’s my sixth?) and my common sense goes straight out the window. Marriage doesn’t sound that bad. Not if I’d be married to someone as sweet, considerate, sexy, handsome, respectful, protective, and adoring as Zane Phillips.

I’d be lucky to end up with a man like him.

“Let’s do it,” I say without thinking. Words are just funny sounds, anyways. “Let’s get married.”

Our waitress arrives with another tray full of drinks. My memory starts to get hazy. I think someone makes a toast, but I could be wrong. All I know is that I help myself to another margarita and then—

My mind goes blank.

CHAPTER 11

I wake up with a pounding headache and exactly zero will to live.

I have no memory of the night before. Drinks were probably involved because I have the mother of all headaches. I haven't gotten this drunk since my late twenties, and now I fully regret letting Heath convince me that *one more drink won't hurt*.

There was discussion of bungee jumping, a petting zoo...

But the rest of the night is a mystery to me.

With an agonized groan, I sit up and slowly take stock of my surroundings. I'm in my hotel suite, lying in my bed stripped down to my black boxer briefs. When I roll over, I find Willow beside me, curled up beneath all the sheets. She's hogged all the blankets, appearing rather cozy in the center of her self-made cocoon.

I squint at the glowing green digits of the bedside alarm clock. 10:52 a.m. We've missed our checkout window, but I don't mind paying the extra fee. Very slowly, I drag myself out of bed and check my phone.

I have fifteen missed text messages.

The majority are from Heath, a string of nonsensical drunk texts about wanting to invest in a local wedding cake chain. One is from Knox with a plain and simple update that he's arrived in Los Angeles. I've got a text from my daughter wishing me a Merry Christmas from Florida. But the last

couple of messages from Andy are the ones that catch my attention.

Passport is ready. I sent it to your hotel.

Pick it up at reception.

Happy holidays and stay out of trouble.

A cold dread sweeps through me. Our time together is over. This time tomorrow, I'll be back in LA and Willow will be God knows where.

She sleeps soundly, the morning glow filtering in through the curtains. Her hair is a wild, untamable mess—yet she is still the most beautiful woman I have ever laid eyes on. Very carefully, I brush a few strands away from her face and take the opportunity to memorize the long curl of her lashes and the fullness of her pretty lips.

I'm not ready to let her go yet. If this is the last time I'm ever going to see her, I figure I'd better make the most of every second.

I peel away the blankets and crawl under, grazing my palms up her inner thighs to nudge them apart. I settle between her knees and lick a stripe up her folds, relishing the soft moan that escapes her lips as she stirs awake.

“Now *this* is how to wake a girl up in the morning,” she mumbles with a light laugh.

My mouth is preoccupied with her pleasure, but I do manage a hum in agreement. I tease her senseless until her legs shake around me, Willow's slender fingers tangled in my hair. I can tell how close she's getting by the escalating breaths.

As I bring her to the brink of ecstasy, a memory flashes through my mind.

Dearest beloved, we are gathered here today...

“Oh, *God*,” Willow whimpers as she comes on my tongue. “Fuck, Zane, that was—”

I smirk at her. “I know. I’m amazing.”

“C’mere,” she murmurs. “It’s my turn to take care of you.”

My mood gives way to something more sullen. “We don’t have enough time, I’m afraid.”

Willow props herself up on her elbows and peers down at me. There’s no need to exchange words. We both know what’s coming. We knew it couldn’t last forever. But neither of us seems ready to say our goodbyes.

“Your passport is ready,” I mumble against her inner thigh. I really don’t want her to go, but I know that decision isn’t up to me.

Willow chews on the inside of her cheek, a quiet understanding passing between us. I crawl up the length of the bed and wrap her in my arms, pressing light kisses into her hair.

“Thank you,” she whispers against my chest. “For everything. I don’t know what I would have done without you.”

I hold her a little tighter. “Make me a promise.”

“What is it?”

“Wherever you end up, promise to be safe.”

Willow nods, her smile so soft and sweet and appreciative. “I promise, Zane.”



I drive her to the airport. It’s the least I can do since I’m headed back to Los Angeles anyway and it happens to be en route. Even if it weren’t, I probably would have found some excuse to see Willow off regardless.

She’s packed light, her backpack full of new clothes, her fake ID, and a one-way plane ticket to England. I may or may

not have stuffed an additional thousand English pounds into one of her pockets while she wasn't looking. It doesn't feel like nearly enough. I have half a mind to give her a supplementary credit card, but she'd probably refuse outright.

The airport is a busy place, people coming and going in a hurry. Even though Christmas is over, there's still plenty of traveling to do before the New Year. Long queues at the check-in desk, even longer lines to get through the TSA security checkpoint. Several announcements regarding flight delays and gate changes hiss through the speakers. It's insanely crowded in here — bad for my nerves, but perfect for Willow to slip away unnoticed.

She squeezes my hand but doesn't say anything. Instead, she bites her lip as she anxiously eyes her boarding pass.

“Made it just in time,” she mumbles, more to herself than to me.

“Do you have everything you need?”

“I think so.”

I linger a little too long, struggling to find the right words to say. I've never been good at this kind of thing. I dislike the awkwardness of goodbyes. There's so much I want to say, but so little time to do it. When I dropped Anna off at college, I left her in her dorm room and that was that.

It's not that I don't care. It's that I care too much.

A part of me wants to tell Willow to stay. I'm sure I can figure out someplace safe for her. I'm in the security business, after all. She'd be far safer with me than on her own in a foreign country. She'll probably think I'm being crazy and overprotective. Maybe I am. Because somewhere deep down, I know this connection between us is nothing short of a miracle. What we have... it's a rare, breathtaking thing.

And it's about to board a flight to halfway across the world.

“If you ever need anything,” I say to her, “just give me a call. You have my number.”

Willow nods, smiling appreciatively as she reaches up to cup my face. “Thank you, Zane,” she says before hopping up on her toes to press a sweet kiss on my lips. “I’ll never forget you.”

Letting her go feels like a mistake. A *massive* mistake.

My body moves before I have the chance to think, my arms circling her slender waist to draw her even closer.

“Stay,” I whisper against her lips.

“Zane—”

“*Stay.*”

“I can’t. You know I can’t.”

“I’ll keep you safe.”

“You’ve already done enough.”

“Whoever’s after you... They’ll have to go through me.”

Willow’s eyes grow misty. “The people who are after me will make your life a living hell.”

“They can try.”

“Leaving you is a mercy, Zane. It’s for your own good as well as mine.”

I dip down to kiss her deeply, our lips slotting in place. Everything about this woman drives me crazy. The softness of her skin, the sweet scent of her floral shampoo, the taste of her strawberry ChapStick... I want every part of her, to hold and savor and claim.

But she is not mine.

She pulls away and my chest hollows out.

“I have to go,” she whispers so quietly I almost don’t hear her final words. “Maybe in another life.”

Willow heads toward security and disappears amidst the crowd.

I remain standing there for a few more minutes, numb from head to toe. After one final breath, I turn on my heels and

leave through the airport's sliding doors.

CHAPTER 12

WILLOW

The voice in the back of my head is screaming. I want to go back. It isn't too late. If I run, I can probably still catch Zane and take him up on his offer.

"Shoes and jacket off, please," the TSA officer says to me when I get to the front of the line.

I pause. It isn't too late. It isn't. I could turn around right now—and I'm aware how suspicious that might look, but I don't care—I could probably throw myself into the back of Zane's car before he drives off.

"Ma'am," the TSA officer says tersely. "Shoes and jacket off."

Reluctantly, I bend over to untie my shoelaces. My heart thuds loudly in my chest. I can't explain this awful twist in my guts. I've only known Zane for a little under a week, yet three minutes without him and I'm an anxious mess. I *miss* him. His warmth, the sound of his voice, the safety of his arms.

"Ma'am, come with me."

I look up. Another TSA officer is standing in front of me. "Is something wrong? I was just about to step through."

"We would like to ask you a couple of questions."

"Why?" I ask sharply.

"It's a random check, ma'am. Totally routine. Please, come this way."

My stomach flips. It's not like I have a choice, now do I? If I make a scene, I'll probably end up detained and miss my flight. "Fine," I grumble, snatching up my things.

I'm escorted to a side room at the very end of a long, narrow hall. The fluorescent lighting above hurts my eyes, and the dull white color of the tiles, floors, and ceilings makes the whole place feel distant and clinical. The officer shows me to a room with a single metal table and chair, both of which are bolted to the floor—probably for safety.

"I need your passport and boarding pass, ma'am," the officer says.

I frown. "Why?"

"Standard procedure."

"Is it?"

"Ma'am, you can either give them to me or I will have them confiscated. The choice is yours."

The alarm bells in the back of my head blare. Something isn't right. It should have been smooth sailing. Is there something wrong with the passport Zane gave me? Or maybe the airline has a few questions about my last-minute ticket? Either way, I'm an animal backed into a corner and I'm *this* close to lashing out.

Freedom is on the tip of my tongue. I just need to get on that damn plane.

With a huff, I shove my passport and boarding pass into the officer's hand. He smirks before leaving the room, shutting the door harshly.

My claustrophobia sets in. I do *not* want to be here. The room is way too small and stuffy, and although I haven't been restrained, it *feels* like I have. The officer knows I can't very well catch my flight now that he has my documents.

I pace back and forth along the back wall, biting my nails and reminding myself to not hyperventilate. There's no clock in here, probably on purpose. I can't tell if a couple minutes have passed or a whole hour. What the hell is taking so long?

The next time the door opens, I get my answer.

I hear him before I see him. The *click click click* of his cane sends a chill shrieking down my spine. I'd know that sound anywhere. When my father steps into the room, I'm surprised and mortified.

"Hello, my daughter," Arturo Allegra says.

There is no light in his dark blue eyes, no hint of a smile on his thin lips. He's pushing sixty, but he's still built like an ox. I know for a fact the cane is for show. Growing up, I learned to fear the whip of his cane whenever I so much as *inched* over the line of what he thought was acceptable behavior for a young cartel princess.

My heart lodges in my throat. "*No.*"

"You have upset me greatly, my dear," he says without a hint of emotion. That's how I know he's telling the truth. My father has never been the kind of man to wear his heart on his sleeves. Through anger, sadness, happiness... He'll never show you what he's thinking.

Until he snaps—and then it's too late.

"I'm not going back," I rasp, traitorous tears streaking down my cheeks. "You can't make me go back."

My father pulls out my fake passport and flips to the first page. "Where did you get this? Tell me, Willow."

I shake my head. No way in hell I'm giving Zane up. Doing so would ensure his death sentence.

Arturo pulls out my boarding pass next. His dead eyes scan over the information. "England, eh? Did you really think that would work for you? I have contacts all over the world, my dear, as does Esteban."

"Fuck Esteban!" I seethe. "I'm not marrying that monster."

"My patience with you is growing thin, Willow. You can either come back of your own free will, or I will drag you back by your hair myself."

I snort. “You? Oh, please. When was the last time you bothered to do the dirty work yourself?”

My father frowns, his overall composure still and statuesque. “You have a point. I’m far above getting my hands dirty.” He bangs the bottom of his cane on the tile floor twice, summoning a group of four armed guards from the hall. “Bring her,” my father orders. “Try not to damage the merchandise.”

“No!” I scream as they come for me.

I’m surrounded on all sides. There’s no escape. I know resistance is futile, but I’m not letting them take me without a fight.

I kick and I punch and I scratch. I scream and scream and scream. I’m pretty sure I bite someone, but I’m so blind with rage and helplessness, there’s a good chance I imagined it. I’m tossed over someone’s beefy shoulder, but I continue to flail and beat his back and claw at his neck with my nails.

“Please!” I whimper. “Please, don’t do this! I don’t want to marry him!”

My father looks at me without a hint of sympathy. “You’ve always had Liana’s fiery spirit, Willow. I admire that about you—”

I spit in his direction. “Leave my mother’s name out of your fucking mouth!”

“—but one day you’ll learn this is your only choice. You will have a good life, Willow. You’ll be given a house to call your own, plenty of food and clothes and jewelry—”

“I don’t *want* any of those things!”

“You will. You will, because at the end of the day, we’re your family. Family is all you have left.” Arturo snaps his fingers. “Knock her out. Let’s get her out of here quickly.”

“Don’t you fucking da—”

I feel something sharp jab into my arm. I’m vaguely aware that I’m being transported somewhere.

I have only one thought as exhaustion drags me under.

Zane.

CHAPTER 13

One Month Later

My father has tripled the amount of security around the compound. Three times as many armed guards, three times as many guard dogs, three times as much scrutiny. I'm not even allowed to cross the hall to go to the bathroom by myself. One of the maids has to come with me and stand by the door to make sure I'm not up to any funny business.

What little sliver of trust there was between my father and me is now gone—pulverized to bits.

I spend most of my days in my room, staring out the window. Bars cover the glass. My father had them installed while I was in Vegas. They obstruct my view of the sky.

He sits across from me, a piece of paper in hand. His expression is blank, but the pulsing at his temple is a dead giveaway of the fury just beneath the surface.

“Just fucking tell me,” he grumbles for the umpteenth time.

I say nothing, too tired and too stunned.

“Who is he?” my father growls. “Tell me his name. I'll have him shot in the street.”

Marianne, bless her soul, makes the mistake of entering the room with a tray full of sandwiches and tea. “E-excuse me, sir. It's t-time for lunch.”

My father rises, swiping his cane down onto the tray. The clatter of metal against the hardwood is louder than thunder.

Bread, ham, cheese, lettuce, and tea flies everywhere as Marianne yelps, stepping back in fear.

“This is no time for lunch!” he hisses.

Marianne nods, scurrying out of the room. “Y-yes, sir. Sorry, sir!”

I exhale slowly, surprisingly calm. “I don’t know why you’re so adamant about finding him. It’s been a month. Let it go.”

My father points the sharp end of his cane at me. “You managed to evade me for a week, Willow. I need to know the name of the fucker who helped you so I can put him in the ground.”

“I don’t know,” I lie. “I had a right old time in Vegas, you see. Plenty of drinks and parties. I was eager to celebrate finally escaping your clutches.”

“You little—”

“Enough.”

Esteban steps into my room without knocking. He’s a tall man with broad shoulders and wide chest. He has a crooked nose that’s clearly been broken several times and healed incorrectly. His hair is dark brown and caked with way too much gel. He wears a white shirt tucked into dark blue jeans and a golden bolo tie hanging around his neck. A toothpick sticks out from the corner of his lips, tucked between one of his fake golden teeth—he has four on the top row.

“You need to learn to relax, old friend,” Esteban says coolly. “Smoke some weed or something.”

I fight the urge to roll my eyes. This fucking guy.

“I will get to the bottom of this,” my father assures us both. “My private investigators will find the truth soon enough.”

Esteban smiles at me. It makes my skin crawl. “Oh, I’m sure it’ll all work out. Yes, *mi amor*?”

I turn in my seat and face the window. I'd rather stare at the bars than at his ugly mug. While my father's nostrils flare, Esteban only chuckles. He plucks his toothpick from his teeth and points at me with a smile.

"I like you, *mi amor*. You've got spunk. Remind me to sleep with one eye open."

My father frowns, but there's no denying the hopefulness in his voice. "Does this mean you still want to marry her?"

Esteban leans casually against my bedroom wall. "Well, we both knew going into this that the marriage was for strategic purposes. I'd forgive your debts, and in return you'd give me control of the Allegra racket."

"And I'm the chess piece being used to seal the deal," I mutter bitterly to myself. Both men ignore me.

"I don't mind that she ran off and had a little fun," Esteban continues. "I see it as a good thing. Let her get it out of her system before we marry. She won't be allowed such a vacation once I've put a baby in her."

I shoot him a glare over my shoulder. "Excuse me?"

"I need an heir," Esteban says simply, looking at me as if I'm not the brightest. "*Princesa*, don't tell me your sweet virgin ass doesn't know where babies come from. You think I'm marrying you for your snark?"

I want to vomit. The thought of Esteban coming anywhere near me makes my skin crawl. "Touch me and I'll cut your dick off," I hiss.

He laughs, but this time there's no humor in it. His eyes, cold and dark, don't leave mine. "I need a son to raise, one who will eventually take my place. Don't make this more complicated than it needs to be, sweetheart. It's just business."

I stare at him, barely able to hear over the rush of blood past my ears.

I've contemplated trying to escape again, but I'm starting to feel like a beaten animal. There's no hope for me. If I run, my father or Esteban will have me dragged back or killed. I'm

tired of fighting. At least if I'm stuck inside my cage, I'll get three square meals a day and maybe live to a ripe old age where nobody pays me any attention anymore.

But what happens if I do get pregnant? The thought of Esteban raising my child to follow in his footsteps makes me nauseous. I've always loved the idea of having children of my own, but condemning them to a life in the cartel? What if my child grows up to be just like my father, or worse, Esteban—cruel, unfeeling, dangerous?

My options are limited.

Right now, I need to deal with one problem at a time. I need to keep myself safe and worry about the rest later.

“Get out of my room,” I murmur. “I want to take a nap.”

Esteban chuckles, sticking his toothpick back in place. “You're forgetting who I am. I own this house, the same way I own you.”

“Go fuck yourself.”

Esteban pulls a pack of cigarettes out of his pocket and lights up on the spot. The smoke makes my nose burn and my throat terribly dry. “Enough business for today,” he says. “Come downstairs, *mi amor*.”

“Why?” I grumble.

“Because I want to spend time with my lovely fiancé.”

“I'd rather eat nails.”

“Are you going to be this difficult when we're married?”

“Yes.”

Esteban smirks. “Good. I like a challenge. Now, come.” He holds out his hand, beckoning with a curl of his finger. When I don't move immediately, his snaps twice. “I don't have all day. I'd rather not throw you over my shoulder.”

My lip curls into a sneer. “Put the damn cigarette out. I don't want to breathe in your secondhand smoke.”

Esteban watches me like a bird of prey, sizing me up from his side of the room. “My mother smoked three packs a day while she was carrying me.”

“Is that why your face looks like that?” I ask flatly.

My father bangs his cane on the floor. “Willow, I swear to God, you’d better start showing him some respect.”

“Or *what?*”

Esteban laughs, a low but loud sound that hurts my ears. I have no idea why he’s so amused. Maybe he’s insane—most of these high-ranking cartel members are. “Alright, *mi amor*, alright. I’ll put it out.” He snubs the cigarette out on the doorjamb, leaving the butt on the floor for a servant to clean. He winks at me and says flirtatiously, “Damn, you’re mean. It’s a fucking turn on.”

I shudder. “Gross.”

He turns and starts out the door. “I want to introduce you to someone. I might put up with your attitude, but you will not disrespect my guests.” He snaps his fingers at me again like I’m a dog expected to heel. “Now, *mi amor*.”

I’m tempted to remain exactly where I am, but I’m so tired of fighting. All I want to do is shut my brain off. I can’t win this battle. It’s easier, doing what I’m told even though I hate every minute of it. I’m burnt out, running on fumes.

Esteban offers me his hand at the top of the stairs. I stare at it for several seconds before reluctantly taking it. He’s playing the part of a gentleman right now, which I suppose is leagues better than anything else. Behind us, my father closely follows, along with a whole team of guards.

“Who are we meeting?” I grumble as we descend the steps together.

“I’ve gotten you a gift,” Esteban says. “A team of highly trained bodyguards.”

I roll my eyes. “That’s not a gift.”

“Once we get married—officially, this time—I want you to be safe. I protect what’s mine, you see, and that means hiring

the best of the best.”

Mine.

A chill races down my back. Is this really what my life has become? I am property to be passed around and nothing more.

We reach the bottom of the stairs together. Waiting in the main lobby, I spot three men in fitted black suits. They look far more official than the other guards around the compound—serious and professional and built like tanks...

And very, *very* familiar.

“Willow,” Esteban says, gesturing to the men. “These gentlemen are from Phillips Security. They’re ex-Navy SEALs. They’re perfect for protecting a valuable asset.”

I choke at the term, then my heart leaps into my throat.

Oh.

Oh, God.

“This one is Knox,” Esteban continues. “This is Heath. And this big guy here is... Sorry, I forgot your name.”

The third bodyguard steps forward. I’d know the shape of him in a crowd. I’d know the scent of his woody cologne even in the dark. I’d know those deep green eyes from a mile away.

He sticks his hand out to shake mine.

“Zane Phillips,” he says evenly, “at your service.”

CHAPTER 14

What.
The.

Fuck.

This was not how I was expecting the day to go, and now I'm thrown for a loop. When Willow descended the stairs, I thought for sure I was dreaming. *What the hell is she doing here?* I saw her to the airport myself. She should be in England, not on the arm of Esteban Becerra, the leader of the Becerra Cartel.

It takes all my strength not to go to her, not to react. I don't need my new client knowing about our history. That wouldn't bode well for either of us.

Willow shakes my hand, her fingers trembling, her face even, her tone level. "Willow Allegra," she says. "Nice to meet you."

I see the fear in her eyes. The confusion. The *desperation*.

My brothers and I did our due diligence when we received an offer of employment from Becerra shortly before Christmas. It was an easy enough task to dig up all sorts of information on him. We knew of his history, of his criminal ties. Maybe Knox was right to question bringing him on as a client. The only reason Heath and I voted on taking the contract was because we were told we'd only be protecting Becerra's wife—far from any kind of criminal activity. I just didn't expect Becerra's wife to be...

“I’m going to be out of the country for a few months for work,” Esteban explains, interrupting my train of thought. “I’ll be taking most of my guards with me to deal with a little... *problem* down in Mexico.”

Willow gives him a pointed glare. “You’re leaving me with them?”

He lays a hand on her shoulder, squeezes harder than necessary, and nods. I grind my teeth. My blood boils at the sight. He’s being way too fucking rough.

“Yes, *mi amor*,” he replies, barely giving her a glance.

“I don’t need bodyguards,” she mutters under her breath.

“That’s not up to you.”

I clench my jaw so hard my molars squeak. This man is insufferable.

“No, after your adventures, shall we call them,” he says condescendingly, “I’m afraid I can only trust the best of the best to keep an eye on you.”

“So they’re my jailers,” she snaps.

“Jailers... Protectors... You can call them whatever you’d like, *mi amor*. Either way, they’ll be with you around the clock.”

Willow presses her lips into a thin line. Every fiber of my being burns to go to her, wrap her in my arms. I can’t believe she’s here. I’m equal parts relieved to see her again and infuriated that it had to be here of all places.

Esteban dips down to kiss Willow’s cheek. I don’t miss the way she cringes. “Go back upstairs, sweetheart. I need to show your bodyguards around the compound.”

Willow nods, casting her eyes to the floor. She’s doing a very good job of pretending not to know us. Probably for the best.

Esteban walks forward with a chuckle, clapping me on the shoulder. “Was the drive okay? I know traffic in LA can be a real bitch.”

“The drive was fine,” Knox says flatly. I can hear the tension in his voice. He probably realizes the predicament we’re in.

“Shall I show you around? The pool and gardens are spectacular,” Esteban continues with a wolfish grin. He walks off without waiting for our reply. It’s clear he’s the kind of man who does what he wants, when he wants.

I already have a general sense of the house thanks to the blueprints provided by Esteban’s people. It’s a part of our due diligence to make sure we understand every nook and cranny of our principle’s primary residence. We need to know the location of every window, every door, and every corner to provide the best protection detail we have to offer.

But this isn’t just a house.

It’s a damn fortress.

Hundreds of rooms, half as many baths, and several recreational areas sprinkled about. I take note of all the security cameras, the armed guards, and the barbed wire fences around the perimeter of the property. There’s even a team of oscillating patrolmen with guard dogs at the end of their leashes doing rounds around the clock.

From a security standpoint, there’s no way in hell anyone can force their way in.

But there’s also no way to force their way out, either.

“Beautiful room, yes?” Esteban says with pride as we walk into a massive atrium. The swimming pool spans several lanes, a hot tub just off to the side. The ceiling is actually one massive skylight, the daytime rays shining in and warming the chlorine-heavy air. “My wife-to-be will probably ask to go swimming, but you must be firm and tell her no.”

Beside me, Heath frowns. “Why’s that?”

“She’s tried drowning herself more than once,” Esteban says carelessly.

I clench my fists. “Is that true?”

Esteban glances at me, dead eyes staring at me. “Willow’s *loca*, makes poor decisions. A flight risk, to be honest. I need the three of you watching her at all times until I get back from Mexico. Once I’m finished with business, we’ll hold the wedding. Again.”

My stomach cramps. This whole situation is so fucked up. Esteban seems to be exaggerating, but the thought of Willow harming herself to escape this place lingers in the back of my mind.

“Is there anything else we should know?” I ask him.

“She’s manipulative,” he says. “She’s a beauty, my fiancé, but she ran off last month and had herself a good time in Vegas.”

Esteban smiles. It doesn’t look quite right, like a snake whose skin is pulled uncomfortably tight. The blankness of his eyes creeps me out. Beneath his politeness is something dark, ugly, and twisted—dangerous and unhinged.

“Would you like to see the dogs?” he asks. “I’ve hired a dog trainer from San Antonio. He trained all my dogs to attack with the sound of a whistle.”

“That’s alright,” I say. “I’m sure we’ll become acquainted with the guard dogs soon enough.”

Heath pulls out a notepad. “What does Ms. Allegra’s schedule usually look like? My brothers and I will do our best to plan around her day.”

Esteban pulls a cigarette out of his pocket and lights up, taking a heavy drag. “She spends most of her days complaining. Then crying and screaming. Her father doesn’t let her out of her room anymore. Because she can’t be trusted.”

Anger licks at the nape of my neck. I really want to put this man in the ground, but I can’t do that without jeopardizing our safety. How dare they treat Willow this way. A sane man in my position would tear up our contract on the spot. This isn’t the kind of work Phillips Security was created for.

Willow was right—we *are* her jailers. But if we stay on, I can keep her safe and try to find a way to get her out.

“You’ll have full access to the place,” Esteban continues. “*Mi casa es su casa.*”

“That’s very generous of you, Mr. Becerra,” Knox says, except he doesn’t sound the slightest bit thankful.

“Now, if you’ll excuse me, I have to get packed. I have a long flight.”

Esteban wanders off, humming to himself while he smokes his cigarette. His voice eventually fades into the distance, his form disappearing from view.

Knox and Heath are beside me in an instant.

“Dude,” Heath whispers. “Dude, what the fuck?”

“I *knew* we shouldn’t have taken this job,” Knox grumbles under his breath. “What do we do? It isn’t too late to pull out.”

I shake my head. “We do what we were hired to do—*protect her*. This changes nothing, do you understand me?”

Knox crosses his arms. “Look, I don’t know what the two of you got up to in Vegas, but we can’t afford for you to let your personal feelings get in the way of seeing clearly.”

“I *am* seeing clearly. If we pull out of this contract, Becerra will start asking questions and that may very well harm Willow. We’re professionals. We’re going to stay and do our jobs and try to get her out.”

Knox squints at me, clearly not buying what I’m selling.

Heath slaps our youngest brother on the shoulder. “Think of it this way—do we really want to decline our first ever client? How bad will that look on our company’s reputation? It took months for us to set this contract up. If we back out now, who knows how long it’ll take to find someone else willing to hire us.”

Knox grinds his teeth, appearing to mull things over. After a few moments, he huffs. “If this ends up biting us in the ass...”

“It won’t,” I assure. “Now get to work. Go through our usual perimeter checks.”

“And what are *you* doing,” Heath asks me without his usual chipper air.

“To get answers,” is my terse reply.

CHAPTER 15

WILLOW

I hear him coming before I see him, the heavy footfalls of his shoes against the floors echoing in my ear. When Zane steps into my room, I rise from my seat and suck in a sharp breath.

“Don’t come too close,” I tell him, my heart racing in my chest.

“Why?”

“They have cameras.”

“What about mics?”

I shake my head slightly. “No, no mics. But we should still speak quietly. There’s no telling who might be listening in the hall.”

His jaw tightens, his eyes trained on me. “I thought you got away,” he murmurs.

“They nabbed me at the airport. My father bribed security to bring me in.”

I take in the sight of him, just as mesmerized as the first time. He is a force of nature, standing there like a brewing hurricane I can’t bring myself to look away from. Even from my side of the room, I can see how hard he’s trying to keep it together—not just for his sake, but for mine.

“Did they hurt you?” he asks, his tone dark and low.

“No. No, I’m fine, Zane.”

“This is the furthest thing from fine.”

“It is what it is,” I mumble with a shrug. “So, you’re... What? My bodyguard now? I mean, officially.”

“It looks that way.”

“Zane, there’s something you need to know—”

The *click click click* of my father’s cane immediately silences me. Arturo appears, standing by the door but refusing to take a step inside. I feel very much like an animal at the zoo, while the invisible line between us is the fence that keeps us separated.

“You are not to let her out of her sight,” he says to Zane. “She’s a slippery one, my daughter.”

Zane is as stiff as a tree. “Is that so?”

“All of her meals will be eaten in her room,” my father goes on. “She is not allowed any visitors who I have not pre-approved, nor is she allowed to make any phone calls. She’s not to go outside, either.”

“Not even if she’s escorted?”

“No. She’d find a way to escape. Best not chance it.” My father reaches into the inside pocket of his suit jacket and pulls out a wad of cash. It’s difficult for me to say exactly how much it is, but I can tell by the thickness that it’s *a lot*. “A little signing bonus,” my father says under his breath. “If she so much as sneezes, I want you to report it to me. Understand?”

Zane takes the money, albeit while grinding his teeth. “I understand.”

My father gives me one last pointed look before retreating, the sound of that damn cane following him as he retires to his wing of the compound. He has an entire four floors all to himself while I’m relegated to this single corner room. I used to have a lovely view of the sky before he ordered the guards to install the bars. Maybe if I concentrate hard enough, I can pretend they aren’t there.

I watch Zane carefully, ignoring the queasiness in the pit of my stomach. Can I trust him now that he’s on my father’s and Esteban’s payroll? Vegas was different. We didn’t know each

other, didn't have ulterior motives to worry about. But now that Zane is officially an employee, who's to say where his loyalties lie? Sure, we have a connection, but it's like they say: money talks.

"You said there was something I needed to know," he says carefully.

I bite the tip of my tongue. I need to warn him about the private investigator my father hired. If Arturo discovers Zane helped me in Vegas...

I'm about to bring it up, but then I think against it, recalling my father's threats of violence. This is a dangerous situation for both of us. I curse my bad luck for bringing Zane back to me. If the truth comes out, my father will have Zane—and maybe even his brothers—put down like dogs.

But if I *do* tell him, there's no telling how Zane might react. I may very well find myself in the middle of an all-out war.

"It's nothing," I murmur. "You probably shouldn't linger too long."

He lingers anyway. I'm kind of glad he does. I have to fight my instincts to keep from running to him. I can't believe how much I've missed him this past month. I genuinely thought I'd never see him again, and now that he's here, all I want is for him to hold me and tell me everything is going to be okay.

Our situation is a ticking time bomb.

I don't want to know what happens when our time runs out.

"I've been instructed not to let you out of my sight," he says. It doesn't sound nearly as threatening when the words come out of his mouth. Zane sounds almost sad for me.

"Then pull up a chair," I tell him. "You're probably going to be really bored from here on out. I'm not allowed to do much."

"They make you sit here all day? Your father and fiancé."

“My punishment,” I say flippantly, “for running away.” I glance at him. “Don’t give me that look. It could be a lot worse.”

Zane’s eyes grow impossibly dark. “I’m going to get you out of here.”

My gut instinct makes me think this is some sort of test, a setup designed by my father to trick me. Trust cannot exist in this prison they’ve created. But if anybody can help me, it’s Zane. My previous escape attempt aside, of course.

“Esteban Becerra,” he says slowly. “That’s who you were supposed to marry?”

“Still have to,” I say, taking a seat by the window. I make sure to keep my back to the camera installed in the right-hand corner of my room. The last thing I want is anyone on Esteban’s team to read my lips—not that I think they’re clever enough to do so, but you never know.

Zane is quiet for a long time. So am I. What is there to say?

“You won’t get any trouble from me,” I whisper after a while.

“That’s disappointing to hear.”

I arch a curious brow at him. “Is it?”

“The girl I met in Vegas had trouble written all over her.”

“Yeah, well... That girl’s dead and gone.”

“I disagree. She’s still in there somewhere.”

“What makes you so sure?”

“Because I know you, darling.”

Darling.

A warm shiver races down my back. Even after a month, hearing him call me that makes my heart skip and the butterflies in my stomach flutter.

I shake my head, every ounce exhausted and frustrated and defeated.

“I’m going to get you out of here,” he says again resolutely.

“No, you’re not. I know there’s nowhere in the world I can hope to go without Esteban or my father dragging me back.”

“Do you want to marry him?”

I shoot Zane a glare. “Of course not.”

“Do you want to remain trapped here for the rest of your life?”

“*No.*”

“You’re my principle now, Willow. Your wellbeing is my priority. As your bodyguard, I will protect you. Even from your family.”

“At the risk of death?” I challenge. “The Becerra Cartel is no joke, Zane. If they find out you’re trying to help me... If they find out who you are to me, they’ll kill you on the spot.”

“They can try.”

My heart thuds loudly in my chest. He sounds so confident, so sure in his convictions, it’s easy to be swept up in the excitement of it. Do I dare let myself hope? I’ve had my dreams dashed once before. I don’t know if I could survive another close call.

“What if they find me again?” I whisper.

“I have a better picture of what I’m up against now,” he says simply. “You wouldn’t tell me who was after you, but now I know what to expect. I can plan accordingly and get you out of here.”

“When?”

“Soon.”

“What about your brothers?” I ask. “Can they be trusted?”

“I trust Heath and Knox with my life, Willow. I’ll get them on board. For now, we go about our days like we don’t know each other. We’re just a cartel princess and her bodyguard.”

“I’m not a cartel princess,” I grumble, a warning.

“Be that as it may,” Zane says as he stands up straight. “Give me a little time to do some digging. I have access to schedules and security rotations. Second time’s the charm, right?”

“I don’t think that’s the saying.”

The smile he gives me is tight, but there’s no denying the warmth behind his eyes. I can tell how much he wants to close the space between us by the way he leans slightly forward. Even *I’m* having a tough time staying on my side of the room. If it weren’t for the damn cameras, I’d be wrapped in his arms in the blink of an eye.

“Be patient, darling.”

“Believe me, it’s not like I’m going anywhere,” I say dryly.

A soft knock at my door announces Marianne’s arrival. She’s returned with a new silver platter full of sandwiches and a small bowl of soup. She ignores Zane much like she does the rest of the guards around the compound and joins me.

“You must eat,” she says sweetly. “I snuck you a little extra.”

“Thank you,” I say. “Leave the food with me. That’ll be all, Marianne.”

Marianne gives me a mousey little nod before scurrying off.

“Would you like to eat alone?” Zane asks me.

“I thought you weren’t allowed to let me out of your sight.”

“Something tells me they’ve been breathing down your neck since the airport. I thought you might appreciate a little privacy.”

Now that I think about it, Zane has a point. I can’t remember the last time I was allowed a moment to myself. It’s not like I mind Zane’s company, but it might be nice to have a few minutes to just *be*.

“Actually, that might be nice,” I mumble. “Thank you, Zane.”

He nods once before turning to head out into the hall. Before he disappears, he stops to browse through my shelf full of books. There isn't a lot of variety, the majority of novels coming from my father's personal collection. Arturo doesn't like me reading new titles without his express approval. *Who knows what ideas they might put in your head*, he always says.

Zane plucks a hardcover off the shelf and reads the title aloud. “*Love's Labour's Lost* by Shakespeare.”

“One of my favorite plays,” I reply. “It's the only thing there that's even mildly entertaining.”

“Are you a big fan of English literature?”

“Yes. I mean, I was. When I was a little girl, I used to dream of becoming a playwright.”

“And now?”

I give him a sad smile. “Now I dream of the day I'll be allowed to go for walks outside or swim laps in the pool. I know it doesn't sound like much of a luxury, but it is...”

“Esteban told me not to let you in the pool. He said you tried to drown yourself?”

I scoff. “Everything out of that man's mouth is a lie. Don't ever make the mistake of believing him.”

Zane presses his lips into a thin line. I don't like how upset he is on my behalf, but there *is* something oddly sexy seeing him brood like this. He takes a deep breath and nods just once. “Enjoy your dinner, Willow.”

When he stalks off, I quietly pray he doesn't do anything stupid.

CHAPTER 16

I want to do something stupid.
And violent.

But I can't. Not without putting Willow at risk. Now that I'm her bodyguard in an official capacity, I can't afford to let my emotions get the better of me. I need my mind clear and alert. I could storm in guns blazing and whisk her away, but the thing about dangerous men like Esteban and Arturo is that they're not singular entities. If I lay a finger on either of them, I'll have to face the entire cartel.

I meet up with my brothers downstairs in an office-turned-surveillance room. At least ten different monitors are set up, all playing live feeds from cameras stationed throughout the compound. My sights immediately zone in on the cameras in Willow's room. She really *is* being watched at all hours of the day.

I take a deep breath and ignore the rush of blood past my ears. She's like an animal in a goddamn zoo.

"Well?" Heath says. "How's your Juliet doing, Romeo?"

"Shut up," I grumble.

"Not great. Gotcha."

Knox crosses his arms, studying monitors. "When Esteban returns from his trip, we'll hand in our resignation."

"Who died and made you king, little brother?" I ask, gripping the back of the office chair he's seated in.

“Working for that man is a bad idea, Zane. You’re right, though. We can’t just quit today. That’d look too damn suspicious *and* be bad for our reputation.”

Heath frowns. “Think about the poor girl.”

“Why the hell would I?” Knox mutters.

“She’s the victim in all this.”

“Look, I feel bad for her. I really do, but I’m trying to be logical about this. This is a matter for the police.”

I snort. “The police won’t do shit. The Becerra Cartel has had their hands in the LAPD’s pocket for years.”

“Then what do we do?” Heath asks.

“Remember Operation Falcon?”

“The hostage situation we were in charge of?” Knox turns in his seat to look at me. “You can’t be serious. These two cases are nothing alike.”

“They’re completely alike,” I say firmly.

“We were dealing with a terrorist cell,” Knox argues.

Heath shrugs. “Terrorist cell, drug cartel...”

“We had months of intel and weeks of preparation,” our youngest brother continues.

“So we stay for a little while,” I retort. “Gather information and prepare.”

“Zane, this is crazy.”

“Would you rather leave Willow here? How can you, in good conscience, leave that poor woman to rot at the hands of her captors?”

I can practically hear the gears grinding inside Knox’s skull. On the outside, my brother is a cynical man. Gruff and blunt and boorish. But deep down, I know he has a good heart.

“Things have changed,” I say in a low tone. “Now we roll with the punches. We have a new objective, and that’s to get Willow to safety. You’re either in or you’re out. If you’re out,

you can leave now and we won't speak of it again, but *I* am going to help her. With or without you."

Knox grinds his teeth. "Why are you so loyal to her? You shared a week together in Vegas. Was it really life changing?"

"Are you in or are you out?" I ask, ignoring his weak jabs. "I need to know if I'm going to plan a rescue operation with two men or with three."

Knox is quiet for a long time. Heath is similarly silent. Nothing but the electric hum of the monitors and the whir of the computer fans sitting just beneath the desk can be heard. Outside in the hall, I can hear the steady march of patrolmen keeping an eye on the perimeter. We're not in the right place, nor do we have enough time to waste on drawn-out decision making.

My youngest brother stands and faces me, his shoulders square and his chest high and proud. "I'm out."

Heath crosses his arms. "Dude, come on."

"This isn't what I signed up for. I'm sorry, but I can't watch you take on the fucking cartel for the sake of one person." He paused to look at each of us. "You have to see where I'm coming from here. This is our lives on the line, our business."

"We're fucking *bodyguards*," Heath snaps, frustration dripping from his every word. His reaction takes me by surprise. He's normally so nonchalant about things that seeing him get riled up like this is rarer than a blue moon. "It's literally our job."

"To protect, yes. But what you're proposing—it's suicide. I'm sorry, Zane. But I'm out."

I swallow my feelings.

Am I disappointed? Of course.

Am I surprised? Not even a little bit.

"Then return to the office," I tell him without a hint of malice or frustration. "You'll continue to be paid what you

would have working this contract. We'll make up an excuse as to why you're not here. I'm not going to force you to stay."

Knox sighs. "There's really no changing your mind, is there?"

"No."

"Heath? Are you coming with me or sticking with him?"

"I'm staying. Sorry, lil' bro."

Knox shakes his head disapprovingly. "I hope that woman's worth it."

"It's not about worth, little brother," I tell him. "It's about doing the right thing. But yes. She is."

"I'm going back to LA. Try not to get yourselves killed."

I'm used to Knox's tantrums. Ever since we were young boys, he's had a short fuse and a sharp way with his words. The thing is—I can totally see where he's coming from. He's not wrong to think about our own wellbeing. We've spent a long time building this business, getting our feet wet... But I can't just sit idly by when someone's in need. My fling with Willow aside, my gut tells me to do the right thing, and that means figuring out a way to break her out of here once and for all.

"What do you need me to do?" Heath asks over the hum of the monitors.

"I need information. We have a profile on Esteban Becerra already, but now I need one for Arturo Allegra. I need their itineraries, who they're meeting, everything. You know the drill. I want no stone left unturned."

"Copy that," my brother says as he cracks his knuckles. "It could take some time, though."

"That's fine. We need to move slowly and cautiously. We can't afford to raise any alarms."

"And in the meantime?"

"We do our jobs," I say simply.

CHAPTER 17

WILLOW

I have a shadow.

You'd think I'd be used to having yet another pair of eyes on me, having grown up with guards all around, but Zane is different. I'm always aware of his presence. Looming, just out of my peripheral.

We don't get to say a lot to each other the first week. Too many people around. My father has taken to conducting his business in the same room as me, sending important emails and making urgent phone calls within arm's reach. He's tense. More than usual, but I have no idea why. Probably something to do with cartel business, but it's not like he's going to trust me with any of that info.

We're in the sitting room downstairs today. I know it's only three floors down, but the change of scenery is a breath of fresh air to me. I was starting to worry I'd go crazy, locked up in my room forever. While my father angrily yells at someone in rapid-fire Spanish, I sit there quietly with my needlework—because my father apparently thinks we live in the 18th century—my mind busy cooking up schemes.

I might have been caught, but I'm nowhere close to admitting defeat. I admit to my depression and sense of hopelessness before, but now that Zane is here, a small spark of hope burns softly in my chest. I have a chance—slim as it may be—of getting out of here alive. With his resources and my determination, freedom could very well be around the corner. For now, I bide my time.

“We can’t spare any more men,” my father hisses into his phone’s receiver. “Esteban, you know I’d follow you to hell and back, but an all-out war with Marrones?”

My ears burn, but I do my best not to react. A war with the Marrones? Interesting...

My father rarely discusses the business side of cartel life in front of me, but I’ve known about the Marrones Family since I was a little girl. In many ways, they were my version of the boogeyman. My father used to warn me that if I ever misbehaved, the Marrones would come in the middle of the night to take me away and hold me for ransom. Sometimes he would threaten to not pay for my safe return.

The Becerra and Marrones Cartels have been at each other’s throats for decades, their feud going back well before I was even born. They’ve been fighting for control over most of South America and Mexico, and only recently managed to get a foothold in the States. From what I’ve been able to gather, their histories have often been bloody ones. They’ve managed to find a temporary peace but judging by the pulsing vein in my father’s temple, things might be taking a turn for the worse.

“Look, Esteban, I understand they took that territory from your grandfather, but is now really the best time? No, I—I don’t need to smoke weed, *cabrón!*”

I hold back a snicker, keeping my eyes on the flower I’m attempting to embroider. Out of the corner of my eye, I see Zane shift his weight slightly. He’s so still I sometimes forget he’s there to begin with. He’s a fly on the wall, no doubt listening with as much interest as I am.

My father rises from his seat with a huff, phone pressed so hard to his ear I’m convinced he might leave a print of the screen on his cheek. “I will see what I can do,” he says. With a free hand, he snaps his fingers at Zane before promptly pointing at me: a silent signal to keep an eye on me—not that Zane needs to be reminded. My father leaves the room, grumbling under his breath as Esteban no doubt talks his ear off.

Now it's just him and me.

"That's very pretty," he says to me.

I roll my eyes. "Really? Every time I look at it, I want to poke my eyes out with my needle."

"Please don't," Zane replies lightly. "I wouldn't be able to look at those beautiful baby blues of yours."

I smirk at him. "Seriously? The first thing you've been able to say to me all week and it's a cheesy pickup line?"

He shrugs. "I considered walking over there to kiss you instead, but, you know. The cameras."

I chew on the inside of my cheek, my heart skipping when he takes a single step closer. I've been fixating on the smell of his cologne, soothed by the memories we shared together. When Zane takes another step closer, I have to fight the urge to go to him. It's been hard, having him so close but being unable to do anything about it.

I think about his lips on mine. I want to kiss him, too. I feel very much like a child outside a candy shop, allowed to look but never indulge. Security is still too tight to risk a casual glance his way. It's almost painful not being able to touch him. My skin is feverish and sensitive, the heat between my legs undeniable.

But I cannot have him. Not without consequence.

"Do you think this could be a lead for us?" I ask. "This war."

"Possibly," he says under his breath. He takes another step forward, standing just to the right of my chair. "I'll have Heath look into it some more. It might be the perfect distraction to keep both Arturo and Esteban's attention off you."

"Hooray," I mumble dryly.

Another step forward. Now he's standing just behind me, his gaze warm on the back of my neck. "Patience, Willow," he murmurs. "It's only a matter of time."

I feel the weight of something solid slide onto my lap. When I look down, I'm surprised to find a small hardcover book.

"What's this?" I whisper, my breath hitching. Zane's so *close*.

"You said you like Shakespeare."

I trace my fingers over the cover, admiring the golden lettering and the soft leather. It's a collection of Shakespeare's poems. A giddy warmth blooms in my chest. It's such a simple gift, yet it means the world to me. I'm quick to hide it in my waistband, afraid my father might confiscate it if he finds out.

"Make sure to read page fifty-one," Zane says.

I give him a curious look. "Picked out a favorite sonnet, did you?"

He leans down, his breath whispering past my ear. "I can't wait for the day I can kiss you again."

The *click click click* of my father's cane sounds against the tiles. Zane is gone from my side, returning to his post by the wall as if nothing happened.

Arturo's face is almost purple with rage. "Dammit! Dammit all!"

I force a polite, unassuming smile. "Is everything alright?"

My father glares at me. "I have to head downtown. Very important meeting. You're coming with."

"R-really?" I ask, surprised.

"Don't get any ideas, Willow. I'm not leaving you in this place unattended."

"I wouldn't be unattended. I thought that's what the bodyguard was for." I say this with a vague wave of my hand, pretending Zane is nothing more than another generic face.

"I'm taking zero chances," Arturo snaps. "Hurry up. Phillips, bring the car around."

Zane nods. "Yes, sir."

I'm so excited by the thought of getting to leave the house that I stand far too quickly, the blood rushing straight out of my head. Thankfully, Zane is there to brace my arm, the gentle caress of his fingers sending a shiver down my spine.

"Careful, Ms. Allegra," he says clearly.

"Thank you, Mr. Phillips," I mumble back.

Arturo doesn't think twice about the interaction, too wrapped up in whatever crisis he's dealing with to notice the electricity in the air. My cheeks suddenly feel hot and my skin is too tight. I want Zane to hold more than just my arm. I want his hands all over my body, his fingers in my hair, the press of his hips between my thighs. It's safe to say that my craving for him is getting wildly out of hand.

My father leaves first. "I'll meet you at the car. I need to grab something from my office. Make it snappy."

"Fifty-one," Zane reminds me, a quick whisper in my ear before he escorts me to the garage.

We move with purpose through the long halls. It's just enough distance to give me time to pull out the book Zane gifted me. I obediently turn to page fifty-one and find a small, handwritten note in the margins. It's a message from Zane, his writing neat and in all capitals. I read his brief words twice, peering up at him in confusion.

"Are you serious?" I whisper.

"To help with our plan," he insists. "Trust me, Willow."

"I do."

Zane nods, opening the heavy door that leads straight into the garage.



I'm not going to lie—it feels strange getting to ride around in a car after a whole month of not going anywhere. As stupid as it may seem, I feel very much like a puppy with her nose pressed to the glass as I take in all the sights and sounds and smells of

Los Angeles. I've been so starved for entertainment that every little thing fascinates me, from the faces of all the pedestrians going about their days to the fancy cars stuck in traffic with us to the hustle and bustle of construction sites.

Heath is behind the wheel. Zane sits just in front of me on the passenger side. My father is next to me, complaining the whole ride about how stupid other drivers are being.

"Can't you get us there any faster?" Arturo grumbles. "Can't you take a detour?"

"I'm sorry, Mr. Allegra," Heath replies casually. "All the lanes are jammed."

"What's got you all sweaty?" I ask my father.

Arturo dabs his sleeve against his forehead. He really is sweating buckets next to me. Whatever Esteban said to him over the phone, it's obviously stressing my father out. "I need to make a withdrawal," he mutters. "Move some assets around."

My ears prick. "What kind of assets?"

Arturo frowns, realizing he's said too much already. "Nothing you need to worry about, Willow. Just shut up and sit there."

I swallow the scathing remark on the tip of my tongue and look straight forward, watching the intersection ahead with great interest. The light goes from green to yellow.

When it turns red, I make my move.

The moment the vehicle comes to a stop, my hand flies to the door handle. I whip off my seatbelt and shove the door open, practically throwing myself out onto the street.

"Willow!" Arturo bellows after me. "Willow, get back here!"

I don't hear a word he says. I make a mad dash for the sidewalk, determined to disappear amongst the gawking crowd when—

A strong arm wraps itself around my waist.

“Nice try,” Zane says, throwing me over his shoulder with ease.

I kick and I scream. “Let me go! What do you think you’re doing?”

“My job, darling.”

He forces me back into the car, slamming the door in my face. He climbs in next to me, wedging me between himself and my father just as the light turns green and the car lurches forward.

Arturo looks like he’s two seconds away from having a heart attack. “Didn’t I tell you she was a slippery one?”

Zane nods. “That you did, sir.”

“You’re in a world of trouble, Willow. When I’m done with business downtown, I’ll see to it that you never leave the compound ever again. Well done, Mr. Phillips.”

“Thank you, sir.”

I cast my eyes down and glare at my lap, pretending to sulk. I discreetly press my knee against Zane’s, a silent reassurance.

Everything is going according to plan.

CHAPTER 18

I NEED TO EARN ARTURO'S TRUST.

MAKE A BREAK FOR IT, I WILL CATCH YOU.

I wrote the little note in the margins of the book I gave her.

She played out her instructions perfectly. She was convincing and well-timed, and now I'm one step closer to pulling the wool over her father's eyes. The key to a successful hostage rescue is that the captors never see me coming. The sooner Arturo believes I'm on his side, the sooner I can manipulate the situation into our favor.

Willow will be free and clear before her father even knows what happened.

I wasn't particularly worried about Willow facing harsh punishment considering the fact that she's already being kept prisoner. In the week I've been here, I've noticed Arturo has plenty of harsh words but has not once raised a hand to her.

If he ever did, he'd have to go through me—consequences be damned.

Arturo conducts his business downtown efficiently. It's an in and out situation, and then we're on our way back in under ten minutes. As expected, Willow is confined to her room.

"You," Arturo says, crooking his finger in my direction, "with me."

I look at my brother. "Keep an eye on her."

Heath gives me a mock salute. "You got it."

Arturo guides me into his office. It is far more spacious than Willow's room and three times as gaudy. It's as though I've walked onto the set of *Scarface*, what with his big mahogany desk and over the top accents. There's even a taxidermy tiger posed in the corner of the room. I wouldn't at all be surprised to find lines of coke on the man's desk and a machine gun bolted to the underside.

"Zane, is it?" Arturo asks as he takes a seat in his black leather executive chair.

"Correct, sir."

He studies me from head to toe. It's impossible to tell what he's thinking. For a moment, I'm worried he knows something. Has he figured out I helped Willow in Vegas? Surely I'd be full of holes by now if that were the case. I refuse to be the first to look away. He can stare all he wants, pretend he's the one in control. I may be deep within enemy territory, but I've survived a lot worse than a mean old man with a chilling glare.

"Tell me about yourself," he says finally. Something in his tone tells me he isn't being friendly so much as getting a feel for me.

"What would you like to know, sir?"

"Are you married?"

"I was."

"Any kids of your own?"

A flicker of annoyance licks at the nape of my neck. I don't ever want to bring Anna up in conversation, especially with a cartel member. Who knows what he might be saving this information for? But if I *lie*...

"I have a daughter," I say slowly, watching his expression carefully. "She's all grown up now."

Arturo produces a small file from the top drawer of his desk, rifling through the documents. It doesn't take me long to realize it's a dossier on not just me, but Heath and Knox as well. This was a test.

“Ah, yes. Anna is her name, right? What a lovely young lady.”

The tips of my fingers pulse with adrenaline.

This bastard...

“I’m very thorough when it comes to the people I bring onto my team,” Arturo explains. “It says here Heath just celebrated his wedding in Vegas, correct? Give him my congratulations.” He leans back casually in his chair and strums his fingers on his desk. “It’s quite the coincidence...”

“What is, sir?”

“You were in Las Vegas around the same time as Willow.”

I remain perfectly calm, refusing to let my composure crack. “Is that so? A coincidence, indeed.”

“You didn’t happen to see her there, did you?”

My heart thuds loudly in my chest, but I’m not going to let this shriveled old man bait me into a response I might regret. “I was busy helping my brother organize his wedding, Mr. Allegra. Not to mention Vegas is a big place. My chances of running into your daughter were astronomically slim.”

“I suppose you’re right. I’m probably overthinking things.” Arturo hums, pensive. “I noticed a brother has left?”

“A problem with another client,” I explained simply. He waited as if for details, but none were forthcoming.

He nodded. “I’m needed in Mexico to help with a... developing situation.”

“How long will you be away?”

“Only three days. I leave tomorrow morning.”

Three days... not enough time to put together a meticulous plan and cover our tracks, but at least it’s something.

Arturo rises from his desk. “Your reaction time earlier was impressive, Mr. Phillips. I’m hoping you keep my daughter in line while I’m away. I’ll be leaving a few of my guards behind

to provide you with backup, but I'm sure Willow is in very capable hands."

"That she is."

"I'm glad to hear it. Good help is hard to come by these days."

"Will that be all, sir?"

"Yes, you're dismissed." I'm just about to exit through his office door when Arturo clears his throat. "Oh, and one more thing, Mr. Phillips."

"What is it, sir?"

"Mistakes will not be tolerated. Do you understand?"

"Loud and clear."

"Good. Now, get the fuck out of my office."

I don't return upstairs right away. Instead, I head to the security office and seal myself inside, grappling with the thoughts inside my head.

Arturo knows about my daughter. He knows about Heath and his Vegas wedding, and probably about his new wife Darlene. I have to give credit where credit is due—Arturo *is* thorough. But that's not going to deter me from helping Willow escape. If anything, he's shown his hand prematurely. A mistake if there ever was one. Everyone and their mother can do a simple background check, but now that I know what he knows, I'll do what I have to in order to stay two steps ahead.

I settle before the surveillance monitors, studying the comings and goings of everyone on the compound. I spot Heath and Willow together in her room. They appear to be talking, though there's no audio. If I had to guess, my brother's probably trying to crack a joke. Judging by the way Willow's slender shoulders shake, I'm willing to bet it's working.

I get to work, setting a few cameras to record. If I can get a long enough loop, I'll be able to play it back over the system so when the day comes, whoever's on surveillance duty will

be none the wiser. I'd knock the cameras out entirely, but that will only raise suspicions. I have to be careful about this. Careful and discreet.

By the time I make it back upstairs, Marianne has already served Willow her dinner. The housemaid is a lot easier to read than the other folks on the compound. She's jittery, always looking over her shoulder. I've noticed she tries to sneak Willow extra helpings, but I'm not yet convinced she can be trusted. Marianne seems just as likely to squeal as she is to be an ally, but I'm not writing her off just yet.

In a place like this, we need as many friends as possible.

"What took you so long?" Willow asks me when I step into the room. "Did I get you in trouble?"

"No, I'm not in trouble."

Marianne shakes her head. "That was a foolish thing to do. So terribly foolish. What if you'd been hit by oncoming traffic? Haven't you learned your lesson by now?"

Heath clears his throat. "Marianne, would you mind showing me to the kitchens? I'm starving."

The housemaid squints at him. "It's just downstairs."

"This place is massive. I'm worried I'll get lost."

Marianne rolls her eyes with a huff. "Fine, fine." Her tone is softer when she speaks to Willow. "Make sure to eat every bite, Ms. Willow."

Willow forces a polite smile, but I know her. There's a weariness in her, and dark, heavy circles have settled just beneath her eyes. "I will, I promise."

The pair head out, leaving the two of us alone.

Willow anxiously picks at the hem of her skirt. "Did I do okay?" she asks, referring to my note.

"You were perfect."

"My father trusts you now?"

“Enough to leave you in my care while he flies to Mexico.”

Willow’s eyes widen in surprise. “When?”

“First thing tomorrow.”

“And we’ll leave right after?”

I shake my head subtly. “No.”

Willow’s look of dismay is totally understandable. “What do you mean *no*? Esteban and Arturo won’t be here. It’s the ideal time for me to run for it.”

“Sure, but they’d only bring you back.”

“I’ll be more careful this time. I’ll dye my hair permanently, change my name, learn a different language so I can live in a foreign country outside of their reach.”

“Trust me, Willow. I’m going to get you out of here, but we need to make sure we’re in a position where neither Esteban nor your father can retaliate.”

Her frown deepens. “You mean...dead?”

“I was going to say behind bars, but sure, that works, too.”

She stares off for a moment, and I wonder if her father’s death is too far. She’d be free of him, but he is her father. She shakes herself after a moment and looks at me.

Willow lets out a sigh of frustration. “How are we supposed to accomplish anything? Esteban and my father have an entire army behind them, not to mention a multitude of connections.”

“I’m still working on it,” I tell her.

She takes a deep breath. “Maybe this war of theirs will sort them out for us.”

“Maybe. But until then, we continue to play our parts. When the right moment comes, that’s when we strike.”

CHAPTER 19

WILLOW

I don't shed a single tear when my father leaves the next morning.

A handful of his closest guards load up in the car with him, which tells me one very important thing: whatever business he's handling, it's dangerous. I should feel guilty for not wanting him to come back, but I don't see the point in lying to myself. Arturo may be my father, but there's no love lost between us.

When his car finally peels out of the driveway, I allow myself the chance to breathe. The past month has been stifling, borderline suffocating. And although a few of my father's men remain behind to work their patrol shifts, I am freer than I've been in a very long time. I can barely imagine what true freedom will be like.

If the day ever comes, of course.

Marianne is the first person to see me, bringing up a tray of freshly peeled fruits for breakfast. "I wonder what's going on," she mumbles to herself as I dig in. She watches out the window as the convoy of black SUVs drives away. "I can't remember the last time your father was called away. Things with the Marrones must be getting pretty serious."

I pop a slice of tangerine into my mouth, savoring the sour tang of the juice washing over my tongue. Everything tastes better now that my father is gone. "I wouldn't worry about it too much," I tell her dryly. "I'm sure he's got everything under control."

Marianne chews on her nails. “It was never like this when your dear mother was still in charge. Liana was always so good at negotiating with the Marrones.”

This catches my attention. Ever since my mother’s passing, her name has effectively been blacklisted. My father won’t allow anyone to mention her. Naturally, I’ve never been allowed to ask why.

I was seven when she passed away. A car accident. At least, that’s what the official coroner’s report cited as her cause of death. I’ve heard whispers here and there to the contrary, but I’ve never been able to put the whole story together. When I was a little girl, I overheard a few of the housemaids say it really was an accident. A couple of the guards suspected it was a coverup for something far more insidious. To this day, I still don’t have answers.

“Will you tell me about her?” I ask softly, even though I know I’m not at risk of being found out by Arturo for a while. I’m just so used to speaking in hushed tones. “You used to work with her closely, didn’t you?”

Marianne tosses a cautious look over her shoulder. She, too, goes about this place in fear. “I’d only been employed for about a month before your mother’s passing, but I do know she was kind. You look exactly like her.”

I frown, a question burning in the back of my mind. “Wait a second... Did you say *she* was the one negotiating? But why ___”

Three sharp knocks sound at my door. I look up to find Zane there, casually leaning against the frame. “What’re you ladies chatting about this fine morning?”

Marianne clams up quickly, pressing her lips into a thin line. “Nothing, Mr. Phillips.” She’s quick to gather her things and leave, ducking out of the room and out of sight in a flash.

“I don’t think she likes me very much,” Zane says with a light chuckle.

“Marianne? Oh, no. She’s absolutely in love with you.”

“Well then she’s got a great poker face.”

I shrug, feeling lighter and happier than I have in ages. It's wonderful to finally get the chance to speak freely. "Haven't you heard? All the housemaids think you and Heath are eye candy. I'm pretty sure a few of them were crushing on Knox, too."

"That's the old Phillips charm for you."

When Zane takes a step forward, I shake my head. "The cameras, remember?"

He smiles at me like the cat who got the cream. "You don't have to worry about the cameras anymore, darling."

"You disabled them?"

"Even better. I have them playing on a loop. From now until your father gets home, you—Willow Allegra—are the invisible woman."

"Really?" I breathe.

I dare to stand, unrestricted by prying eyes or the thought of bearing the brunt of my father's wrath. My hands shake as I rise to full height, sucking in a deep breath until my lungs can't take it anymore. A million and one thoughts race through my head. I could run, jump, dance, do a freaking cartwheel if I feel so inclined. But the first thing I want to do...

I go to him.

I all but throw myself at Zane and wrap my arms around him, clinging to him like a lifeline on stormy seas. I'm so starved for touch that the mere graze of his hands down my back and the warmth of his breath against my cheeks makes my eyes water. Before I know what's happening, I'm openly sobbing against his chest. Zane—bless his soul—doesn't seem to mind in the slightest.

He gently strokes my hair and holds me a little tighter, whispering, "It's okay, I'm here."

"I'm sorry," I rasp. "I don't know why I'm crying. This is so silly."

"Don't apologize. You have nothing to apologize for."

I'm quick to dry my tears. I'm determined to make the most of my few days of freedom, and I don't want to spend the majority of it weeping. "Zane?"

"Yes, darling?"

I tilt my chin up to look into his deep green eyes. Every lingering touch, every glance shared... It all feels like a luxury I can only now indulge in. The air around us is electric, singing with a sudden and overwhelming desire. It's just the two of us now. There's nothing holding us back.

I'm not sure who makes the first move. It doesn't matter. I find Zane's lips on mine and there aren't enough words in the English language to describe just how right he feels against me.

I adore the roughness of his stubble and the demanding presence of his lips. I want to swoon with the way his arms easily circle my waist and lock me in. I can't get enough of his cologne and the way his lips taste or the way he growls possessively against me, awakening an intense heat deep within my core.

An all-consuming need suddenly takes hold of my body. I don't think I can get enough of him. I feel like I might go crazy if he decides to pull away. Thankfully, Zane appears just as eager to have his way with me. He easily lifts me off the floor, my legs wrapping around his hips instinctively as he starts towards my bed.

"What about the other guards?" I ask between heated kisses.

"On patrol."

"Heath?"

"Doing his rounds."

"What about the maids?"

"They're busy with their chores."

"What about—"

"Willow."

“What?”

Zane sets me down on the mattress, quick to pull off my jeans and slip off my shirt. I lie there in nothing but my bra and panties, my hair spilling around my head onto the soft sheets. My cheeks warm, not because I'm lying here exposed, but because Zane looks like a starved man ready to eat me whole.

He wastes no time settling between my legs, pushing my knees apart so he can press kisses to my inner thighs. He strokes me slowly with his fingers over the fabric of my panties, a shaky breath bubbling past my lips when he brushes the cotton aside. The warmth of his breath hits my sensitive skin, sending a shiver racing through my core.

The first brush of his tongue against my sensitive bud almost sends me flying. I grip the sheets, barely able to hold back my languid moan.

“Z-Zane!”

“Try to stay quiet for me, darling,” he says. “We may be alone, but we don't want to risk anybody coming up to disturb us.”

I clasp a hand over my mouth, my eyes screwing shut as he continues to tease me senseless with his expert tongue. He draws tight circles against me, reading my stuttering breath and soft groans of pleasure like lines from a book. It's almost ridiculous how quickly I come undone for him, the tight coil of heat in the pit of my stomach suddenly exploding outward with the brilliance of a thousand fireworks.

“That's my girl,” Zane murmurs as he rises to his knees, reaching down to make quick work of his belt and zipper. The metallic drag of the metal rings loudly in my ear, my core throbbing with want between my legs.

“I've missed you,” I whisper, opening my arms to welcome him against me.

Zane kisses me tenderly as he aligns himself, pressing his hips against me with so much attention and care I feel like fine crystal beneath him. Everyone else likes to toss me around, to

mishandle me, but not him. Zane treats me with the utmost respect, made evident through his gentle kisses and whispers of sweet nothings against my cheek.

I whimper against the stretch of his cock, my walls clenching around his shaft as he buries himself deeper and deeper inside me. I'd almost made the mistake of forgetting how big he was, the sensation of being filled so delightful and so raw it knocks the air straight out of my lungs. I grip onto his shoulders, desperate to erase the space between us.

"God, you feel so good," he murmurs. "Is this okay, darling?"

I kiss him hungrily, sucking on his bottom lip as I buck my hips against him. "Move," I rasp. "Please, Zane, *move*."

I let out a sigh of relief when the cadence of his thrusts quickens, the creak of the mattress beneath us punctuating the snap of his hips and my needy moans. Zane's fingers curl in my hair as he pistons in and out of me, his kisses devilishly sweet. It's everything wild and even a little bit naughty and *exactly* what I needed.

I can feel myself teetering over the line of pleasure and ecstasy. With one more sweep of his cock over my sweet spot, I unravel beneath him, euphoria flooding my veins as the room spins around us. I'm drunk off his commanding kisses, high off the taste of his tongue. Zane isn't far behind me, thrusting a few more times before pulling out to spill into his hand.

We're a tangle of arms and legs, breathless and satiated.

"Promise me we'll do that again," I mumble against his jaw.

"Three days of freedom and all you want to do is have sex?"

"Do you not want to?"

Zane chuckles. "Trust me, I plan on fucking you every chance I get, but I want to make sure you get to do whatever you want in that time."

My mind wanders. "A walk outside might be nice."

“Consider it done.”

“And maybe some time in the pool? Esteban never lets me use the pool.”

“Yes, of course we can use the pool. Anything else?”

“I want to plan our getaway.”

Zane nods, planting a chaste kiss against my lips. “That’s my top priority, darling.”

I hug him a little tighter. “Thank you.”

CHAPTER 20

I wait until well after dark before I conduct my investigation. The best way to bring down your enemy is to know everything about them, and Arturo Allegra and Esteban Becerra are no exception.

“How does the Becerra Cartel make the majority of its money?” I ask Willow over dinner.

Marianne brought up two platters consisting of roast beef, buttered mashed potatoes, green beans, and a bottle of chilled sparkling water to share. Like always, she scurried off once the job was done, disappearing to the employee quarters down in the basement.

“Drug trafficking mostly,” Willow says around a mouthful of beans. “It’s a massive operation spanning several countries. Interpol has been after them for years. That’s what I’ve overheard, at least.”

“What about the Allegra faction?”

Willow crinkles her nose. “My family has a long history with weapons trafficking, but that was before my father took over. He kind of...”

“What is it?”

“Well, I don’t have the whole picture exactly. I’m severely limited in what I’m allowed to know, but what I *do* know is that when Arturo took over the family business from my grandfather, he ran it into the ground. He made one bad decision after another. If it weren’t for Esteban basically

buying him out, there's a really good chance my father would be six feet under by now."

"And that's why he's so intent on marrying you off? To settle that debt?"

"Bingo," Willow grumbles around her glass of sparkling water.

"And what about the Marrones?" I ask. "Do you know anything about this war?"

She shrugs. "All I know is they're dangerous. People you don't want to mess with. My family has had beef with them for ages."

"What kind of beef?"

"Alliances gone wrong... Backstabbing, stealing, a little bit of torture thrown in there somewhere. You know, fun stuff. Their numbers rival the Allegras and the Becerra Cartel combined. If there really is a war brewing, we might see some pretty hefty losses."

Willow polishes off her meal, licking hungrily at her lips. I give her my plate, more than happy to see her dig in without a second thought.

"I'm going to need more information than that," I say.

"We could always break into my father's office," she replies a little too casually. "He's got all sorts of top-secret documents in that safe of his."

"He has a safe?"

"Oh, yeah. I broke into it and grabbed a bunch of cash before I ran away to Vegas. I know the combination. Of course, there's a very good chance he changed it, but it's worth a shot, right?"

I nod, but that doesn't stop the concern from crawling up the back of my neck. "There aren't any cameras inside his office," I point out. "I've only been in there once, but without eyes on the room, there's no telling if he's set up traps or if he has a guard on watch while he's away."

Willow shrugs. “He might have someone posted on the door, but that’s where I come in.”

“How do you mean?”

“The guards aren’t allowed to touch me. I’ll use myself as a distraction while you sneak in and open the safe. Grab whatever you can. We’ll put everything back before my father returns from his trip.”

I smirk at her, amused as hell. “You’re a sneaky little minx.”

Willow beams. “I’m not a *total* damsel in distress.”

“I knew that the moment you pointed a gun at my head.”

“Are you ever going to let that go?”

“What can I say? You left a very distinct first impression.”

“And don’t you forget it,” she teases.

“Finish your dinner,” I say with a light chuckle. “And then we’ll break into your father’s office.”

“Do we get to use a cool mission name?”

“A mission name?” I echo.

“You know. Like in the spy movies.” She snaps her fingers, a delighted sparkle in her eyes. “I hereby dub this operation *Operation Free Bird*.”

I roll my eyes, but there isn’t any heat behind it. “Remind me to sneak you a spy novel next time.”

She grins. “I’d like that very much.”



I’m not particularly fond of the idea of using Willow as bait, but she can be rather insistent when she wants to be. We descend the stairs together and make our way silently down the hall, passing by several ceiling-mounted security cameras. I know for a fact Heath is working the surveillance room

tonight, but we still have to move quickly. I'd rather not risk being caught.

Willow goes on ahead of me, her bare feet padding across the cold tiles. The singular guard standing in front of Arturo's office notices her immediately.

"Ms. Allegra, you can't be here."

"Please!" she says, a convincing warble to her voice. "I saw one of the dogs outside acting really weird. I think it was frothing at the mouth! Doesn't that mean it's sick?"

"Are you serious?" the guard asks, already stepping away from his station. "Stay inside, Ms. Allegra. I'll handle this."

He rushes off, using the radio strapped to his chest to call a few of the other guards. Willow skips on ahead, clearly very pleased with herself.

"And the Academy Award goes to..." I tease her as I round the corner.

She smirks. "That should keep them busy for a few minutes. Let's hurry."

On the surface, there doesn't appear to be very much in Arturo's space. Nothing of importance, at least. His workspace is tidy and without clutter, not a single errant document to be found. No family photos are on the walls, none of those typical trinkets you'd bring back from family vacation. It's impersonal in here, without any real character or hint about who Arturo is.

Willow moves quickly, circling around her father's big mahogany desk. She crouches and disappears beyond the surface, feeling around underneath for something. The soft *click* tells me she's found a hidden button. On the other side of the room, one of the framed landscape paintings pops forward by an inch, exposing the wall safe behind it.

"Fancy," I murmur, making my way over.

Willow joins me, taking up the reins. Her slender fingers move nimbly, rotating the combination lock right, left, and then right again. "Ten, twenty-four, seventy-three," she whispers to herself as she works. "My mother's birthday."

The door to the safe swings open.

“How’d you know that was the combination?” I ask.

“My dad’s pushing sixty,” she explains. “His password is pretty much the same for everything. His laptop, phone, email... It’s easier for him to remember that way.”

I chuckle. “Clever girl. I feel like you could give Sherlock Holmes a run for his money.”

We peer inside together. The contents of the safe are, unfortunately, lackluster. There’s barely anything in it, save for a thick yellow envelope, a ring box, and a silver Rolex tucked into the far back.

I go for the envelope, opening it carefully so as to not leave any tears. We don’t need Arturo knowing someone was rifling through his things without permission. Out slides a thick stack of papers, all of them covered in fine print.

“A will?” Willow breathes, glancing at it over my shoulder.

“It’s in Spanish,” I notice aloud.

A quiet gasp escapes her throat. “It’s my mother’s...”

I shift through the pages as quickly as I can, using my camera to take a snapshot of each side. There’s no time to read it all now, and we can’t risk taking it with us in case we aren’t able to replace it in time. Once every page is digitized, I put everything back in its place, but not before eyeing the ring box in the back of the safe.

Willow reaches for it, prying it open with curiosity written all over her face. Inside rests a beautiful diamond ring with three massive gems seated atop a band of white gold.

A memory flashes through my mind.

A wedding chapel. Christmas evening. One too many drinks and a warmth in my chest as I peer into a set of gorgeous blue eyes.

I shake the thoughts from my head. Weird.

“Let’s get going, Nancy Drew,” I say. “How’s your Spanish? Do you think you’d be able to translate this for me?”

Willow grimaces. “I’m afraid not. I know the basics, but my father didn’t see any need for me to keep up my studies. He didn’t want me to be able to understand what he was saying when talking business.”

I swallow the anger boiling in my chest. This isn’t the time or place for distractions, but *damn* do I want to punch that son of a bitch square in the face when he gets back.

“That’s fine,” I say as we close the safe. “I know someone who might be able to translate it for us. Although it might take some convincing on my part.”

“Who is it?”

“Knox. He spent a few years studying abroad before he enlisted with us.”

“You mean your brother who was so adamant about *not* helping me that he quit day one?”

“He’ll do it.”

“You sound awfully confident.”

“I’m not going to give him a choice.” I tuck my phone away and take Willow’s hand. “Come on. Let’s get a move on.”

CHAPTER 21

WILLOW

I wake up the next morning feeling under the weather. I'm not sure if it's because I didn't get much sleep—Zane and I were up really late—or if it was something I ate for dinner. My stomach is a queasy knot, my skin is mildly feverish, and there's a terrible pressure behind my eyes.

I roll over in bed, stretching beneath my warm covers. A sliver of golden morning light peeks in through the crack in the window curtains, casting a gentle glow over the furniture in the room. I reach out to my side, fully expecting to find Zane beside me...

He's already gone.

A quick glance at my bedside alarm clock tells me that it's 5:35 a.m. I'm disappointed but not surprised. Marianne and a few of the other maids are usually already up and working by six, a fact that Zane is likely well aware of considering he's privy to everyone's work schedules for security purposes. It's probably a good thing he's not here, because being caught together will surely spell our demise.

I change into a pair of jeans and a simple white blouse, sleepily brushing out the knots in my hair by the time Marianne carries in my breakfast. She's extra squirrely today, her eyes shifting back and forth like she's on high alert for signs of a lurking predator.

"I received word from my cousins down south," she whispers conspiratorially.

I frown. "About..."

“There’s been a number of murders. Marrones are showing up dead left and right. They think it’s Esteban’s doing.”

I sit up a bit straighter, the uneasiness in the pit of my stomach entirely forgotten. “Why do you think I would be interested in that information?”

Marianne rolls her eyes. “Oh, please. I wasn’t born yesterday, Willow. I know you and that handsome bodyguard of yours are plotting something.”

I blanch, my heart skipping a beat. “W-we’re not.”

“You can trust me, remember? I wouldn’t have helped you escape the first time if I wasn’t on your side.” Marianne crouches down beside me and takes my hand. “I can get the rest of the household on your side. Believe me, Willow, there are those amongst the staff who want to see you get out of here just as much as you do.”

I swallow, my throat suddenly too dry to breathe. It’s true that Marianne helped me get away, but can the rest of the staff really be trusted? I can see the benefits of having more allies but casting too wide a net could end up backfiring. It’s one thing to say they’re on my side, but I know who cuts their paychecks. What if somebody reports back to my father?

“This stays between you and me,” I say softly. “You, me, Heath, and Zane. We need to keep this as contained as possible.”

“Of course, of course,” she says, patting the back of my hand. “I’ll keep the other maids busy. Hopefully they’ll be scarce enough that you can formulate a plan undisturbed.”

“Thank you, Marianne. I really appreciate this. Did your cousin have any more news?”

She shakes her head. “Only that things are about to get ugly.”

Zane’s heavy footfalls announce his presence. He gives Marianne a brief nod before looking at me. “Good morning. I’ve given the patrol guards some maintenance work in the warehouse, so we’ll have free reign of the front yard if you’d

like to go for a walk. It's only for a couple of hours, and I know it's early, but..."

I smile, the promise of fresh air and the chance to stretch my legs sending excitement rushing through me. "I'd love that."

"After you, Ms. Allegra."

I leave through the front door, tiptoeing across the lawn in my bare feet. The grass is slightly wet with the morning dew, but the sunshine overhead does a wonderful job of warming me up. The air is crisp and cool against my cheeks, the tunes of the morning songbirds heavenly in my ears.

As I enjoy the outdoors, I'm aware of Zane's eyes on me. His smile is sweet, but his gaze is sad. There's pity in his expression—pity *and* resolve.

"Is Knox onboard?" I ask quietly.

"He hasn't responded to my texts yet, but I'm sure he will be."

"I'm sorry for all the trouble I'm causing you. The last thing I want is to drive a wedge between you and your brothers."

"Knox has always been a pain in the ass. And logical to a fault, but that's in no way on you."

"The will could end up being nothing," I say dismissively. "We really need to be thinking about an exit strategy."

Zane nods in agreement. "Getting you a whole new identity is easy but finding a foreign country outside of the cartel's reach will be difficult. Your father obviously has connections with the TSA and the police, and if he doesn't, it's only a matter of winning them over with bribes."

"If only we knew someone who could smuggle me out of the country." I huff, a ridiculous idea popping into my head. "Do you think the Marrones would be willing to do it? You know, just to spite Esteban and my father?"

Zane crosses his arms. "I'm trying to get you *away* from the cartel. Why would we team up with *another* to get you out

of here?”

“Because the enemy of my enemy is my friend and all that,” I say with a wry smile. “No, I know it’s silly. I’m just spitballing here—”

“Liana!”

I whip around, startled by the thunderous boom of a man’s voice. It echoes off the walls of the house and the rest of the compound, slicing through the air like a knife. I spot a man quickly approaching. I’m not sure how he managed to get past the perimeter fences, but then I remember that Zane sent the patrol guards to deal with another task, effectively leaving the entire property undefended.

There’s an unhinged quality about him. His eyes are wide, his hair’s a mess, his shirt is wrinkled and covered in sweat stains. He makes a b-line toward me, panting hard like he’s traveled thousands of miles to make it here.

Zane pulls me behind him, using his body as a shield. I don’t even have a chance to blink before he draws the gun tucked in his shoulder holster. He trains his sights on the stranger—safety off.

“Stop right there!” Zane snaps.

“Liana, Liana,” the man wheezes. “I’ve been trying to get a hold of you for years!”

“I said *stop* or I’ll shoot.”

I grip the back of Zane’s jacket. “Wait, don’t! Give him a second—” I look at the man. “How do you know my mother?”

The stranger blinks, swallows. I don’t think he’s here to hurt me. “You’re not... You’re not Liana?”

I shake my head, my heart railing in my chest. “No, I’m Willow. Her daughter.”

“Ah,” he says, his expression softening. “You look just like her. It’s so good to see you alive.”

Confusion swirls inside my skull. Who is this guy? What could he possibly mean? Why is he looking at me like some

long-lost family member?

“Identify yourself,” Zane snaps. “This is your only warning.”

The man puts his hands up in surrender. He means no harm. “My name is Joseph Marrones. Liana was my little sister. I’ve come to bring you and your mother home. You must come with me. We have to get you as far away from that monster as—”

A gunshot rips through the air.

I scream, the spray of blood forever imprinted onto my mind. His body slumps forward with a violent jolt, slamming into the dirt as the grass soaks all the red.

Behind him, my father stands—smoking gun still in hand.

“Guess who’s back early,” Arturo says with a wicked smile. He snaps his fingers, summoning his personal guards. “Seize them.”

We’re suddenly surrounded by my father’s personal henchmen, outnumbered twenty to two. Someone grabs me by the arm, but they’re quickly introduced to Zane’s fist for their reckless mistake. It’s a chaotic mess, so many people shouting at me, crowding me, attempting to rip me away.

“Willow!” Zane roars as no less than fifteen men attack him at once. He stands no chance against them. They punch him, kick him, beat him into the ground despite his best efforts.

And all I can do is scream.

I scream and scream and scream until I tear up my throat and taste iron on my tongue.

“Did you really think I wouldn’t find out?” Arturo asks with a sneer. He reaches into his pocket and pulls out a picture. It’s blurry, the camera quality lackluster, but the photo is very clearly of two people locked in a passionate embrace, standing at the front of a chapel room before the altar.

I can barely make out the details through my tears.

It's Zane and me.

What—

"It took my private investigator a while to put it all together," Arturo explains as his guards restrain Zane and me. "When Willow returned home, I got to work re-arranging her wedding. Imagine my surprise when the wedding license was denied because my dear girl *was already married.*"

My throat squeezes shut. I can't breathe, I can't think.

"Married?" I echo in disbelief. "But that's impossible—"

My memories of that night suddenly burst forth. I remember everything now. We celebrated Heath and Darlene's wedding earlier that day, got sloshed, and then Zane and I...

I'm overcome with a wash of emotions, confusion being key among them. But there's also a trace of joy, of relief. The thought of being married to Zane makes the butterflies in my stomach flutter. I may not have known him for very long, but I know for a fact he is a far more honorable and kinder man than Esteban will ever be in his lifetime.

And what about Joseph Marrones? Is he really my uncle? Am I somehow related to my father's worst and most dangerous enemy? Whatever answers he might have died with him.

But there's no time for these thoughts to settle, no chance to make sense of everything that's happening. I've been hit by a tsunami of realizations, and there's a very good chance I won't live to see tomorrow now that Arturo has returned.

"Shoot him," my father says coldly.

"No!" I plead at the top of my lungs.

I'm restrained on either side by armed men. No matter how much I struggle, I can't break free. All I can do is watch in dismay as one of Arturo's closest guards raises his pistol. I refuse to give up. I won't stand idly by as they shoot my one and only protector. My fight or flight instincts kick in, taking control of my body as my brain goes into overdrive.

I turn and bite the shoulder of one of my captors, sinking my teeth hard enough to break skin. He yelps loudly, rearing back in pain. The moment he lets go from the shock, I throw my weight against the second guard, driving my knee straight into his groin. He keels over like a house of cards, wheezing in agony.

I throw myself in Zane's direction, landing hard on my knees as I wrap my arms over his head and shoulders. I'm not big enough to shield him completely, but I hope I'll at least make it difficult for my father and his men.

"Stop!" Arturo screams. "Stop! Don't you dare hurt her!"

I'm running on pure adrenaline at this point. There is only one thought on my mind: *survive*.

The ear-shattering screech of tires rips through the chaos, a black SUV barreling straight toward Arturo and his men. They manage to jump out of the way, but just barely, scrambling and disorganized to get out of the way. The car stops right in front of us, the passenger-side window sliding down.

"Get in!" Heath shouts from behind the wheel. "Hurry!"

Zane and I rush to our feet, dashing into the backseat just as Heath slams on the gas.

So much for trying to be discreet.

CHAPTER 22

WILLOW

We drive for what feels like hours. I have no idea where we're going, and I quite frankly don't care as long as I never have to go home. The stakes are too high. I not only have a target on my back, but I've put Heath and Zane in the line of fire, too.

Zane, my husband.

He's seated in the back with me, several large bruises and nasty cuts riddling his face. my father's men really did a number on him. At least he's conscious.

"This is nothing like Operation Falcon," Heath grumbles from behind the wheel.

When I look out the window, I notice a big highway sign that reads: *Arizona, the Grand Canyon State Welcomes You.*

"Where are we going?" I ask, my voice fried and raspy. I'm surprised I'm even able to get a word out considering all the frantic screaming.

"To the other coast, ideally," Zane mumbles. He sounds terribly tired, but he does a good job of not letting it show.

"How the fuck did we not know Arturo was coming back early?" Heath asks. "You think he did it on purpose?"

"I suspect so. We might be in big trouble."

"How do you mean?"

"When he brought me into his office... He mentioned Darlene and Anna."

Heath glances at his brother through the reflection of the rearview mirror. “Fuck.”

“Drop us off at the nearest gas station,” Zane says. “I’ll take Willow the rest of the way on my own.”

His brother frowns steeply. “Absolutely not.”

“We’ll move faster if it’s just the two of us. Besides, you need to get back to your wife. Move her somewhere safe. Have Knox reach out to Anna, too. We need to cover all our bases.”

“But what about the two of you? I can’t just abandon you to deal with this by yourself.”

“You have to,” Zane says sternly. “You know you do. I can take care of her from here.”

Heath is quiet for a very long time, which, considering how chatty he normally is, tells me exactly how dangerous our situation is. I can practically smell the smoke from his brain overheating. His grip on the steering wheel is knuckle white, his jaw set so tight I’m afraid he might crack a tooth.

I’m finally out, it’s true, but for how long?

And at what cost?

Once we’re well past the state line, Heath pulls the car up to the first rinky dink gas station we come across. The place looks like it’s a strong breeze away from collapsing in on itself, but at least there’s hardly anyone in sight. Heath parks the car behind the gas station building and turns in his seat. He doesn’t say anything, but he doesn’t have to. A silent conversation passes between the brothers, an understanding that comes from years of living side by side. Heath gives me a sympathetic smile before exiting the vehicle.

“What do we do now?” I ask once he’s gone, nothing but the still air and the sound of distant traffic around us.

“I need to get you out of the country,” he says with a grunt. I suspect his injuries are far worse than he’s letting on. “We’ll drive this time. Your father would only stop you from catching another flight.”

“What about Joseph Marrones? Do you think... was he really my uncle?”

“You know as much as I do, darling.”

I wrack my brain for answers I don't have. What the hell is going on? Could he have been some random lunatic who ventured too far onto the compound, or was he really my mother's older brother?

“Maybe the whole enemy of my enemy thing has some merit,” I mutter aloud. “I need to figure out a way to reach them.”

“The Marrones Cartel? You can't be serious.”

“And I need a translation of my mother's will. As soon as possible.”

“It sounds like you've got a plan cooking.”

I chew on the inside of my cheek. “My whole life, my father has kept me locked away. It's probably because he's a controlling asshole without an ounce of parenting sense, but now... I don't know. Something bigger is going on. I know it's a huge risk, but I think the Marrones might be the key to finding the answers I need.”

“Willow...”

“I know it's crazy. Probably downright stupid. But that man, Joseph... I really don't think he was lying. I've got this feeling in my gut and—” I wipe my eyes, the shock and adrenaline finally wearing off. A sudden wave of exhaustion floods my system, leaving every muscle, nerve, and bone too heavy and frazzled to move.

Zane cups my face in his big palms and leans forward, gently pressing his forehead to mine. “When I was in the SEALs, do you know what the first thing my commanding officer taught me?”

“What?”

“*Always* trust your gut.”

I take a deep breath, soothed by the tenderness of his touch. “I just wish my gut would tell me *how* to find them.”

“Let me worry about the logistics,” he says. “For now, we need to spend the next couple of days lying low.”

“Right, of course.”

“Come on, darling. We need to buy a couple of things.”

“Like what?”

“Hair dye for you. Painkillers for me. Maybe a new car to make a clean getaway in if we’re feeling ambitious.”

The inside of the gas station is surprisingly well stocked considering how little traffic they seem to get. The floors smell of chemical cleaners and stale coffee made first thing this morning. Donuts and other sugary pastries sit in the display cabinets near the back, and although I have a massive sweet tooth, I’d rather not risk food poisoning. I have enough on my plate to deal with as it is.

I’m surprised to find the place does indeed have hair dye. The quality is questionable, but if we’re going to fly under the radar, I need to change my appearance. Nothing a box of black L’Oréal and a pair of scissors can’t fix.

“The bathroom’s back there,” Zane tells me. “I need to make a phone call. Meet me outside when you’re done.”

I move with purpose, locking myself inside the small grey room. The lighting is abysmal, and the floors are distressingly sticky, but I buckle down and get to work.

As I wet my hair in the sink, my mind wanders.

I’ve come to bring you and your mother home.

That was the last thing Joseph Marrones—if that’s even his name—said before my father heartlessly shot him in the head. I’ve never known my father to get his hands dirty. He normally assigns the messier, complicated work to one of his subordinates. It makes me wonder if he had a reason to keep Joseph’s mouth shut.

My dear girl was already married.

My cheeks flood with heat. Zane and I... This whole time we've been husband and wife and neither of us were the wiser. The more I think about it, the giddier I feel. I've been so opposed to the thought of marriage to Esteban that I never stopped to wonder if I'd *ever* get married. And yes, I know it was a drunken accident, but it feels almost like fate that I should end up with the man who's saved my life on more than one occasion.

I just don't know if he feels the same way.

As I streak black through my locks, I wonder what Zane wants to do. He probably thinks it's a mistake, being married to me. Hell, I wouldn't be surprised if he thinks getting involved with me in the first place was the biggest mistake of his life. He's on the run *because of me*. His family might be at risk *because of me*.

When all is said and done, I wouldn't blame him if he asks for a divorce.

I rinse my hair out, a cold, heavy dread seeping into my bones. Why does the thought of Zane leaving make me feel so... *awful*? I know it's probably not doing me any good to think about a future without him. What I should really do is focus on the task at hand, to see another day. But imagining a time where business is done and we finally part ways?

My stomach clenches as I chop my hair off. Marianne showed me a long time ago how to cut layers properly, so I think it ends up looking alright. *Different*, but alright.

I grip the edges of the sink and stare at my reflection. I hardly recognize myself. That's the point, of course, but I think something *inside* me has changed, too. My eyes are harder, darker. This is the face of someone who's fed up, someone who has nothing left to lose. The voice in the back of my head warns me that seeking the Marrones Cartel is probably going to get me killed, but I don't care.

Willow Allegra has been dead for a long time. Hell, I'm convinced she was never alive to begin with. I've attempted to take control of my life before with disastrous results, but I officially feel like I'm at a turning point. The event horizon.

I'm going to walk right into the lion's den and offer my father and would-be fiancé on a silver platter.

It's time to stop running around aimlessly.

I now have a destination in mind, and nobody's going to stop me from freeing myself.

CHAPTER 23

“I told you so.”

I sigh loudly, pinching the bridge of my nose. “God, you’re such a little shit.”

“True,” Knox says over the phone, “but I’m also right.”

“Just hurry up with the translation.”

“I’m doing my best. My Spanish is rusty. Besides, this could very well be nothing at all.”

“We won’t know that until you *hurry up with the translation.*”

“Fine!” Knox grumbles. “You better get yourself and that woman someplace safe tonight. I’ll call you once I’ve finished.”

“Thank you, little brother.”

“You better come back alive so I can kick your ass.”

“I’ll hold you to it.”

My brother hangs up the phone with a sharp *click*. His snarky attitude never fails to make my cortisol levels shoot straight through the roof.

Behind me, a woman clears her throat. I turn and do a double take. Willow looks so different that I hardly recognized her. Her hair is cropped short, a cute pixie cut that suits the sharp angles of her face. She’s still as stunning as ever, but where she was beautiful and soft before, she’s now sexy and domineering.

“Oh, it’s not that bad,” she chides, bringing a hand up to comb through her short locks. “Cat got your tongue, did it?”

I chuckle. “No, it’s just... You look great. Gorgeous, even.”

Willow smirks. “I was going for badass, but I guess I’ll take it.”

I step forward and circle my arm around her waist. “There’s a motel a few miles from here. We’ll stay there for the night and figure out how to contact the Marrones.”

“I could definitely use the rest,” she says softly. “Are we going to walk there? I guess we could hitchhike if we have to, but...”

“Absolutely not,” I say, gesturing to one of the beat-up old cars parked around the back of the gas station. “Only the best for my wife.”

I mean it as a joke, of course. Something to lighten the mood. I don’t expect her to smile so bashfully, her cheeks and the tips of her ears turning an adorable shade of pink. We’re probably going to have to talk about it at some point—this whole *drunk-married-in-Vegas* thing—but I’m afraid we have far more pressing concerns.

“Keep an eye out,” I tell her, making my way over to a Toyota that’s seen better days.

It’s a simple matter of wrapping my fist with my jacket and swinging with as much strength as possible. The driver-side window cracks open, scattering bits of glass onto the seat and floor of the car. It’s such a clunker that the alarm system doesn’t kick in—which is fine by me. The less attention we draw to ourselves, the better.

I unlock the door and quickly get to work sweeping away the glass while Willow climbs into the passenger seat. It takes me a couple of seconds to locate the necessary wires under the dash.

“Did they teach you how to hot-wire cars in the Navy?” Willow asks, her tone mildly amused.

I chuckle. “No. This little skill is courtesy of my grandfather.”

Her eyebrows shoot up. “Your grandfather taught you to steal cars?”

“He was a mechanic,” I explain with a grin. “Owned his own shop in a small mountain town. Sometimes people would lose their keys, and the only ways to get their car to the shop was to tow it, but nobody in town could afford to buy a tow truck. So we had to hot-wire it.”

The engine sputters, then rumbles to life. When I look up, Willow is smiling at me warmly. “It’s hard trying to picture you as a gruff mountain man wearing flannel.”

“I’ll have you know I don’t look half bad.”

“Hey!” someone’s voice interrupts us. The gas station clerk rounds the corner, his eyes wide and his cheeks bright red with anger. “That’s my fucking car!”

“We’re sorry!” Willow shouts out the window as we rip away, tires squealing beneath us as we hit the road.



“Are you sure you don’t want to swap out?” she asks for the umpteenth time.

I’ve been driving for almost seven hours straight, stopping only once for gas just outside of the Arizona-New Mexico border. Now that we’re quickly approaching Las Cruces, I’m thinking our best option is to stop for the night, get some rest, and continue first thing in the morning.

Besides, we need to come up with a concrete plan. If Willow’s dead set on contacting the Marrones, we’ll have to get creative. It’s not like you can’t just walk up to anybody and ask to meet with a member of the cartel. It’s all about connections, of which we have *none*.

I pretend not to notice the way Willow constantly checks over her shoulder. She’s on high alert, a hound on watch for

any signs of danger. She's been chewing on the inside of her cheek, which I've very quickly learned means she's deep in thought. It's one of her many adorable tells, so subtle a quirk, most might miss it. But not me.

I'm sure she has a lot on her mind. I personally haven't stopped thinking about it, about all the mistakes I made. Joseph Marrones came out of nowhere. Arturo Allegra surprised me as well. If my younger brother hadn't come barreling in when he did...

It was a misstep on my part, a lapse in attention. It won't happen again.

"Seriously, Zane. You need to take a break."

"No offense, darling, but do you even know *how* to drive?"

She shifts in her seat. "I mean, not exactly. My cousin Claire let me play Mario Cart with her once."

"That's definitely not the same."

Willow crosses her arms. "It's not like my father was ever going to let me. It would make me an even bigger flight risk."

I keep my eyes on the road, thinking about the time I first let Anna behind the wheel. I'm fairly certain the experience of her flooring it while the gears were still in reverse is the reason I started going gray prematurely. But my experience surprisingly doesn't deter me from saying, "I can teach you."

Willow blinks up at me, a smile stretching across her lips. "You mean that?"

"Sure. Once we get you somewhere safe, I'll teach you all you need to know."

She casts her grin out the window, the soft glow of city lights visible just beyond the horizon. She points, gesturing to a billboard advertisement for a local bar. "Let's grab a bite to eat," Willow says. "That way you can take a break, and we can hit the road right after."

My stomach rumbles loudly in agreement. Seven hours on the road has worked up my appetite. “Alright, but we have to make it quick. This is a pitstop, not a dinner date.”

She shrugs. “I know. You can take me out to dinner some other time.”

I compartmentalize her words, though I adore her sheepish expression. “You have my word, darling. Once all this shit’s taken care of, I’ll be sure to properly wine and dine you.”

“You’d better. I’ll have you know, though, I’m one hundred percent going to eat everything in sight and probably use my hands.”

I chuckled. “You’ll get no judgment from me.”

The bar in question is...*questionable*.

The only way I can really describe it is that it’s a hole in the wall. The black and white checkered floors are sticky, every surface smells of spilled beer, and the wallpaper has turned yellow from years of baked-on grease and cigarette smoke.

The clientele is the furthest thing from savory, too. Tattooed bikers, shady men with bleary eyes, and more than a handful of men with unfortunate mugs and aggressive energies about them.

“I’d rather take you to the McDonald’s down the street,” I whisper in her ear.

Willow flashes a mischievous grin. “I’ve got an idea.”

“Care to elaborate? Or am I going to have to play a game of twenty questions?”

“You’ll see soon enough. Help me climb up onto this table.”

“Why?” I ask, even though I’m already extending my hand to support her.

“I know we’re supposed to be laying low,” she says, “but maybe what we really need is to make a scene. How else are the Marrones’ going to know I’m looking for them?”

“I really don’t think this is a good idea, Willow. What if someone alerts Arturo and Esteban?”

“You’ll protect me, right?”

I nod. “Of course.”

“Then I have nothing to worry about.” She steps onto the table surface and clears her throat. “Excuse me! Everyone? May I have your attention, please?”

A hush falls over the bar, half a dozen pairs of eyes suddenly honing in on her. I’m tense as hell. I hope Willow knows what she’s doing.

“Hi, everyone,” she says politely and clearly. “My name’s Willow Allegra. My mother was Liana Allegra. I’m hoping to find a member of the Marrones Cartel. If any of you have any information, me and my, uh—husband—are going to be seated in that booth over there. Thanks!”

Willow hops off with a proud smile on her face.

I nod, glaring at every other man who dares look in her direction. “Well, that’s certainly one way to do it, I guess.”

“The only thing my father taught me was that word travels fast. I’m sure we’ll hear back from *someone*. It’s not everyday someone randomly asks to be put into contact with the cartel in such a public manner.”

“You’re very efficient,” I say with a chuckle.

Willow shrugs. “Yeah, well... I figure time isn’t really on our side, so I might as well take the chance.”

Our booth is in the back corner of the bar. As far as meals go, nothing looks particularly appetizing. Our waitress is a tough older woman, her gray hair thin and pulled back into a bun so tight it actually lifts her brows.

“What’ll you have?” she asks gruffly, her voice hoarse from years of smoking.

“Can I get a cheeseburger with fries?” Willow asks.

“Nah, we’re out.”

“Oh, uh... How about the fish and chips?”

“We’re all out of that, too.”

I eye the woman up and down, sensing something’s *off*. “You’re out of everything, aren’t you,” I say, not so much a question as it is a statement.

Our waitress slides a piece of paper across the table toward me. “They’ll see you in fifteen minutes,” she says before promptly walking away.

Willow leans forward in her seat, intrigued. “What does it say?”

I unfold the paper and decipher the woman’s chicken scratch writing.

Alley out back.

“Looks like your little stunt worked,” I say.

Willow beams. “Told you it would.”

CHAPTER 24

WILLOW

The alley is cramped and full of discarded trash bags and little critters scurrying about. A health violation if I ever saw one, so it's a good thing we didn't actually get anything to eat. Either way, my biggest concern isn't food but the woman standing at the other end of the narrow pass.

She has at least four guards with her, all of them big and burly and intimidating. I'm not as scared as I probably should be, but I'm so used to being surrounded by Esteban's guards that this hardly feels out of the ordinary. The woman herself is quite beautiful. She has long black hair, dark brown eyes, and eyeliner so sharp she could cut someone with it. She's dressed casually in a black turtleneck and equally dark jeans, a standard issue Beretta holstered at her hip.

"You're Willow?" she asks, her voice low and sultry.

"Yes. Who are you?"

"Natalia Marrones. You've got some balls asking to meet with my family."

I put a hand on my hip. "I would have looked you up in the phonebook, but I have a feeling your number's not listed."

Behind me, Zane chuckles to himself.

Natalia frowns, her lips pressed into a thin line. "You said Liana Allegra was your mother? Do you have any proof?"

Her question surprises me. "I wasn't aware I needed my birth certificate."

“I can’t very well go around believing everyone who says they’re Liana’s daughter, now can I? Only an idiot would do such a thing.”

“Or someone who’s telling the truth,” I argue.

Zane takes a single step forward, placing himself just slightly in front of me. “Joseph Marrones showed up on her doorstep,” he says. “He was shot dead.”

This breaks the woman’s hard, cold exterior, her eyes widening slightly in surprise. “My brother’s dead?” She and her guards draw their weapons at the same time, pointing the barrels of their guns at the two of us. “Who the hell are you?”

“I already told you,” I hiss, frustration boiling in the pit of my stomach. “My name is Willow Allegra. My mother was Liana Allegra. She married my father, Arturo Allegra.”

“Arturo,” Natalia grumbles. “That fucker’s still alive? There was never any mention of a daughter.”

I shrug. “Surprise? I really don’t know what else to tell you.”

“A will,” Zane says quickly, moving slowly to pull out his phone. “We have a copy of Liana Allegra’s will. Will that convince you?”

Something dark flashes behind Natalia’s eyes. “Show it to me.”

Zane steps forward, handing his phone to one of Natalia’s guards. Once she has it in hand, she scrolls through all the images we took of the pages. I wish I could tell what she was thinking because her steep frown has me feeling all types of anxious.

What happens if she doesn’t believe me?

What happens if she *does* believe me?

Natalia tosses Zane his phone back. He catches it like it’s nothing.

“Is Joseph really dead?” she asks.

I nod slowly. “I think he was confused. He kept calling me by my mother’s name. Said something about how he’d been trying to get a hold of her for years. My father was away on a trip, but he came back early. Saw the whole thing. He shot Joseph right in front of us.”

Natalia pinches the bridge of her nose with a sigh. “That fucking idiot. And my sister. Where is she?”

Cold swells in my belly. “My mother’s been dead for years. Car accident. I think.”

“You don’t know? How is that possible?”

“Arturo kept me locked away,” I mumble, unsure why I feel so embarrassed. “I only recently managed to escape. I’m desperate for help.”

“And that’s why you thought it was a good idea to announce your presence on a tabletop?” Natalia asks me, judgment dripping from her words.

“It got you here, didn’t it?”

We’re suddenly at an impasse, staring at each other like spooked animals seeing their reflection for the first time. The longer I stare at her, the more I realize how much she looks like my mother. What I remember of my mother, at least. They have the same scowl, the same refined air. There’s no question about it, though—Natalia Marrones is one hundred percent my aunt.

“Come with me,” she says after a long while. “We’ll take you somewhere safe.”

“Where?” Zane asks.

“If you are who you say you are, Renata will want to speak to you.”

I frown in confusion. “Who’s that?”

“Renata Marrones is your grandmother. Now hurry up. I don’t like being out here in the open.” Natalia turns to one of her guards. “Tell my mother we officially have a leg up in our war with the Becerras. Oh, and don’t forget to put bags over their heads.”

Zane growls. “What?”

Two men approach from behind swiftly, startling me, though Zane turned to face them before they reached us.

“Bags over your heads, or we leave you to your deaths,” Natalia says.

Neither of us object, though I feel like I’m going to have a panic attack as they shove black woolen bags over our heads and shove us forward despite my protests.

“Forgive me, princess,” Natalia says, though she doesn’t sound the least bit apologetic. “It’s a security measure.”



It’s hard to judge how much distance is traveled when I can’t see where the hell we’re going. It feels like we’re on the road for hours. All I know is we’re in a speeding car, all around me are people speaking in Spanish, and that Zane is right beside me. I blindly reach out for his hand to hold. I relax—but only a little—when he laces his fingers with mine.

We’re shoved around like cattle. Up stairs, down stairs, down a long hall.

Someone forces me to sit in a chair before they rip off my hood. I squint against the light, my eyes struggling to adjust to the sudden contrast. I’m equally alarmed and surprised to find myself seated in a courtyard in the middle of a hacienda. The walls are a baked coral pink with red brick shingles on the roof. Around us is a gorgeous garden full of colorful flowers and palm trees, the granite arches giving the whole place a romantic feel.

It certainly beats being locked in a dungeon.

Before us is an elderly woman. She has kind eyes and an even kinder smile. Her hair is completely gray, pulled back into a respectable braid. The woman’s got a bit of a hunch in her back, but she moves about freely without any assistance of a cane. She casually inspects her flowers, humming a gentle tune.

What strikes me as odd and fascinating is the large glass cage resting atop a short wooden pedestal. Inside, a black viper curls around and around, his pink tongue flicking out to smell its surroundings. It gives me the creeps, but nevertheless, the woman smiles at the snake like one would an adorable puppy.

“You need not be afraid,” she says. “Guadalupe is perfectly harmless. Aside from her fangs. One bite could put a grown horse to sleep in an instant.” Her voice is sweet and rich like honey. “Welcome to my home, mi niña. You as well, Mr. Phillips.”

Zane sits beside me stiffly, keeping his hands firmly against his chair’s arm rests. The Marrones haven’t restrained either of us. I wonder if it’s because they don’t see us as a threat, because something tells me they’re definitely not stupid.

“Excuse me, ma’am,” I say. “Where are we?”

“You, my dear, are in Mexico.”

“How did you get us across the border?” Zane asks.

The woman smiles gently. “In this day and age, it’s not what you know, but who you know. Half the border guards are on my payroll.” She stands a bit straighter and walks over to me, chuckling to herself as she extends a hand to caress my cheek sweetly. She smells like cinnamon sugar. “My name is Renata Marrones,” she says calmly. “You, Willow Allegra, are my long-lost granddaughter.”

My mind reels.

I know I’ve only just met this woman, but I wholeheartedly believe her. Something about the way she looks at me, the way she feels like home resonates deep within my soul. This whole time, I thought I was alone in the world—trapped under my father’s punishing thumb. But I have a whole family I didn’t even know about, one that may very well have been looking for my mother and me for a very long time.

“I know you must have questions,” Renata says. “But there’s plenty of time for that. How would the two of you like some dinner before I give you a tour?”

I glance at Zane. He’s been uncharacteristically quiet, but I don’t think he’s necessarily upset. I return my gaze to her. “That sounds lovely,” I answer.

“Come with me, my dear,” Renata says, taking my hand and hooking her arm around mine. “You look so much like my darling Liana. Such a pity, what happened to her and Joseph. Those two always were always joined at the hip. I will have to introduce you to all your aunts and uncles.”

“I have more?” I ask, gawking as I take in the details of the hacienda.

“Oh, yes. Four aunts and five uncles. Well, only four now.” Her voice warbles, her pain obvious in her watery eyes.

“I’m sorry about Joseph.”

Renata composes herself. “We’re at war, dear girl. I will have to mourn some other time. For now, my priorities must shift.”

She guides Zane and me down the west wing of the building toward a large dining room. Several maids and a cook busy themselves by setting out four different meals. Natalia is already seated, digging in without so much as an upward glance. Renata takes the head of the table and has me sit next to her. Zane dutifully takes his spot next to me, eyeing the food suspiciously.

“You can relax, Mr. Phillips,” Renata says. “You are amongst friends here.”

“You’ll forgive me for being careful,” Zane says tightly. “It’s hard to know who to trust.”

“You sought *us* out, remember?” Natalia scoffs from her side of the table.

Renata waves her daughter off. “Be polite. From what little information I’ve been able to gather, I can’t imagine what awful things must have gone on inside that house.”

“Zane kept me safe,” I explain firmly. “He always does.”

“Then I am grateful to you, Mr. Phillips. I suppose all I can give you is my personal guarantee that no harm will come to either of you whilst under my protection. All will be provided to you now that you’re part of the family.”

I shift forward in my chair. “Renata, I—”

“Abuela,” she corrects. “Please.”

“*Abuela*,” I say slowly. “Before Natalia brought us here, she said I’d give you a leg up in this war against the Becerra Cartel. What did she mean?”

“I will tell you everything you need to know after dinner. We wouldn’t want our food to get cold.”

“Please?” I insist. “I’ve gone my whole life without answers. All I want is the truth.”

Renata smiles patiently, patting the back of my hand with hers. She takes a deep breath, her eyes suddenly far away in a distant memory. “My youngest daughter, Liana, was one of my most brilliant commanders. She was in charge of our expansion into the States.”

Across the table, Natalia makes a noise as she shoves a piece of bread into her mouth. I pay her no mind, intrigued by my grandmother’s story. This is the most I’ve ever truly been told about my mother, and I’m thirsty to drink in every word.

“I sent her off to hold onto our territory in southern California,” Renata says, something sad dragging at her tone. “And then, roughly twenty-two years ago, we lost all contact.”

A chill shrieks down my spine.

Renata shakes her head. “That’s enough for tonight, my dear. Please, eat your fill. I’m sure you must be starving.”

Reluctantly, I pick at my plate. The food is delicious, but my appetite is absent. Questions swirl around in my head, dread licking at the nape of my neck.

What the hell happened to my mother, and why do I feel like it has something to do with me?

CHAPTER 25

I don't like this one bit.

Willow paces the length of the room, back and forth and back again. I can practically smell her brain frying as she turns over the day's events. She carries her stress in her shoulders, her anxiety in her grinding jaw.

"You need to sleep at some point," I tell her. "If you want, I can ask them to give me a separate room."

She shakes her head. "Won't they think that's weird? My husband and I sleeping in different beds? Besides, I'd feel a lot safer if you stayed."

"Then I'll stay."

Willow gives me an appreciative smile, but I can tell her heart isn't in it. The poor woman is so terribly exhausted, and I can't blame her. I'd be out of my mind, too, if I were in her shoes. The next time she passes, I gently grasp her wrist to keep her still.

"Come here, darling. You're going to wear a groove into the floor."

She takes a deep breath but allows me to guide her to the bed. I pull her onto my lap, her arms circling my neck while she straddles me. Our bodies press together, melding to each other's shape with ease.

"We're okay," I assure her in a whisper. "You're out. Arturo and Esteban will never hurt you again."

“You sound so sure,” she mumbles, a flash of fear and worry in her pretty blue eyes. “Last time, they—”

“This time, I’m going to keep you safe.” I press a kiss to her cheek. “You’re in another country, Willow. You’ve found your family.” I kiss her other cheek, adoring the way she melts against me further. “And most importantly, you’re with me. Okay?”

“Okay,” she mumbles, moving in to slot her lips against mine.

Our kisses are unhurried and tender. There’s no need to rush. We’re not at risk of being caught like we were at the compound. For now, it’s just the two of us. The rest of the world and all our troubles can wait until we’ve had our fill of each other.

It quickly grows into something more desperate, more frenzied. Willow combs her fingers through my hair while I slip my hand down the length of her spine. She rolls her hips against me, the warmth of her thighs sending pleasure straight to my cock.

“Zane,” she whimpers against me.

“I’m here, darling. I’m here.”

“Touch me. Please, touch me.”

I slip a hand beneath the fabric of her shirt, gliding my fingers over the smooth pass of her waist, her belly, and up towards her supple breasts. She cants toward me, a gasp bubbling past her lips when I lightly squeeze her nipple.

“My beautiful girl,” I growl. “Fuck, I want to eat you out until you scream my name. Would you like that, darling?”

The noise that escapes her makes my cock throb. Her cheeks are bright pink, her eyes dark with untamed lust, and her lips are swollen and glossy. She nods, breathless and quivering in my arms.

“I want you to tell me how good I taste,” she murmurs.

I smirk. “With pleasure, darling.”

I set her down gently on the bed, pulling off her clothes one piece at a time. I unwrap her like a Christmas present, a birthday gift, memorizing every crest and valley of her body. She's really, truly the most stunning woman I've ever laid eyes upon.

Settling between her thighs, I tease her folds with the tip of my tongue, beyond pleased to find her wet and ready for me. She tastes so nice and sweet, borderline addictive. When I draw tight circles against her clit, I grip her thighs to keep her steady as I determinedly work her toward the brink. Willow writhes beneath me, clutching the sheets as her chest rises and falls with labored breaths.

"Oh my God, Zane," she whines, her hips bucking. "More. More—I'm so close!"

It's a delight to have her come on my tongue, her wanton moans a symphony in my ear.

I'm quick to flip her onto her stomach, kissing a line down the length of her back, occasionally sucking hard enough to leave marks against her pale skin. I grab fistfuls of her perky ass, grinding my unattended erection between her cheeks.

"I wonder how many times I should make you come," I mutter, mostly to myself as she sighs against the sheets beneath her. "Three more times? Four? Maybe seven."

Willow giggles. I can't see her smile so much as hear it in the giddiness of her tone. "Feeling ambitious, are we?"

I shuck off my shirt and make quick work of my belt and zipper, dragging everything down to let my cock spring free. Just the sight of her parted legs and the curl of her hair over her delicate shoulders is enough to make me lose control, and when Willow rolls over and presses her hands to my chest, I damn near do.

"It'd be a shame if I were to thwart your plans with plans of my own," she hums, reaching between us to wrap her fingers around my shaft. She strokes slowly, carefully, the tight coil of heat in the pit of my stomach growing brighter and more intense with each pass.

“Fuck, Willow—”

“Lie down, husband,” she says, half serious and half teasing. The word is electric, making the little hairs on the back of my neck and arms stand on end.

“Say it again,” I rasp.

“Husband,” she whispers.

It’s not a joke this time. When she looks at me, I see nothing but adoration and amazement. She’s happy I’m her husband, regardless of whether or not our marriage was accidental. She’s pleased because she gets me all to herself.

I don’t believe in Lady Luck or Christmas miracles, but it was a miracle that Willow and I ran into each other that day. Never before have I experienced such wonderful oneness. When I’m with her, I feel whole.

Willow applies a bit of pressure to my chest, effectively getting me to lie down on the mattress. She peppers my skin with light kisses and gentle touches, working her way down to my abs and dark brown happy trail. She nibbles her bottom lip, smiling as she bends over to wrap her pretty mouth around the head of my cock. When she swirls her tongue, I nearly lose it.

“Fuck, darling. Just like that.”

“Like this?” she asks with a soft giggle, teasing me with kittenish licks. “Or like this?” She wraps her slender fingers around the base of my cock and strokes slowly, working in time with her devilishly hot mouth. “Or maybe like this?” Willow hollows her cheeks and sucks me down as far as she’s able, the heat of her tongue sending sparks across my vision. She bobs her head up and down, stroking me gently, moaning all the while.

I rake my fingers through her hair, gripping the roots—not hard enough to hurt, but firm enough to control her pace. “So fucking sexy with my cock in your mouth. God, you’re going to make me come, Willow. Ease up a little.”

“But I’m having fun,” she complains, popping off my cock for a moment.

I chuckle. “Come here, darling. Let me see you on top.”

Willow crawls on to my lap, bracing herself against my shoulders as she slowly lowers herself onto me. I sink into her slick heat, the walls of her pussy clenching around me as she takes me inch by inch. Her mouth falls open with a languid moan, her eyes screwed shut as she concentrates on her own pleasure. I brace her waist, helping her rise and sink on my cock. I moan, entirely enchanted by the sway of her hips and the bounce of her breasts and the flush of her skin as she climaxes.

“Ooh, God,” she whimpers, her pussy pulsing around me. “You make me feel so full, Zane. You’re so—”

I sit up and wrap my arms around her, using the momentum to roll her over and pin her on her back. I thrust into her, kissing her lips and forcing her mouth open with the tip of my tongue. We’re breathless, lost in the feel of one another. The bed creaks beneath us in protest, but I don’t stop. I piston in and out of her, aiming for her sweet spot with every pass.

“Come on, darling,” I grunt in her ear.

“Z-Zane!” she cries, circling my neck to pant in my ear. “Zane, right there! Right—” She chokes on her moan, gasping for breath as she comes yet again.

But I don’t stop. I want her to come undone, and I want to be the one responsible. I crave every inch of her. Every sound, taste, and sensation.

“My beautiful wife,” I growl against the crook of her neck. I drink in her sweet floral scent, nibble at her ear. “My beautiful wife’s so good at milking my cock.”

She drags her nails down my back, probably leaving marks. Good.

“Zane, please...”

I spill inside her with a low moan, pleasure pulsing through my veins as a climax consumes me. We hold onto each other tight, arms and legs knotted together, impossible to let go. She spoils me with kisses on my cheeks, the tip of my

nose, brushing lightly across my lips. Pride swells in my chest to see her so thoroughly satisfied.

It takes a few more minutes and a bit more will power before I'm finally able to pry myself from her arms. I tuck her up against me, pressing my lips to the top of her hair, perfectly content to watch as her eyes flutter closed. Willow's been through a lot the last twenty-four hours. If anyone deserves to rest, it's her.

I almost curse when my phone dings on the bedside table. Willow stirs, wakened by the sound.

"Go back to sleep, darling."

"Who is it?" she mumbles tiredly.

With a sigh, I fumble around in the dark for my phone. The screen nearly burns out my retinas when I turn it on. There's a message waiting for me. Several, in fact—all of them from Knox.

Finally finished the translation.

See attached.

What the hell did you get yourself into?

My brother has sent me several pages of translated text. Several lines immediately grab my attention.

The properties owned by Liana Allegra nee Marrones will heretofore be transferred to the ownership of her sole living heir, Willow Allegra, upon her eighteenth birthday in the event of Mrs. Allegra's death, as well as the monetary sum of \$50 million dollars to be held in a trust account by Mr. Arturo Allegra until the inheritor comes of age.

My mouth must have dropped open because Willow shifts onto her elbow.

“What is it?” she asks with a frown.

“How did you say your mother died again?”

“A car accident.”

“Something tells me it wasn’t an accident.”

I hand Willow my phone so she can read it with her own two eyes. Pure shock washes over her features, her whole body rigid and suddenly cold.

“Holy shit,” she whispers. “We need to show this to Renata.”

CHAPTER 26

“See?” I say as I hold Zane’s phone out for Renata to inspect. “I was supposed to inherit everything when I turned eighteen. In the event of my mother’s passing, I was supposed to...”

I trail off, my mind swirling.

Nothing makes sense, yet everything makes sense. I thought Arturo kept me locked away because he was a cruel, unfeeling bastard. Now I realize he did it because he wanted to keep Liana’s fortune, power, and territory all to himself. He made sure I was none the wiser—dependent on him and cut off from the rest of the world.

There’s the off chance that my mother really was killed in an accident but knowing how much of a weasel my father is, I can’t believe any of this is a coincidence. He deliberately hid my mother’s will from me, isolated me from the rest of my family, and basically held me hostage so he could keep what was supposed to be mine.

If my grandmother is at all concerned, she does an excellent job of hiding it. I’d expect nothing less from the leader of one of the most powerful cartels in both North and South America. She casually walks about her garden, checking her tropical plants before stopping in front of her pet snake’s enclosure.

“Do you know much about the Allegra faction?” Renata asks me.

I shake my head. “My father never discussed business in front of me.”

My grandmother takes a seat in what appears to be a well-loved wicker chair next to a large fern, running her fingers along the rich green leaves. “They were a smaller group, roughly twenty-some years ago. Little boys high off the smallest of power trips. They focused mainly on narcotics, but my people had the market cornered for ages. They were mostly a nuisance, too underfunded and without much manpower. I honestly didn’t expect them to last another two years.”

I take a seat in the chair across from her, picking at my nails. “What else can you tell me?”

“Arturo Allegra was a foot soldier. All my reports said he wasn’t a threat. Just a greedy child with no real business sense, but he was causing problems for us on the west coast. Disrupting deliveries of various goods of questionable origin.”

I shrug. “There’s no need to sugarcoat it, Abuela.”

Renata smiles gently. “Alright, then. Cocaine and other drugs. Liana was one of my most trusted generals. This life... She thrived in it. If there’s one thing I admired most about my youngest daughter, it was that she was a no-nonsense sort of woman. I told her to go to California to deal with this little rat problem of ours...”

I frown, confused. “I’m guessing things didn’t go as smoothly as you’d hoped?”

Renata sighs, but there isn’t a hint of irritation on her face. Only regret. “Love is a funny thing. It happens when you least expect it. They were married within the year. Liana didn’t give me all the details. The way she explained it, marrying Arturo Allegra was the easiest way to keep him from interfering with our business dealings. For a while, it actually worked.”

Cold washes over me, a sudden lump lodging in the back of my throat.

“I’m guessing their time in paradise didn’t last?” Zane asks. He’s taken up a spot between two potted ferns, keeping

his distance while staying within earshot.

Renata presses her lips into a thin line. “No, I suppose not.”

“What happened?” I whisper.

“What always happens, my dear. He got greedy.” My grandmother takes a deep breath, watching her snake curl up inside its tank beneath the warm afternoon sunshine. “It wasn’t long before I lost contact with my daughter. I can only guess what that monster did to her. If your treatment is anything to go by, I wouldn’t be surprised if he subjected Liana to the same kind of isolation.”

I don’t know whether I want to cry, scream, or throw up. Maybe a combination of all three. My heart thuds harshly against the inside of my ribcage, threatening to burst right out of my chest. The more I learn about my father, the more I’m disgusted by the fact I spent twenty-one years stuck under his thumb. I’ll never know for sure if my mother truly loved him, but I know without a shadow of a doubt that he never loved us. I grew up believing his lies, that the Marrones’ were all monsters, all the while living under the same roof as one.

I don’t think it’s possible for me to describe my rage or anguish. Arturo tried to take everything from. He *has* taken everything from me. All his wealth and power—*my* wealth and power—has been squandered to the point that he’s now Esteban’s lackey. Whatever my mother left me in her will probably isn’t there anymore...

But I’m hungry for revenge.

“He needs to pay,” I say firmly, staring off as if in a trance. “For everything he’s done. I want to make him pay.”

“Don’t worry, my dear,” Renata says, casually signaling to one of her maids to bring over a pot of tea. “Arturo Allegra will get what’s coming to him. You leave the fighting to us.”

I shake my head. “I want in.”

Out of the corner of my eye, I see Zane take a step forward. “Willow...”

“I’m serious, Abuela. I want to fight with you. I deserve justice, not just for me, but for my mother, too.”

“There’s a difference between justice and revenge, dear girl. Which do you want more?”

“Both. I can have my revenge and seek justice, too.”

“Do you even know how to fight?” Renata asks me, not unkindly. She sounds more concerned for my well being than anything else. “Have you ever fired a gun before?”

“Well, I mean, no. But I’ve held one.”

“Ever kill a man?”

“No.”

“What about hand-to-hand combat? Self-defense?”

“No,” I mumble sheepishly. “I always had guards for that.”

“My dear, I’m always in search of good soldiers, but I can’t in good conscience let you go out there when you’re untrained.”

“Then train me,” I insist. “Please, Abuela. I’ll do what I have to, but I want to be the one to make my father pay for what he’s done.”

Zane clears his throat, quickly approaching me. “I need to talk to you,” he says as he takes my hand and guides me to the other side of the courtyard. “What’s gotten into you?” he asks me in a hushed whisper.

“Don’t give me that look.”

“I got you the hell out of there to keep you safe. Not so you want to go running back into the chaos.”

“What would you have me do, Zane? Stay on the sidelines and do nothing?”

“Preferably, yes.”

I shake my head, adrenaline pumping through my bloodstream. “No. No, I’ve spent my whole life in a tower like goddamn Rapunzel. I’ve never been allowed to make my own choices. This... This is my choice.”

“Your choice is to fight in a cartel war? You’re smarter than this, Willow.”

“You don’t understand.”

“I do,” he says, cupping my face. “I do understand. But my job is to protect you. It always has been. And I can’t very well protect you if you throw yourself in harm’s way.”

“You’re not my bodyguard anymore, Zane!”

My words come out harsher and sharper than I mean them to. He steps back like I’ve struck him across the face. Everything’s different now, even though we don’t want to admit it out loud.

“Willow...”

“Nothing’s keeping you here,” I whisper. “I think it goes without saying that your contract is null and void.”

Zane stares at me, wordless. “I won’t go,” he says sternly. “I’m not leaving you here. I might not be your bodyguard anymore, but I am still your husband.”

“Stay if that’s what you want. But know nothing’s going to stop me from avenging my mother, from taking back what is rightfully mine. I’m tired of that man taking everything from me. Mark my words, Zane, I’m going to kill Arturo with my own two hands. And if you stand in my way...”

I trail off, unable to follow through with my threat. What will I do if Zane tries to stop me? I don’t think I could ever hurt him, but I’m desperate enough to try.

I clutch his arms, tilting my head up to better look him in the eye. “I know you want to keep me safe, so teach me.”

He immediately starts shaking his head. “No.”

“Teach me how to fight, Zane. What better way to protect me than to show me how to protect myself?”

Zane pulls away and walks off, suddenly out of reach.

“Where are you going?” I call after him, my words strained and caught in my throat.

“Back to our room. Find me when you’ve come to your senses.”

He disappears into the hacienda, leaving me stunned and listless in the middle of the courtyard. Behind me, the click click of sharp stiletto heels against the tiles reaches my ear.

“Why are men so—ugh?” Natalia asks with a roll of the eyes.

She’s dressed in a bright red pantsuit, complete with crimson blazer and pants, her black blouse tucked in neatly. There’s a long string of white pearls decorating her neck, her chocolate brown hair pulled up into an elegant low bun. Her gun, as always, is holstered securely to her hip.

Renata shakes her head. “Don’t be rude. He has a point.”

I walk toward my aunt, deflated but still determined. “Will you teach me?”

Natalia pulls a cigarette from her pocket, lighting up casually before taking a long drag. “What makes you think I want to?”

“You want to win this war,” I say easily. “You need more soldiers. So teach me everything you know and I’ll fight for you.”

She blows smoke out of her nostrils. “You’re not fighting for me, chiquita. You’d be fighting for the Marrones Family, which—quite frankly—you only just learned you’re a part of. If you ask me, I think you might be a mole.”

I cross my arms. “I’m not a mole.”

“I think it’s amusing how quickly your loyalties switched over. Cause for concern, I think.”

“My last name might be Allegra, but I have never once felt an ounce of loyalty to my father. Not when he’s spent my whole life treating me like a dog.” I grind my teeth, so sure in my decision I can feel every fiber of my being singing. “Train me and I’ll redefine the definition of loyalty.”

Natalia takes a long, contemplative drag of her cigarette, the tip burning bright red. “I’m a tough teacher,” she warns.

“I learn fast.”

“You could get hurt.”

“Then at least I’ll finally feel something.”

My aunt casts Renata a questioning glance. My grandmother simply nods. It’s all the permission Natalia needs.

“I have three rules,” she starts. “You show up on time, you don’t talk back, and if I catch you crying... you better not cry.”

I nod, eager and ready. “You have my word.”

“Excellent. We start now.”

CHAPTER 27

I land on my ass. My face. My back.

If I didn't know Natalia was on my side, I'd be convinced she was secretly working for Esteban and attempting to kill me before I could ever get my hands on him.

"Giving up already?" she taunts heartlessly. "I'm not going to take it easy on you just because you're my niece."

"At least let me catch my breath," I argue, struggling to pull myself upright.

Natalia comes at me with a swift left hook followed by a well-placed kick to the back of my knee. My body jerks forward, crumpling in on itself now that my joint's given up. I land on the hard tiles of the courtyard, groaning up at the sky in agony.

"You wanted me to whip you into shape," she says, "so that's exactly what I'm going to do. Now, quit your whining. If you want to hit me, hit me."

I let out a mighty roar, charging at Natalia with my fist raised—

She sidesteps me with ease.

With nothing to catch myself, I end up tumbling over the ground and into one of Renata's flower bushes. I'm quick to get on my feet, but my aunt leaves no time to think, only to react. I duck out of the way just in time to avoid being nailed in the face. I give Natalia a hard shove to put distance between us, mustering all the force I can.

“Better,” Natalia says. “But not good enough. You telegraph all your actions, which makes it incredibly easy for me to defend myself.”

I brush my hair out of my face, redoing my ponytail slipping from its elastic. “Can’t you just teach me how to shoot a gun? I won’t have to worry about telegraphing if I can kill them at a distance.”

“True, but that’d be taking the easy way out. You need to be able to think on your feet. What happens if your gun jams?”

“Well, then I’d—”

“You’d be dead,” she says bluntly.

I wipe the sweat from my brow. We’ve been at it for hours and I feel like I’ve hit a wall. I’m starting to wonder if Natalia likes treating me like a punching bag. I almost say a quiet prayer when one of the maids arrives with our lunches. I don’t know how much more pummeling I can handle.

Natalia takes a seat in Renata’s favorite wicker chair. I sit across from her next to Guadalupe’s glass tank. She doesn’t freak me out nearly as much as she did, but I’ll be hard pressed to ever take up my grandmother’s offer to hold it.

“Where’s Abuela?” I ask. “I haven’t seen her all day.”

“She’s in the middle of a strategy meeting. We lost another one of my brothers last night. Your uncle.”

I frown. “I’m so sorry.”

Natalia shrugs, surprisingly unmoved. “It is what it is. We’ll have time to mourn after we win. No sense in crying now; otherwise, his death will have been in vain.”

“How do you do it?” I ask quietly, sipping my bubbly lemonade. It’s so deliciously sour and sweet that it makes my mouth pucker.

“Do what?”

“Be so... detached?”

“You get used to it. This way of life... it necessitates it. You can love, but never with your whole heart.” My aunt picks

at one of her cucumber sandwiches. “That husband of yours... I’d cut him loose, if I were you.”

I shift uncomfortably in my seat. “Excuse me?”

“The fewer attachments you have in the world, the safer you’ll be.”

“That’s a lonely way of thinking.”

“It’s a smart way of thinking.” She sets her food down, studying me with her cold, dark eyes. “Did I ever mention my kids? Your cousins.”

“No.”

“That’s because they’re dead.”

My stomach churns. I don’t think Natalia’s a great conversationalist. The whiplash is enough to make my head hurt.

“I’m really sorry to hear that,” I admit honestly.

“It was a long time ago,” she says, her eyes distant and unfocused. “Enrique was eight. Yolanda was seven.”

“What happened?” I ask carefully.

“Car bomb.”

Dread tears at my insides. “Holy shit.”

“I went to pick them up from school. I parked the car by the curb. Thought nothing of it. I had to speak with their teachers for a moment and told them to get in the car and wait for me. Next thing you know...” Natalia exhales sharply, the features of her face hard as stone. “We’d been having some territorial squabbles with a lesser cartel. They wanted to make a name for themselves and come after one of the Marrones’ higher-ranking generals.”

“And they chose you?”

She nods slowly. It’s the closest I’ve ever seen her behave even remotely human. “You say you want to fight, but are you prepared for what that means?”

“Of course—”

“Don’t answer so quickly. Learn to take your time. The ability to think clearly under stress is an invaluable skill.” She leans forward, like a jaguar waiting to pounce. “Zane Phillips... Do you love him?”

I swallow, my throat suddenly dry. Her question takes me off guard.

In truth, Zane and I haven’t really spoken over the last few weeks. Not since our argument. It’s been awfully lonely returning to our shared room every night only to find him already asleep and gone first thing every morning. He’s been making himself scarce around the hacienda. I don’t think he really likes it here, but I can’t exactly blame him. He’s miles from home, far away from his family. He’s a good man trapped in the criminal underbelly that I dragged him into.

Our roles are reversed now.

He’s stuck in one place with nowhere to go.

“I care for him deeply,” I answer.

Natalia clicks her tongue. “Caring for someone deeply is different than loving them.”

“No offense, but my personal life really isn’t your concern.”

“Actually, it is. You really don’t get it, do you?”

“What?”

“The Becerra Cartel... They don’t just go after you. They’re a ‘big picture’ kind of organization. They go after your family, too. Nobody’s safe. That means you, your husband, your husband’s family, too.”

“But they have nothing to do with it.”

“I bet you Esteban won’t see it that way. They’re enemies by association. That’s why you gotta cut that man loose. The less collateral damage, the better. It’ll fuck with your head otherwise.” Natalia pulls a cigarette and lighter out of her jacket pocket. “That’s enough for today. Clean yourself up. Tomorrow, I’ll teach you how to shoot a man at a hundred yards.”

I return to my room in a trance, mulling my aunt's words over and over until they're ingrained in my memory.

Do you love him?

My gut tells me *yes*. Of course I love Zane. How could I not after everything we've been through? After everything he's shielded me from? My gratitude toward him runs deep, and my love for him, deeper still. I just haven't afforded myself the chance to truly think about it, to reflect. Loving someone isn't necessarily a foreign concept to me, but it is new and scary. I've been on my own for so long that really, truly letting someone in is a daunting thought. But if I were to let someone in, Zane would undoubtedly be the one I'd do it for.

He isn't in our room when I get there. I genuinely have no idea what he gets up to during the day. With a heavy sigh, I head to the bathroom across the hall and draw myself a bath.

My body is covered in purpling bruises courtesy of my aunt. My palms, elbows, and knees are covered in shallow scrapes. Dark circles hover beneath my eyes, and my hair is a sweaty mess. My muscles are unbelievably tight, burning with every minor movement I make. I sink into the water, which is just shy of scalding, attempting to wash away the ache in my bones.

The steam and the scent of lavender bath salts do little to ease my mind.

The less collateral damage, the better.

I think about Natalia's story, about how she lost her children. My heart aches for her. I can't imagine what it must have been like. I'd never truly been allowed to spend much time with my mother. Arturo did a very good job of separating me from her influence early on, so her passing felt... numbing. Not as earth-shattering as it could have been. But to lose not just one, but two of your children in one fell swoop and still become a stone-cold cartel leader?

Natalia really is built differently.

The more I turn it over in my head, the more I wonder if I belong here.

I don't want that for me, or for Zane. I can't even imagine him being gone. Back in December, when Arturo nabbed me at the airport and I thought I'd never see Zane again... Those were a dark couple of weeks. I'd argue that he means even more to me now than he did around Christmastime. If something were to happen to Zane, if he were taken away from me...

It'd break my heart.

As I slowly lather shampoo into my wet hair, I wonder if my aunt is right. Zane didn't sign up for this. I'm not being fair to him. My decisions were based on anger and pain, but that doesn't mean he has to suffer for my choices. I don't want to suffer for my choices. Is this whole endeavor a mistake?

Three soft knocks sound at the bathroom door.

"Willow?" Zane's voice calls from the other side.

"Come in."

He enters the bathroom and promptly shuts the door, slowly walking over to the side of the porcelain bathtub. He kneels beside me on the fluffy white bathmat, casually dipping his fingers into the water.

"I was just thinking about you," I admit, my voice a quiet murmur.

"Oh?"

"I've missed you."

"Me too, darling. You've been busy."

I stroke my fingers over his cheek, sighing contently. It's odd how quickly I can relax when he's near. I don't really know what to say to him except, "I'm sorry."

He reaches up to press his hand against mine, keeping my fingers against his cheek. "Not your fault."

"What have you been up to?"

“Renata’s been keeping me busy.”

“Really? Doing what?”

He makes a face, like he’s not sure how to describe it. “Consultation work. She has a few raids planned, and she wanted my expertise.”

Something close to guilt tugs at my heartstrings. The irony isn’t lost on me. An ex-Navy SEAL working for the cartel? Lawful good working for chaotic evil? It doesn’t sit right with me, this world I’ve accidentally exposed him to.

Zane frowns, huffing to himself as he inspects my knuckles. They’re bruised and cracked from all the punches I’ve been throwing. “I’ll get you some ice.”

Before he can leave, I thread my fingers through his. “Later. Just... Will you stay for bit?”

“Of course, darling. Anything for you.” He brushes a few loose strands of my hair away from my face. “You know, I’ve been doing a little exploring.”

“Is that so?”

“Just around the property. Did you know there’s a small river near here? Just down the hill. How about we take a walk?”

“Ugh, more moving?”

Zane chuckles. “The view is beautiful. A change of scenery might be good for you.”

“And if my legs give out halfway?”

“I’ll carry you on my back.”

A smile stretches across my lips. “A walk sounds lovely.”

CHAPTER 28

The grass is taller near the riverbed, the gentle current trickling over smooth rocks and pebbles that make up the shallow shoreline. We are downhill from the hacienda. No doubt a strategic decision, building up where its residence has a vantage point in all directions. Down here, though, the tree line is thick and the paths rarely used. The property's edge goes on for another few yards, but Willow and I are effectively alone.

One look at Willow is all I need to know that she's thriving. Before, when Arturo had her under lock and key, she was pale and thin and sluggish. Now that she's free and able to spread her wings, I can't help but notice the light in her eyes and the joy in her soul. She's developed a lovely tan with all her time spent training with Natalia in the courtyard. There's a gorgeous flush to her cheeks and an unrivaled brilliance in the way she smiles. She's toned up, too, everything about her stronger and prouder than before.

She is, and always has been, a force of nature.

"Is this where you've been coming the past week?" she asks me, stepping toward the water's edge. Willow allows her shoe to hover just over the river's surface.

"Not all the time. There's a library in the east wing. I've been spending my afternoons there sitting in on strategy meetings."

"There's a library?" she asks, incredulous. "How did I not know that?"

“Too busy being bullied by your aunt, I think.”

“That’s probably it.”

“You’re doing much better,” I point out. “Reflexes are a little slow, but that comes with more training.”

Willow grins at me. “You’ve been watching?”

“Consider it professional curiosity.”

“Mm-hmm,” she says dryly. “Or is it because you’re worried I might get hurt?”

“That’s a given, darling.”

She rolls her eyes at me as she toes off her shoes, dipping her feet into the water. She doesn’t wade out too far, and the current is nowhere near strong enough to sweep her away, but I follow her regardless. Willow bends down to sift through the rocks, picking one up to inspect before chucking it away. She continues her search with a small reminiscent smile.

“You know,” she begins, “my mother taught me to skip rocks when I was a little girl. It’s one of the only memories I have of her.”

“Tell me about her,” I say.

Willow skips the rock across the water. It skids three times before sinking to the bottom. “My memory of her is fuzzy. I think it might have been when I was five? I think it was in the middle of summer somewhere. I remember she bought me ice cream and we spent some time by the water.” She takes a deep breath and tries skipping another stone. “I wish I had a picture of her,” she mumbles. “Arturo removed all of them after her death. I wasn’t even allowed to talk about her. It’s like she didn’t even exist.”

I frown; this new revelation is just as disturbing as it is unsurprising. I’d already made up my mind that Arturo Allegra was at the top of my list. Before I knew the full extent of Willow’s situation, before I saw her mistreatment firsthand, I knew I was going to ruin whoever was responsible.

“Maybe you can ask your grandmother if she has photos,” I suggest.

“I just might. It’d be cool, seeing pictures of her from when she was younger.” She smiles to herself, skips another stone. This one sinks to the bottom after only one bounce. “I wonder if I look like her.”

I join her, skipping a rock all the way across the width of the river. “I bet you do. I sincerely doubt you got your good looks from Arturo.”

She giggles. “God forbid.”

I send my next stone flying. It bounces five times before breaking the water’s surface.

“How are you so good at this?” Willow asks.

“My brothers and I used to go to this summer camp many years ago. We’d dip out of group activities to play by the water.”

She glances at me out of the corner of your eye. “Summer camp? Talk about fancy.”

“Not really. Our father would sign us up so he had an excuse not to look after us. Fatherhood didn’t really agree with the man. While he distracted himself with the bottom of a beer bottle, I was looking after my brothers.”

“I guess we have shitty fathers in common, huh?”

“Maybe that’s why we get along so well.”

“Do you miss them?” she asks softly. “Heath and Knox.”

“Of course.”

“Do you want to go home?”

I pause to look at her directly, sensing something lingering just below in subtext. “Do you want me to go home?”

Willow nibbles on her bottom lip. “I don’t want you to get hurt.”

“Right back at you.”

“This war has nothing to do with you. It’s not fair of me to make you stay.”

“You’re involved,” I argue. “Therefore, it has everything to do with me.”

“Zane—”

“I appreciate the concern, darling, but I make my own decisions. Where you go, I go. All I want is to keep you safe.”

“But why?”

“Because you’re my wife. And I love you.”

Willow blinks at me, surprised. “Y-you do?”

I take a step toward her, taking her hands in mine. I make it my new mission to warm her frigid fingers between my palms. “I know it’s crazy and probably too fast but fuck it. God, Willow... I can’t explain it. It feels like I’ve known you a lifetime. It doesn’t make sense when I try to rationalize it, so I won’t. All I know is that I love you and you’re my wife—accidental or not—and I’m going to take care of you.”

She closes the remaining space between us and hops up on her toes, crashing her lips against mine. Willow clings to me, pulling away long enough to rasp, “I love you, too.”

I kiss her like my life depends on it. For some reason, it feels like it does. Like if I can’t hold her, I might come apart at the seams. If I can’t taste her, I’ll forget myself. If I can’t look upon her sweet smile and hear her laugh, I might as well be hollow inside. Everything about Willow—from the moment she pulled a gun on me to this very instant—has awakened something inside me. A purpose. A reason to fight off the rest of the world with my bare hands so long as she has a chance of being happy.

Screw morals. Fuck being right or wrong.

I’d raze it all to the ground if she asked me to.

Willow deepens the kiss, the tip of her tongue sliding out to bribe my lips apart. I step forward, guiding her away from the water’s edge until I have her back firmly pressed against the wide trunk of a tree. Her breath hitches when I dip my hand beneath the fabric of her shirt, tracing my fingers over the curve of her lovely hips.

“Here?” she breathes.

“Here,” I confirm.

She grins devilishly. “You, sir, are a wild, wild man.”

“You haven’t seen anything yet.”

There’s no eloquence in our haste to remove our clothes, just a general fumbling for our belts and the undoing of our zippers. I turn Willow around so her hands brace against the tree, brushing her hair aside to hungrily suck marks against the crook of her neck. I greedily drag her jeans down, exposing her round ass and lean thighs, my cock throbbing at the sight of her bent over and waiting for me.

She’s so wet and ready that I’m able to bury myself deep inside her with next to no resistance. Her walls clench around me, welcoming me in. Willow’s soft moan is mine alone to hear, the way her body moves against me utterly divine. She’s braced against the tree, and I’m slowly thrusting in and out of her, one hand wrapped around to slip between her legs and tease her swollen clit. She throws her head back against my shoulder, her mouth falling open as pleasure takes hold.

“Look at all these bruises,” I grumble, caressing her skin as tenderly as possible. “I’m going to have a word with Natalia.”

“It’s just a part of training.”

“Nobody hurts you, darling. Not on my watch.”

“Z-Zane—”

“Fuck, you’re so nice and tight. I don’t think I’m going to last.”

“That’s okay,” she moans. “I want you to feel good.”

“Come with me, darling. Come on, that’s it. That’s—”

Release hits us both, hard and fast and overwhelming. Willow shudders against me, jolts of pleasure zapping through her. My own ecstasy whites my mind, nothing but pure satiation left in its wake.

Willow giggles as she turns toward me, her cheeks rosy and her hair a wild mess. “Well, damn. Sex in the great outdoors is surprisingly fun. We should do it more often.”

“I could arrange that.”

“Oh?”

“Sure. I could buy a plot of land somewhere. Build a house for us. We could fuck on every inch of our property.”

Her smile stretches wide, the corners of her eyes crinkling. “You’d build a house for us? Do you even have any construction experience?”

“I’d figure it out. Or we’d live in a tent.”

Willow laughs, light and bubbly. “I’d love to live in a tent. It sounds fun.”

“You won’t be saying that when the bugs come after you —”

A gunshot rips through the air. Willow and I look at one another. There’s another gunshot, and then another. Before we know it, it sounds like an all-out battle.

“I think it’s coming from up the hill,” I say.

“The hacienda,” Willow gasps. “Are we under attack?”

“Stay here and hide,” I warn, moving toward the sound of conflict.

“Absolutely not! If my aunt and grandmother are in danger, then I’m going to help.”

I grind my teeth. This isn’t ideal. I can’t leave Willow unattended in case someone nabs her, but I don’t want to lead her directly into the fight, either.

“We have to go,” she insists. “They need our help.”

“Fine,” I grumble. “But you stay close to me, understand?”

Willow nods. “I’m right behind you.”

CHAPTER 29

WILLOW

They attack from the north. I can't get a clear view from where we're hidden in the bushes, but the south wing of the hacienda is largely unguarded.

"That's our way in," I mutter under my breath.

I'm about to step forward, but Zane grabs my shoulder. "No. We're not going inside."

"But my family needs help!"

"And risk getting pinned down just like them? Hell, no."

"Then what are we supposed to do?"

Zane reaches for the guns in his shoulder holsters and hands me one. "Natalia teach you how to shoot yet?"

I gulp. "No."

"It's easy. Here." He holds up his own weapon to demonstrate. "Always keep your eyes open. Arm steady, but never lock your elbow. Make sure the safety is off. Keep your finger off the trigger until you're ready to fire. Don't aim for the head, aim for the chest. It's a bigger target. Do you understand?"

I suck in a shaky breath. "I think so."

"And remember, don't hesitate. It's either you or them, and they won't show you the courtesy of mercy."

We hug the tree line, keeping as low to the ground as possible to remain out of sight. Zane leads the way, swift and practiced. I've never seen him move like this, never actually

seen him in action before. He's a predator, trained and patient and ready to pounce in a moment's notice. We eventually make our way around the front.

It's absolute carnage.

Bodies litter the ground. I can't tell friend from foe. The north-facing windows of the hacienda have all been shot out, beautiful stained glass fractured and irreparable. It's a constant barrage of gunfire, Esteban's men firing at the defending occupants.

My heart seizes in my chest. I really hope Renata and Natalia are okay.

Zane signals with his hands, pointing at a man who's hidden himself behind his vehicle, using it as a shield. No words are exchanged between Zane and me, but his meaning is loud and clear. I keep my weapon raised and ready as he creeps out from our hiding spot, approaching from behind with the stealth of a puma.

Zane is on the man in the blink of an eye, arm whipping around the man's throat. Zane squeezes with such force that I swear I hear the gunman's head snap right off his head. I'm not at all surprised when his limp body slumps to the ground. Now that the coast is clear, Zane waves me over. I take a deep breath and will my shaky hands to still. This is no time to be afraid.

Our new vantage point gives us a better view of what the Marrones are up against. It seems I was worried for nothing. The Becerra's have effectively been picked off one by one, only five or six armed men remaining. Now that we've managed to flank them without being spotted, they're as good as finished.

Up ahead, two men stand with their backs toward us. Zane gives me a nod. We're moving in, and this time, I'm going to get my hands dirty. We need to take them out at the same time or risk giving up our position. With my gun in hand, we advance as a team.

My heart races. My God, am I about to kill a man? I told myself I'd do what I have to, but now that the moment's upon me? I draw closer and closer, the tip of my gun pointed directly at the base of the man's skull. It'd be so easy. All I have to do is pull the trigger, yet—

I freeze, a deer in the headlights.

But Zane was right. It's him or me. What the hell am I panicking for?

It takes me a moment too long to push the doubt out of my head. The man turns, noticing my presence. He reacts quickly, ripping the gun from my hand and throwing me off kilter. I hit the ground, winded and dazed. Before I know it, he's on top of me with his gun pointed directly between my eyes.

My body moves on its own. Weeks upon weeks of training with Natalia has imbued me with enough muscle memory to react by itself. I've been in this position before, I've been pinned and on the brink of defeat, but now I'm armed with the knowledge of how to disarm him.

Before he even has a chance to pull the trigger, I twist my body out of the way. He fires, but the bullet pierces the ground instead of my skull. My ears ring loudly, the sound deafening. My attacker attempts to shoot me again, but before he can I drive my knee up into his groin while simultaneously ripping his own gun out of his hand.

We both fumble for the weapon, covered in dirt and sweat and gunpowder. No matter how hard I strain, I can't reach it, but thankfully neither can he.

So he resorts to strangling me instead.

The pressure on my windpipe makes my eyes water. My lungs burn, somehow about to burst and deflate at the same time. Black encroaches on the edges of my vision.

Fuck. Fuck. This is a shitty way to die. Just when I'm on the brink of passing out, Zane fires. My assailant's body slumps to the ground. I try not to think about the bloody mess. If I do, I may very well vomit my guts out. I gasp and wheeze, one hand flying to my sore throat.

“I’ve got you,” Zane says, already by my side. “Deep breaths, darling. You’re safe.”

I cling to him, tears streaking down my cheeks. “Shit, I— Why didn’t I shoot him? I should have—I’m sorry. I’m so sorry.”

He holds me close, pressing a light kiss to my hair. “It’s okay, Willow. It’s okay.”

“No, it’s not! He could have killed me. I thought I was ready! I should have held my own.”

“Nobody’s blaming you, darling. You’re never really ready to take a life.” Zane helps me to my feet, but I don’t trust my wobbly legs to hold me upright. “It’s done, Willow. Just relax.”

The tips of my fingers and toes buzz. Everything is too hot and too cold and too loud. It’s not until several long moments later that I realize there’s nothing to listen to. No more gunfire, no more angry shouting or screams of pain. The fight is over.

And I didn’t help a damn bit.

“Willow!” Renata calls to me. She rushes out the front door, looking pale and frantic as she checks me over. “Are you alright? Did they hurt you?”

I shake my head numbly. “No. No, I’m fine, Abuela.”

“Those fuckers!” Natalia screeches, coming out with a machine gun held up with one hand. “Let me at them, *Mama*. Let me go to them and take them all out. They’re getting too fucking bold, coming here to attack us at our home.” Natalia kicks one of the dead men at her feet. “We’re wasting time here, sitting around in our fortress. I want to take the fight to them.”

Renata sighs heavily as she takes my hand and gives my fingers a comforting squeeze. “Let our captains deal with the matter.”

“No,” Natalia snaps. “Remember what you always told me when I was a little girl? If you want something done right, you have to do it yourself.”

“Our men are thinning out Becerra’s numbers. There are too many of them to take on directly.”

“You’re not getting it. Why waste time picking off the ants when we can go straight to the source and destroy their colonies?”

I frown. “What are you trying to say?”

Natalia rolls her eyes. “We go after their warehouses. Drugs, ammunition, money laundering depots. The only way to stop Becerra from coming after us is to take away his income. No money, no hired guns. No hired guns, no army to protect his sorry ass.”

Renata nods slowly. “Mr. Phillips and I have discussed this option at length. It was too dangerous to truly consider it before, but now...” My grandmother turns to face Zane. “What do you think?”

Zane’s expression is hard and impassable. His hand is firm against the small of my back, his way of telling me he’s here for me. “If we move quickly, we might be able to catch them off guard. They expect this attack to leave us scrambling. If we gather the troops and hit them hard and fast, they won’t have any time to recover.”

Renata nods sagely. “Then let’s do it. Natalia, call your brothers. We’ll have targets for each of them.”

“And what about me?” I ask, still burning inside from my earlier failure. “I want to help, too.”

“You’ll go with Zane,” my grandmother says. “There’s a warehouse, roughly four counties over. It used to belong to us, but Becerra stole it several years ago. It’s an ammunition stockpile. If you and Zane can destroy it, it’ll leave them largely defenseless.”

I look at Zane. He’s so resolute and sure of himself, confident in his ability to get the job done. To be honest, it’s inspiring. I want to be able to contribute, to prove I’m not some useless bird lost without her cage. I refuse to hesitate next time. I won’t make the same mistake twice.

“Let’s do it,” I say.

Zane nods. “Go get ready. We leave within the hour.”

CHAPTER 30

On paper, the plan is simple.

Since we already know the location of the ammunition warehouse, it's a simple matter of rigging the place to blow. We can level the whole place in one go and hit the road before anyone realizes what's happened. If we can destroy even half of their stockpile, it could still cripple the Becerra Cartel enough to tip the scales in our favor.

It's an in and out sort of job.

Hopefully.

Willow and I are joined by a handful of Marrones lieutenants, handpicked by Renata herself to assist us in our mission. Many hands make quick work, as the old saying goes, and it also helps that they have a better lay of the land. We work under the cover of night. No lights, just the stars and the silver glow of the moon. The warehouse sits on the edge of a small town that boasts a few thousand residents. Slipping in and out of here undetected should be a piece of cake.

But I probably shouldn't get ahead of myself.

Willow and I are hidden at the top of a hill beneath the dense foliage of trees and low shrubs. She has a pair of binoculars pressed to her eyes, her lips pressed into a thin line as she surveys the area. The angry red welts on her throat visible over her jacket's collar give me pause.

I'm haunted by all the things I could have done during the attack on the hacienda. I should have been faster, fought harder, got to her sooner. I don't blame her for freezing. It's a

normal, human reaction. I'm more than convinced Willow is too good, too innocent for the atrocities of war. It's not easy to take a life, yet I know she's been quietly blaming herself this whole time.

"I see movement," she murmurs.

"Guards?"

"No, there's a car coming."

"Probably a shift change," I say. "How are our boys doing?"

She moves the binoculars to take a look. We've sent several of our soldiers ahead, dressed in all black to set up remote explosives around the warehouse. I have the detonator in hand, but I can't set it off until I've got visual confirmation that everything is set and our men have retreated to a safe distance.

"Not yet," she answers, her brow furrowing. "What's taking them so long? They should be finished by now."

"Patience," I remind. "One wrong move and they'll blow themselves up."

"That car's still coming. It's pulling up to the front of the warehouse." She perks up slightly. "Someone's getting out of the back..."

"I'm sure it's nothing to—"

"Holy shit!" she gasps. "It's Arturo and Esteban."

I tense, reaching for my own binoculars. It takes me a second to put them in focus, but once I spot their frames in the dim lighting, there's no denying it. They're here. They're here and this could be the opportunity of a lifetime. If we take them both out along with their weapons, the Becerras and Allegra are as good as finished.

Beside me, Willow is as pale as a sheet. She's barely breathing, her body tense with rage and unchecked stress.

"Our last man is out," she confirms, her words low and raspy. "Set the bombs off. Quickly, before Arturo and Esteban

leave.”

I raise the detonator and click the bright red button on top.

Nothing happens.

I try again. No explosions.

“Shit,” I hiss.

“What’s going on?” Willow asks, alarmed.

“One of the connections might be faulty. I can’t trigger the bombs at this distance. We’re going to have to get closer.”

Willow’s eyes widen. “Closer to the explosions?”

“It’s the only way.”

Arturo and Esteban are in deep conversation, gesturing toward the warehouse they stole from the Marrones. Probably discussing business, distribution strategies. For now, they’re none the wiser of our presence.

“We move to plan B,” I say, grabbing my rifle. “If we can’t blow them up, we’ll do this the old-fashioned way.” I signal to one of our lieutenants, who promptly nods and grabs his own gun. It’s a game of telephone, my silent command passing through our men swiftly and effectively.

“Shit, they’re getting back in their car,” Willow grumbles.

“Let’s move!”

We rush in, guns blazing and bullets firing. It’s chaotic and dangerous, but it has to be done. Is it honorable for us to sneak up on them like this? Of course not. But they didn’t seem to have any qualms when they did the same to us at the hacienda. War is dirty and vile and unfair. At the end of the day, all that matters is coming out alive.

In the darkness, I see Arturo and Esteban hurry back to their car. I aim for them, but the bullets hardly make a dent. The vehicle’s frame is reinforced, as are the windows. Beside me, Willow aims for the tires. She’s already figured it out. They may have the advantage of cover, but they’re sitting ducks if rendered immobile.

She manages to take out one of the front tires. We're about to take out the other three when the window rolls down. From out the small gap, Esteban shoves the point of his gun out and starts firing right at us.

"Look out!" I shout at her, shoving her out of the way.

There's no time to get to her. I don't see the bullet so much as hear it, the wet thud of something grazing her side. Willow doesn't fall, but it's clear she's hurt. Red soaks into her shirt, her body hunched over in pain. She keeps firing until she runs out of bullets.

I need to get her out of here.

I place my body between her and Esteban's line of fire. A bullet whizzes past my ear, but I don't let that frighten me. My training kicks in. I'm grace under pressure. My mission has changed from destroying the warehouse to getting my woman to safety. I pick her up in my arms and retreat behind the safety of a large concrete barrier, setting her down on the grass to inspect her wounds. Our men continue to fight, determined to see this through.

Willow groans in agony. "I'm fine!"

"The fuck you are," I snap, swiftly lifting her shirt up to inspect the damage.

The bullet's gone straight through her, piercing her side just below her lowest rib. There's blood everywhere, but I don't think it hit anything vital.

"Don't stop fighting!" she insists. "I'll be okay. Don't let them get away!"

I ignore her. She's hopped up on adrenaline and numb with shock. I know from experience that she's really going to feel it in a few minutes. I'm quick to rip up the base of my shirt to press against her wound, staunching the bleeding.

Behind us, the squeal of tires. I don't have to look to know that Arturo and Esteban are making their escape.

Willow whines, sweat dripping from her brow. "Zane, please! They're leaving! Just—"

“You’re more important,” I tell her firmly.

“I fucked up again,” she says, choking on a sob. “I should have shot out all their tires.”

I press my forehead to hers, looking deeply into her eyes. “You’re being too hard on yourself, Willow. You did great.”

“I got shot.”

“But you were brave.”

“We could have gotten them if it weren’t for me.”

I shake my head. “No, darling. We could have gotten them if someone hadn’t screwed up and our explosives went off according to plan.”

The fight is over. I can’t tell how many losses we’ve taken, but I’m sure as hell that the Becerra’s fared far worse. I pick Willow up again and start toward our base camp on the other side of the property line.

“Blow this place up,” I order one of the lieutenants. “Do it fucking properly this time.”

“W-where are you taking me?” Willow asks, looking obscenely pale.

“To the hospital. I don’t have the supplies I need here to take care of you myself.”

“But they’ll ask questions.”

“They can try.”

“Zane—”

“I’m not going to let you bleed out on me, darling. Just hang on.”

A sense of urgency floods me. She’s weak and barely coherent by the time I lay her down in the backseat. I don’t think I’ve ever driven so fast in my entire life, one hand on the steering wheel while the other reaches back to hold her hand. Willow’s frightfully cold to the touch, her grip weakening by the second.

“Stay with me, Willow,” I urge, speeding through the narrow streets of the town. “Where the fuck is the hospital?”

“Z-Zane...”

“Don’t worry, darling. I’ve got you. Everything’s going to be fine.”

“The bleeding...won’t stop.”

In the reflection of the rear-view mirror, I can see her struggling to stay awake. Things are taking a turn from bad to worse. Maybe I was wrong—maybe the bullet did hit something vital.

“Keep your eyes open, Willow,” I tell her firmly, shouting over the loud grumble of the car engine. “You stay with me now.”

I nearly crash the car into the curb just outside the small hospital’s emergency room. I don’t even bother turning the car off, kicking open the driver’s door to circle around and pull Willow out of the back. I rush inside, the hard metallic smell of her blood smearing all over my shirt.

“I need a doctor!” I shout, startling a few of the nearby nurses.

One of them approaches me, but I don’t understand a word she’s saying.

“I need someone who speaks English. Get me someone who speaks English!”

A petite nurse in her early twenties steps forward, understandably spooked. “I speak a little.” Her accent is heavy, but I understand her.

“I need a doctor. My wife’s been shot.”

“Put her on the stretcher.”

It’s a frenzy but organized. The hospital staff get to work, checking Willow’s vitals as they rush her off down the hall. When I try to go with, one of the nurses stops me.

“No puedes, señor!”

“What?”

“No further. Hospital staff only.”

“I need to be with her.”

“We will do what we can,” she insists, “but you cannot go further than this point.”

I nearly choke, my throat so dry it's like I've swallowed a handful of glass shards. I know she's right. I'd only be in the way. Even though it kills me not to be with her, there's nothing more I can do for Willow. I have to trust the doctors and let them do their job.

I anxiously pace the waiting room, ignoring the stares from the staff and the other patients. Anxiety stabs me in the chest. What a fucking nightmare. If Willow doesn't pull through...

I shake the thought from my mind. No. I can't think like that. She's going to make it. She has to.

Once I've managed to collect myself, I pull out my phone.

“Is it done?” Renata asks me when she picks up.

“It is, but Willow's been shot.”

“Where are you?” she questions, her tone surprisingly even. I admire this woman. She has nerves of steel. I suppose it's a given considering how long she's been running one of the most powerful cartels in modern history.

“The hospital in Lagura.”

“Hold tight. I'm on my way.”

“Copy that.”

“Oh, and Mr. Phillips?”

“What?”

“If my granddaughter dies, I will kill you.”

Renata hangs up without another word.

CHAPTER 31

WILLOW

Until today, I've never taken a bullet. I can say with one-hundred percent certainty that I don't want to do it again. Zero out of ten experience, would not recommend.

It's like being punched and pierced and sliced and ripped open all at once. The pain radiates, ebbing and flowing with each one of my slow heartbeats, burning like the open crater of a fallen meteorite. I'm pretty sure I've got painkillers in my system because it takes way too long for my brain to put everything together. I'm groggy as hell, cramped and stiff, and more than a little aware of the annoying ringing sound in my ears.

I'm hyper aware of everything.

The white fluorescent lights above me burn my retinas. The sheets I'm lying on are scratchy and uncomfortable. My skin is impossibly tight and my eyes feel like they're about to swell so large they'll pop out of their sockets.

I grope around for something to hold onto, delirious and confused. When did I black out? What happened? And most importantly, where's—

“Zane.”

Someone takes my hand. I can barely see past the tears blurring my vision, but I don't need to look to know it's him. I recognize the familiar roughness of his palm, the warmth of his fingers.

“I'm here, Willow.”

“Where are we? What’s going on?”

“Relax, darling. We’re at the hospital. The doctors say you’re going to be perfectly fine.”

“But the warehouse—”

“Up in smoke.”

“Esteban and my father?”

Zane’s jaw tightens as he exhales, giving me the smallest, almost imperceptible of head shakes. I’m disappointed, but not surprised given how spectacularly unprepared we were for their arrival.

I attempt to prop myself up on my elbows, but the pain in my stomach leaves me winded. I’ve been cleaned up and changed into a thin blue hospital gown, my ruined clothes nowhere in sight.

“Let’s go home,” I say. “We need to tell my grandmother what happened. If Esteban and Arturo are near our territory, maybe she can—”

Zane places his hand on my shoulder, applying the slightest bit of pressure to keep me still. “You let us worry about them. You need to focus on rest.”

“I’m fi—”

“If you tell me you’re fine one more time, I swear to God —”

The sound of a woman’s chuckle comes from the hospital room’s door. I crane my neck and spot Renata as she enters. “I was about to ask where I could find you, but you’re both so loud I managed to find my way no problem.”

My cheeks flush with heat. I’m not sure if it’s out of embarrassment or because of my fever. Either way, I feel like I’m sitting in the middle of an oven left on high. In fact, the more I think about it, the more I realize how ill I am in general. My stomach is all tied up in knots, my palms are clammy, and I feel like I’m on the verge of throwing up. I’ve been feeling this way most mornings, but it was usually so

mild I chalked it up to nerves. I'm in a new country, with a new family, and a new purpose.

"Where's Aunt Natalia?" I ask.

"Taking care of a few things," Renata replies. "Don't worry. Everything is going according to plan. My sources tell me Becerra is running scared. He has few options left, and fewer allies still. It's only a matter of time before we bury him."

I lay my head back against the thin hospital bed pillow, staring up at one of the speckled panels of the ceiling. A part of me is relieved. Maybe this madness will finally come to an end. I'm not going to lie, I've been thinking about Zane's offer to live someplace remote and peaceful. I think it would be nice after everything we've been through.

But there's one thing I want more than anything else—to be the one to make my father pay. For his mistreatment, for his cruelty. I want to be there to see the look on his face when he realizes he's lost everything, that despite all he's done, he couldn't keep me from taking what's mine.

And I can't very well do that from a hospital bed.

"Get the doctor," I tell Zane. "Get them to clear me. I'll rest at home."

Zane gives me a look. "The doctor said she's running a few more tests. We'll leave after that."

Renata takes a seat on the other side of my hospital bed. She lovingly brushes a few strands of my hair away from my face, pressing her cool fingers to my forehead. "You're one of us now," she says, almost light enough to sound like she's joking. "You're not really a cartel member until you've been shot. It means you've got real cajones."

"Hooray," I say dryly, though I can't help it when the corners of my lips tug up into a smile. "Does this mean you've taken a bullet before?"

"Several, my dear. Several. Twice in the leg, one in the arm, four in the chest."

I blink at her. “Damn. And you’re still standing?”

Renata cackles. “It’ll take an atomic bomb to knock me out, my dear. The women in our family—we’re made of tough stuff.”

“What about you?” I ask Zane fondly. “I’ve never asked about those old scars on your back.”

“IED,” he answers simply, stroking the back of my hand with the pad of his thumb. “Don’t remember how it happened, just that I survived.”

Renata nods sagely. “Looks like you’re made of tough stuff, too.”

Zane smirks. “I should hope so now that I’m running with this crew.”

Just then, a stout woman waddles into the room, reviewing the notes on her clipboard with a steep frown. She’s in a white lab coat, an ID badge clipped to her pocket. She looks at me, her expression awakening something anxious in the pit of my stomach.

“I’m Dr. Romero,” she introduces herself, her words heavily accented. “I’m glad to see you’re awake.”

“Is everything alright?” I ask, sensing something’s off.

“We had an x-ray taken to make sure there was no shrapnel remaining. It came up clean.”

“Well, that’s good, isn’t it?” Renata asks.

“Yes, it’s good. But we found something else.”

I frown. “What is it?”

Behind Dr. Romero, a nurse walks in with a large machine, pushing it toward my bedside. Zane clears out of the way to give her room to work, choosing to stand eagerly at the foot of my bed.

“Maybe we should speak in private,” she says.

I shake my head. “No, this is my husband and my grandmother. Whatever you have to tell me, they can hear.”

The doctor nods once before continuing. “I have reason to believe you’re pregnant,” Doctor Romero says. “We’re going to conduct an ultrasound to be sure. Thankfully, you weren’t exposed to high levels of radiation for very long. I suspect there will be no negative side effects for you or the child, but I still need to conduct a few more tests to be sure.”

My jaw drops. I can hardly believe what I’m hearing. “I’m... pregnant?”

Dr. Romero is quick to apply some lubrication to my belly, gently pressing the wand to my skin as the machine thrums rhythmically. On the screen, images start to take shape. I’m unsure how to decipher all the lines and the warping images, but the doctor eventually pauses over my belly.

My eyes prickle, a warmth blooming in my chest.

That’s a baby. My baby.

And I didn’t even know they were there.

“Oh my God,” I breathe, stunned and amazed and alarmed all at once. If the bullet had hit me a few inches to the right... My heart thuds loudly in my chest. I don’t even want to think about it.

Beside me, Renata is in tears, barely containing her smile. She says a quick prayer in Spanish, of which I understand none. “My dearest girl, look.”

“I’m looking,” I say on a breathy laugh. “Is it...”

“I would estimate roughly three months along.”

Three months...

That would mean December, when I first met Zane in Las Vegas. Could it have been the night we got black out drunk and accidentally got married? Could our child have been conceived on Christmas day? If it’s true, it’s the best gift I’ve ever received.

“Oh,” Dr. Romero says, furrowing her brow.

“What’s wrong?” I ask quickly. “Is the baby okay?”

“The baby appears in excellent health... As does the other one.”

I stare at the screen. She’s moved the ultrasound wand over a touch, bringing into view not just one, but two babies resting directly next to one another.

Twins.

My grandmother is practically sobbing her eyes out, so over the moon she can hardly speak. She grips my hand and kisses the back of my knuckles. “What a miracle!”

While I’m obviously ecstatic, I’m overwhelmed, too. I can’t be pregnant in the middle of a cartel war. I’ve only known about them for thirty seconds, but I feel an unchecked protectiveness stirring inside me. I wouldn’t dream of putting my babies at risk. What if the Becerras open fire on the hacienda again? What if I’m caught in the crossfire? I need to keep my children as far away from all this violence and mayhem as possible...

And that means I can’t enact my revenge in person.

Amidst all the thoughts swirling inside my skull, one screams louder and harder than the rest: *What does Zane think?*

I look at him, studying his statuesque posture and hard expression. He stands at the foot of my bed like a guard dog, eyes trained on me as if waiting for a command. I can’t tell what he’s thinking, but I do know this is the furthest thing from happiness.

“Zane?” I rasp.

He grinds his teeth, his fists clenching up into tight balls. “This changes everything,” he says, low and dangerous. He looks to Renata. “I want a moment alone with her.”

My abuela stands and nods understandingly. She gestures to the nurse and doctor. “Let’s give them some privacy.”

Zane and I are alone.

I let my hand drop to affectionately rub my belly. It’s a wonder I hadn’t noticed before. My cycles have always been

irregular, and with all the running around I've been doing, it was more than easy to lose track of when my last period was. Right now, my babies are so small there's barely even a bump.

Zane walks to my bedside slowly, conflict in his eyes. I'm afraid to ask what he's thinking, but I do it anyway.

"Are you mad?" I whisper.

"No, darling. I'm not mad. I'm overjoyed."

"You don't look overjoyed."

"Because this is complicated, Willow. More complicated than it's ever been." Zane takes my hand and threads his fingers through mine, giving them a light squeeze. "I can't stop thinking about it. You got shot. One wrong move and I would have... I could have lost all three of you, Willow."

I swallow hard at the sticky lump in the back of my throat. I've never seen him so shaken before. Zane's normally so composed, so sure, but now... Now his shoulders tremble, his breathing is rapid, his eyes are bloodshot and dazed. I always thought he was a man who didn't know fear. Now I know how wrong I was.

"Listen to me, and listen close," he says gently, but firmly. "Effective immediately, you're on the sidelines."

"Zane—"

"Listen. I won't have you out there where you can get yourself killed. I know how much this means to you, but I'm not going to risk your lives. I'm going to put you somewhere safe, somewhere far away from the fighting." He brings my hand up and kisses my palm before pressing it against his cheek. "Please, Willow. Do it for me. For our children. Stay as far away from this mess as possible."

"But what about you?"

"I'm going to put an end to it. All of it. As long as Esteban and Arturo are alive, they're never going to stop coming after you. I won't have that. There's too much at stake now. So I'm going to finish this once and for all. For you, for our children, for our future."

I take a deep breath, my heart twisting at the devotion and determination in his words. I know he's right. This does change everything.

"Okay," I murmur. "Okay, Zane. I'll take good care of our babies."

He dips down to kiss me tenderly on the lips. "Thank you, Willow. When I get back, we'll be a family."

"Promise me one thing."

"Anything, darling."

I touch my forehead to his and close my eyes. "You come back to me—to *us*—alive."

CHAPTER 32

I've spent weeks camped out in foxholes under constant threat of enemy fire. I've dealt with hostage situations and rescue operations, deliberately sticking my neck out to see the mission through. I'm no stranger to hardship, to making tough, split-second decisions in the heat of the moment.

But knowing I have to leave Willow and our little ones behind is the hardest thing I've ever had to do.

We've relocated to a smaller house, one of a few hundred properties that Renata Marrones owns to distribute the cartel's financial assets. It's in an unassuming town, in an unassuming neighborhood, in an unassuming bungalow in the south of Mexico. Even if the Becerra Cartel is actively looking for Willow and the rest of the Marrones Family, it'd take them forever to find them hiding in plain sight.

"When do you leave?" she whispers to me as I gingerly carry her up the stairs to her new room. It's got plenty of light and a view of the gardens in the backyard, along with a whole wall full of books I ordered special for her.

"First thing in the morning. I need to make a few calls before I go."

She picks at her fingernails as I set her down on the bed. She's healing well, but I want to keep her off her feet as much as possible. Her health and comfort are my top priorities, especially now that we know about our kiddos.

I love my daughter very much. Anna is my pride and joy in every sense of the word. If Teresa and I had stayed together, I

probably would have wanted to expand our family. It wasn't in the cards for us, but now? Now, things are different. If someone had told me all those years ago that all this was going to happen, I would have laughed and said they were crazy. For some reason, the voice sound an awful lot like Knox in my head. The strangest thing is I don't regret any of it. I'm probably in way over my head, and I'm obviously terrified about what might happen, but for the first time in a long time, I feel strangely at peace.

Every decision I've ever made has led me to her. So even if I'm in for the fight of my life, at least I know my choices aren't wrong. When it comes to Willow—and now our children—I'll do anything if it means giving them the life they deserve.

"You still need lots of rest," I tell her, tucking her into bed.

"You can't stay for even a little bit?"

I press a kiss to her hair. "No, my love. Think of it this way, the sooner I get this job done, the sooner I can come home and stay."

Willow takes a deep breath. "You're right."

I cup her face in my hands and kiss her sweetly. "I love you, Willow. I'm doing this for us."

"I love you, too," she murmurs, her eyelids already drifting close. My poor wife is in desperate need of sleep.

It's a struggle to will myself away, but I eventually manage. I pause at the doorway, committing everything about her to memory. Willow is the fuel to my determination. I've already decided there can only be one outcome: victory. Death isn't even an option. I will make it back, and I will put an end to Esteban and Arturo once and for all—for her, for our children.

I'd kill them a thousand times over if it means keeping my loved ones safe, but as confident as I am, I can't do this alone. I'm going to need backup, a team I trust with my life.

And there are only two people in the entire world who come to mind.

Once I find myself downstairs in the quiet of the unused kitchen, I make a phone call. I add Knox to the line before dialing Heath's number. Both my brothers answer in record time.

"Where the hell are you?" Knox snaps.

"Yo, nice tan, dude!" Heath says with a chuckle.

"I need you both to listen to me very carefully," I reply, getting straight to business. "There's too much to explain right now, but I need manpower. It's a one-off contract hit. Are you in or out?"

I can't see my youngest brother's expression, but I've known him long enough to know he's probably frowning like someone's pissed on his shoes. "I think the fuck not," is his short, clipped answer.

"How much is the pay?" Heath asks. Not that I can blame him for it since it's a perfectly valid question.

"Five million," I answer. "Each."

The silence over the line is deafening.

"Are you having a stroke or something?" Knox asks, sounding genuinely flabbergasted. "We're not mercenaries, Zane."

"Who's the target?" Heath asks. I knew going into this that he'd be the easiest to convince.

"Arturo Allegra and Esteban Becerra."

"Ah, right. The dickhead with the boner for his swimming pool. I'm a huge fan," Heath says dryly.

"This is crazy, Zane," Knox argues.

"They're already wanted by the FBI and Interpol," I shoot back.

"Yes, but they're probably wanted alive."

"True, but think of it this way: there'd be two less predators in the world. I'm sure nobody's going to decry us for defending ourselves."

“Defending ourselves,” Knox scoffs. “Is that how we’re spinning it?”

“Look. There’s no need to over-complicate this. At the end of the day, you both get paid and never have to work another day in your life, the world is rid of two evil bastards, and Willow and the babies will be safe.”

“Babies?” Heath asks. “What babies?”

“Oh. I should have led with that. Willow’s pregnant. You’re going to be uncles again.”

Knox groans. “What was that about not making this over-complicated?”

“I need your support on this,” I say quickly. “I’ll do this myself if I have to, but it’ll go a lot quicker if I have my brothers beside me. You’re under no obligation to agree, just know that one way or another, I need those men dead.”

“You can count me in,” Heath says without hesitation. “It beats the stuffy office job Darlene wants me to take. She’s hated the idea of a security firm since we first brought it up.”

“Knox?” I prompt.

He’s quiet. Too quiet. For a moment, I genuinely believe he’s about to tell me to shove it where the sun don’t shine. But then he lets out a frustrated sigh and grumbles, “Ten million. I want Ten million or I won’t do it.”

“Done,” I say.

“Hey!” Heath grumbles.

“You get ten million as well.”

“Where are you getting this money?” Heath asks.

“The less you know, the better. Just know I’m good for it.”

“When and where do you need us?” Knox asks.

“I’ll text you the info.”

“Do we need to bring anything?”

“No, I’ve got that covered. Just get down here as soon as possible. We have a lot of work to do.”

I hang up the phone and sit at the kitchen table, rubbing my hands over my face. The gravity of the situation is starting to set in, but I refuse to let it get to me. I'll have time to relax when the deed is done. Right now, I need to be at the top of my game. There's too much at stake to let my guard down.

Out of the corner of my eye, I spot Renata entering the kitchen to sit down next to me.

"I don't remember agreeing to pay ten million out of pocket," she says amusedly.

"You'll honor it, won't you?"

She nods. "I will. Twenty million is peanuts to me, but are you sure they're worth it?"

"My brothers and I may be retired from military life, but we're the best at what we do. Heath might come across as a jokester, but he was the finest sniper of our whole squad. Knox was our logistics expert. His quick thinking saved our asses more than once. We're trained for this sort of thing."

Renata smiles gently. "I have no doubt you are."

"Do you have any information that might give us a leg up?"

As if on cue, Renata produces a thin folder from beneath her arm and slides it across the table. "We have his last known location. Many of the minor members of the Becerra Cartel are running scared. Esteban's security team has been reduced to a handful of his most loyal lieutenants, and even they're far and few between. We've picked off most of them. The sharks are starting to circle and he knows it."

"This is helpful, thank you."

"If there's anything you need, don't hesitate to ask me. You're a part of the family now. We look after our own."

I set the file down, regarding the woman carefully. "You have been nothing but kind to Willow, and for that reason you have my respect. But..."

Renata arches one of her thin brows. "But?"

“After this is done, I’m taking her away from here. She needs peace and stability.”

“And you think you can give that to her?”

“Yes, without a doubt.” I gesture vaguely to the space around us.

“And this is your way of asking for my permission to leave?”

“You misunderstand, Renata. I’m not asking. Willow deserves a life away from the cartel and its influence. It’s all she’s ever known, and it’s never benefited her in any way. I’m going to change that.”

For a moment, we’re at an impasse. I’m not going to fool myself into thinking Renata will willingly grant my request. She may look like a darling old grandmother, but I’ve been more than aware of what she truly is the entire time I’ve known her—a wolf in sheep’s clothing.

I’m no fool. She may hide behind her smiles and caring words, but I see her for what she is. In many ways, I worry she’s just as bad as Arturo. I can’t allow myself to forget she’s still the head of the Marrones Cartel. You don’t run a criminal organization as lethal and merciless as this one without getting your hands dirty, and dear Abuela Renata is no exception.

She strums her wrinkled fingers over the table, her smile never once slipping. Her eyes give her away, though, cold and calculating. She described herself perfectly before—a shark.

“You would take my granddaughter away? Along with my great-grandchildren?” she asks sweetly. “But isn’t it better that she’s surrounded by her family?”

“She hardly knows you,” I state.

“I could say the same about you, Mr. Phillips.”

“I have her best interests at heart.”

“As do I.”

Renata doesn’t have to use forceful language to get her point across. I can tell by the thick tension in the air and the

way she sits, poised and immovable, that she isn't about to drop the subject so easily. I can't speak to her motivations, only that if she continues to push my buttons, I may have to resort to other means of negotiation.

"Willow is all I have left of my daughter Liana," Renata says. "You would really take her away from where she belongs?"

"That's the thing, Renata. She doesn't belong here."

"She craves family."

"And I will give her a family. I already have." I straighten in my seat, chest up proud and head held high. "Her whole life has been spent shuttered away. She deserves the chance to live a life of her own, to enjoy the freedoms and joys she was denied by her father. She was shot at, twice in as many days. All I'm asking is for you to see things the way I do. I love her deeply and just want what's best."

"You wish me to believe your motives sincere?"

"They are."

"Really? And I suppose I shouldn't bring up the red flag that is your age?"

I frown. "What does my age have to do with it?"

"Oh, please. Look at it from where I'm standing. My poor granddaughter has been subjected to the whims of older influences since the day she was born."

"So my age is a problem for you?"

"You must understand my wariness, Mr. Phillips. An older man comes and sweeps her off her feet. It would be wrong of me to deny there's a dynamic in play here."

"I have never done anything that Willow hasn't wanted. I value her opinions, her voice. I *listen*. Unlike Arturo, I have no need to trap her. I care for her too much to do her that injustice. Besides, I could argue the opposite against you. Infantilizing her is a red flag, too. Willow is a strong woman. Brave and determined and capable of making her own

decisions. It's frankly wrong of us to have this discussion without her being here to weigh in."

Renata stands and chuckles, turning toward the exit. She's done with this conversation.

"Eliminate Arturo and Esteban first," she says as she walks away. "We will continue this discussion when you get back."

CHAPTER 33

WILLOW

It's been a week since I last heard from Zane. If anyone can handle themselves, it's him—but that doesn't stop my heart from wanting to hop right out of my chest. I'm healing very well and quicker than first anticipated. And while I've been restricted to bed rest, I'm getting restless. What I really want is to stretch my legs. Some fresh air might be good for the babies and me.

There are no stairs to worry about in the bungalow, but I make sure to keep one hand braced against the wall as I make my way outside. I don't want any unexpected tumbles to catch me off guard. As I stride through the halls, I take in my surroundings. This home is lovely, quaint and under furnished, but full of potential. I like to daydream—since I have so much time on my hands—about the home Zane promised to build for us.

I'd love a place just like this. Spacious, but not so much that I feel like I could get lost going from point A to point B. I think the kids will have plenty of room to run around and play. We could have a big kitchen like this one, perfect for eating all our meals together. And if we had a living room like the one here, there'd be plenty of space to gather on Friday evenings to watch movies. There'd even be room for a pine tree in the corner come Christmastime where Zane and I can spoil our little ones with an overabundance of presents from Santa.

I'm probably getting way ahead of myself, but dreams of motherhood have been occupying my mind. It's hard not to wonder what life will be like in another six months. I'm equal

parts excited and nervous. The more I think about it, the more ecstatic I become. I can clearly picture myself as a soccer mom, driving the kids in the back of a respectable dark green minivan—once Zane’s taught me to drive, of course. I can picture weekend barbecues and holidays spent by the beach.

But right now, all I can do is wait and pray and hope for Zane’s safe return.

This will all be over soon. It has to be over soon. God forbid I bring my children into the world only to find this awful cartel war still raging.

I find my grandmother outside in the gardens, sipping from a tall glass of cola beneath the shade of a large umbrella. Renata smiles when she sees me, waving me over.

“Hello, my dear. It’s lovely to see you out and about. How are you feeling?”

“Much better,” I say, taking a seat next to her. The sun is warm and shining, the breeze gentle and cool. “Have you heard anything from Zane yet?”

“Not yet, my dear.”

I sigh sadly. She’s given me the same answer every day since he’s left. I know no news is supposed to be good news, but it’s seriously starting to fry my nerves. I can’t imagine this level of heightened stress is good for the babies.

“How can you stand it?” I ask, picking at my fingernails. “All this waiting. Doesn’t it ever drive you crazy? Don’t you want to get out there and do something?”

Renata chuckles. “Back in my heyday, I was a very hands-on leader. Believe me, my dear, I know how maddening it is to be this restless. But I’ve come to realize there are benefits to being hands off, too. I don’t need to micromanage every facet of the business; otherwise, I might have worked myself into an early grave.”

“I guess you’re right...”

“But speaking of leaders, your Zane is quite the shining example. I’ve been thinking about making him one of my

lieutenants. The Marrones Cartel could benefit greatly from having someone like him working for us.”

My eyes widen, something cold churning in the pit of my stomach. “Oh, uh...”

“You don’t agree?” Renata asks, lifting an eyebrow.

“That’s not it. I think he’s a wonderful man, and an even better leader. I just... don’t think this life is for him. For either of us, actually.”

My grandmother tilts her head to the side just so, regarding me with a look I can’t quite pinpoint. Is it disappointment reflected in her eyes, or something else?

“What do you see in him?” Renata asks.

“What do you mean?”

“I’ve seen the way you look at him. I don’t think I’ve ever seen a girl more smitten.”

I can’t help but smile. “Zane is a good man. Honorable. He’s been there for me when others weren’t.”

“And what of his flaws?”

“I don’t understand.”

“You should always be aware of someone’s flaws, my dear. You can’t go about life looking at everything and everyone through rose-colored glasses.”

My jaw ticks. “Zane is...” I shake my head. “He doesn’t have any flaws.”

“Oh, my dear,” she says with a chuckle, “that can’t be true. It’s never a good idea to put someone on a pedestal.”

“I’m not putting him on a pedestal,” I insist. Annoyance licks at the nape of my neck. “I don’t understand why you’re saying these things. Are you trying to put a wedge between us?”

“I’m trying to look out for you. He intends to take you away, you know.”

I sit up a bit straighter. “I’m aware. We discussed it.”

Renata's expression gradually flattens into something unreadable. "And is that truly what you want? To be away from your family?"

My skin crawls. Something about her tone makes me squirm in my seat. I've heard it used a million times before. When I hear the words coming out of her mouth, all I can see is my father. The way he manipulates, the way he frames questions to make me doubt myself. I can't understand why Renata is doing this, why she's trying to besmirch my image of Zane, but I know without a shadow of a doubt that I'm not having it.

I stand and take a deep breath. "Zane is by no means perfect, but nobody is. He can be incredibly stubborn sometimes, and there are moments where I feel he's so trapped in his own head that I can't reach him. But he is by far the best man I've ever met. He listens to me, he cares for me, he loves me."

"Love is a fleeting thing."

"Why are you saying all of this?"

"Because I want to prepare you for the real world."

"I'm not an idiot, Abuela. I know my father has kept me locked away for a very long time, but I'm capable of thinking for myself. What Zane and I have... It's real. And at the base of it all, we have trust and respect. He would never do anything to hurt me. Not in a million years."

I take a deep breath, looking around at my grandmother's garden.

"Natalia told me what happened to her," I say softly, feeling very much like I'm treading over thin ice. My hand falls to my belly instinctively, my palms hovering over where I think my little ones must be. "About how she lost her children. I know I'm young and I have a lot to learn, but I don't need to be taught how to love my children. I won't have them anywhere near cartel business."

"But the family could provide for you," my grandmother argues quietly. "They'd want for nothing."

“I appreciate that, but they’d always be at risk. I intend to provide them with everything they’ll need.”

“How do you plan on doing that?”

“I’ll get a job.”

“Do you have any skills? An education?”

“Well, no... But I can always learn.”

Renata sighs in disapproval, her words slowly eating away at my resolve. *Shit. I can do this, can't I?* Why is my grandmother so determined to confuse me?

“I see so much of Liana in you,” Renata says with a gentle smile, the tension in her shoulders and the strain in her voice dissipating. “Her independence, her fire... Very well, my dear. I will not press the issue any further.”

I frown slightly, confused. “Were you testing me?”

“You’ll have to forgive me, Willow. As your grandmother, it’s only natural for me to worry. When this business is concluded, you and Zane have my blessing to leave.”

“I’m pretty sure we were going to leave regardless,” I point out.

Renata chuckles. “I expect nothing less. You’re your mother’s daughter, after all. Now, come and sit. How about a bit of lunch?”

A heavy weight lifts off my chest, relief filling my lungs. I rejoin my grandmother at the table, the tips of my fingers and toes vibrating with excitement. I wonder what the future holds for me, what adventures await. There’s no telling what might happen, but I know that so long as I have Zane at my side, we’ll be able to accomplish anything. I only hope he comes back to me in one piece.

CHAPTER 34

We've been retired for five years, but it's surprising how easily we settle back into our old roles. Putting on our body armor and navigating our weapons comes as easily as riding a bike or breathing. My brothers and I spent so many years training it into our muscles, the movements of war and the stress of battle prep, that it comes to us without thought. We move as a unit through the remote jungles of Guatemala, driven forward by a single goal: eliminate the threat.

Knox takes point while Heath brings up the rear of our three-man strike team. We've been tracking Arturo and Esteban for two weeks. They've been keeping an extremely low profile since the ammunition warehouse incident. If I had to guess, they're probably feeling the pressure. The Marrones are winning and they're running out of places to hide. Now it's a matter of cornering them and finishing the job.

And then Willow will finally be free.

Knox slaps his hand over the back of his exposed neck with a hiss. "Fucking bugs."

"Quit your bitching," Heath grumbles. "Didn't I tell you to bring DEET? You never listen."

"Oh, shut up."

"Focus," I growl. "They should have a small compound just up ahead."

"Are you sure?" Knox questions. "These maps are at least five years out of date."

“The locals say they saw men matching their description in this area,” Heath says with a casual shrug.

“Oh, yeah. Because we should totally rely on local tip-offs.”

“This region is too dense to map out properly,” I interject. “And our sources have been vetted. They have no reason to feed us incorrect information.”

Knox curses under his breath. I ignore him, trudging ahead. In truth, it does feel like we’ve been going in circles. The jungle is so lush with green that it’s difficult to differentiate the last mile from the next. We’ve been off the trail for a while now, this supposed compound so remote we lost cell service almost an hour ago. There’s no way to call back up should we need it, but I’m confident my brothers and I can get the job done without reinforcements.

Two bullets fired at my command is all we need.

Just ahead, I spot a marker. It’s a long piece of fluorescent orange trail tape tied around a low hanging branch. It stands out like a sore thumb, highlighting the first of many path markers. A simple glance down reveals a world of information. Tire tracks, footprints left in the mud. Someone’s been through here recently.

Knox and Heath are quick to catch on. We’re getting close. From here on out, it’s hand signals only.

The markers take us all the way to a steep cliff face. A jagged river cuts across the land just below, severely limiting our options. It’s impossible to tell how deep or how fast the current is traveling, so it’d be unwise to march across without a second thought. There is a singular wooden bridge spanning the width of it, but it’s guarded on both sides by heavily armed men. At least we know we’re in the right spot.

On the other side of the river is the compound in question. It’s not as heavily fortified as the one in California, but I’m not about to complain. It’s obvious that Arturo and Esteban have nowhere else to retreat, and the lack of tall walls, barbed wire,

and the skeleton crew they have patrolling the area makes me more confident than ever that this mission will be a success.

I signal to my brothers. Heath goes left, Knox goes right. I stay perched on the cliff ledge, reaching for my binoculars. Standing in clear view of one of the compounds front windows, I see Esteban out in the open. I have a clear shot, nothing but the glass and roughly fifty yards between us. I've put a bullet between a man's eyes from almost quadruple that distance.

This is so easy.

Maybe a little too easy.

And when someone is dragged toward him, I suddenly realize how horribly wrong everything's about to be. Struggling in the arms of one of Esteban's personal bodyguards is a young woman, bound and gagged. She's roughly Willow's age, her brown hair frazzled and her green eyes bloodshot from crying. My heart almost bursts when I see her.

Anna.

"Fuck," I hiss. Was this whole damn thing a setup? Would Esteban really stoop so low as to use my own daughter as a bargaining chip? The man's depravity knows no bounds.

I can barely hear over the rush of blood past my ears. What the fuck are we going to do? It's true that I could take him out from here, but there's always a slight chance I could miss and kill my daughter instead. I wouldn't be surprised if Esteban has given his men the express order to kill Anna should anything happen to him. I could always storm in there and save Anna myself, but what if they kill her before I get there? What if they kill me before I can make my rescue attempt.

A thousand different scenarios race through my mind, impossible to organize now that there's a loud ringing in my ears. That bastard knew we were coming for him and took steps to increase his survival—at the cost of my daughter's.

Behind me, the metallic click of a gun's hammer pulling back. The hard tip of a pistol jabs itself against the base of my

skull.

“Up,” the man orders.

Fuck. I was so distracted by my daughter’s appearance, they got the drop on me.

I slowly raise my hands in surrender. Out of the corner of my eye, I see that Knox and Heath have both been captured at gunpoint, too. Things are going downhill and fast. If any of us makes one wrong move, death is guaranteed.

“Walk,” the guard orders, flicking his gun in the direction he wants me to move. I have no choice but to obey.

Esteban waits at the front door of his compound, wearing a smug smile. He has Anna in his hold, one of his filthy hands gripping her bicep tightly. She cries out to me when she sees me and her uncles, tears streaking down her cheeks.

“How good of you to join us, Mr. Phillips.” Esteban greets us with a sneer.

“Let her go,” I snap.

He gives me an amused smile. “You’re in no position to be giving me orders.”

“She has nothing to do with this,” Knox says.

“Let our niece go,” Heath adds. “It’s us you want.”

Esteban pulls Anna a little closer, snaking one of his tattooed arms around her waist. She mumbles something against her gag, desperately trying to break away.

“She’s a real beauty,” Esteban says cruelly against her ear, going so far as to kiss her cheek.

My skin crawls, every fiber of my being screaming at me to lose control. “Get the fuck away from her!” I snarl.

“You seemed to have no problem playing with my fiancé,” he replies. “Why can’t I have a bit of fun in return?”

“Sick bastard,” Knox growls.

Heath sneers. “If you lay a finger on her...”

Esteban chuckles, not at all intimidated. “Fine, fine. Maybe I’ll give her to my boys instead and give your darling wife a visit. Darlene, right? You have her stashed away in San Antonio.”

I’m close enough to see the vein at Heath’s temple pulse. It’s rare to see him so furious, his eyes bulging, teeth bared. This is bad. We’re losing control of the situation. Maybe we’ve already lost.

“You leave my wife out of this, you sick fuck—”

“Heath, no!” I shout, but it’s too late.

My brother lunges forward, incensed and ready to kill. Before he can lay hands on Esteban, a gunshot rings out. Heath goes down, plummeting face first into the dirt as he clutches his knee with a violent shout of pain. Someone’s shot him through the kneecap, blood spilling onto his palms.

When I look up, I see Arturo standing at the front door, smoking gun in hand. He points the gun at Anna next.

“Stop!” I roar. “Just fucking stop. What do you want? Whatever it is, I’ll give it to you. Just let my daughter and my brothers go.”

Esteban clicks his tongue, looking me up and down like I’m nothing more than a maggot beneath his shoes. He appears awfully cocky for a man who we had on the run for weeks. Now that everything’s tipped in his favor, his overbearing confidence and pride is almost sickening.

“How about we go inside?” Esteban says, though I know it’s not really an ask. “I think it’s time we negotiate.”

CHAPTER 35

We're fucked.

My brothers and I are manhandled into uncomfortable wooden chairs, our wrists bound together roughly with layer upon layer of duct tape, our ankles strapped to the legs of our seats. I'm not sure when they got around to sitting us upright—before or after they beat us black and blue—but I suppose it doesn't really matter. The point is that Esteban and Arturo's men have no problem breaking us, and we're in no position to fight back. I should have known from the get-go they weren't going to fight fair.

I think one of my ribs is fractured, and the taste of iron on my tongue confirms I've split my lip. Maybe even cracked a tooth. Esteban laughs maniacally as he nails me with yet another sharp right hook, the crack of his knuckles against my jaw louder than any explosion known to man. Despite the pain rattling through my bones, I don't give him the satisfaction of giving him a reaction. I take it—every hit, kick, slap, and scratch.

My brothers bear the worst of the beating. It's clear Esteban and Arturo don't care what happens to them. As long as I'm still alive and breathing, they couldn't care less if they beat Knox and Heath to death. They only need one Phillips brother, and as the closest to the Marrones family, they've kept my torture relatively light.

They key word being *relative*.

“That's enough,” Arturo barks.

He's seated on the other side of the room next to Anna, who's thankfully uninjured but still terrified. Arturo and Esteban seem perfectly content to take their rage out on my brothers and me, but I'm not complaining as long as they keep their hands off my daughter.

Arturo steps forward, cane snapping hard against the concrete floor. He comes within a foot of me, bending over to look me in the eye. It's a miracle I can even see him considering how swollen my left one is. I'll be sporting a nasty shiner tomorrow—if they allow me to live another day.

“Do you have any idea the headache you've caused me?” he asks, voice low and dripping with venom. “I let you into my home. I hire you to protect my daughter. And to find out you married her... I've never been more insulted.”

“I'd marry her again in a heartbeat, dickhead.”

Arturo cracks me on the side of the head with the handle of his cane. I swear to God I hear something fracture, but I'm not sure if it's his cane or my skull. The room spins. Black encroaches on the edges of my vision. But no matter how much I ache, I keep my eyes ahead and refuse to waiver. I've endured worse—a lot worse. The cartel's going to have to get creative if they want to intimidate me.

Anna screams around her cloth gag, but it's impossible to tell what she's saying. My poor daughter is scared to death, and I don't blame her. It was never my intention for her to witness any of this. My goals have shifted from killing Arturo and Esteban to getting my family the hell out of here. The only question is how? The answer is surprising simple.

Give them what they want.

“Let my family go,” I say around my bloody teeth. “Let them go and I'll... Whatever you want.”

Arturo scoffs. “I think we're going to keep them, actually. For insurance.”

Esteban clicks his tongue. “It's time this stupid squabble between our families comes to an end, hm? You're going to finish the job for us.”

My heart slingshots into the pit of my stomach just to whip back up and lodge in my throat. “The fuck are you talking about?”

“Renata Marrones... She’s lived a good, long life, but I think it’s about damn time she considers retiring. Permanently.”

“You want me to kill her for you,” I grunt.

Esteban smirks. “Ah, good to know I didn’t knock you totally senseless.”

“You’ve got to be fucking kidding me.”

“Do I look like the kind of man who jokes, Mr. Phillips?”

“You are a joke,” Heath grumbles under his breath.

Arthur swiftly raises his cane and brings it down forcefully against Heath’s ruined knee. My brother screams, fighting against his restraints ferociously.

“She’s heavily guarded,” I say hastily. “It’ll be next to impossible.”

“We know you’ve been welcomed into the family,” Esteban spits. “Thanks to your darling Willow, you’ve been able to enter Renata’s inner circle without a hitch. Once you’ve put a bullet between that old hag’s eyes, we’ll release your family.”

My head swims.

This isn’t good, and I have a feeling things will only derail further if I try to press my luck and look for a way out. I’m in no position to bargain. As long as they have my family in custody, I have no other choice but to do as they ask. One life in exchange for three. But if I go through with this...

Even as I try to organize the logistics of pulling off Renata’s murder, there are too many unknowns at play. The moment I pull the gun, her men will be on me in a matter of seconds. I can’t betray the matriarch of the Marrones Family without putting a massive target on my back. I probably won’t even make it out the door once the deed is done. But if I don’t go through with it, Anna, Heath, and Knox will die. Or, more

likely, I will kill them, and my family will die anyway. I don't see Esteban as a man of honor.

And God, what will Willow think? If I kill her grandmother, how will Willow react? In horror, no doubt. I'd lose her in an instant. I'm afraid she'll leave me, turn against me. Worst case scenario, Esteban and Arturo might hurt the woman I love, and our babies along with her. It's not enough to say I'm caught between a rock and a hard place. I literally don't know what to do.

Either way, it's suicide. I'm a dead man walking, and they know it. I can either choose to die now or die later, but nothing will change the fact that I am going to die.

"I'll do it," I rasp. "I'll do it, just... just let my family go."

"After you kill that bitch," Esteban says. He places a hand over his heart, the other raised like he's making a vow. "You have my word. Your family won't be harmed and will be released once you kill Renata Marrones."

I bite down on my tongue. I know as well as anybody here that his word isn't worth a damn thing. Still, it's better than nothing. I've bought us a little bit of time. Hopefully I'll be able to think my way out of this between now and the moment I make my move.

CHAPTER 36

WILLOW

The morning starts out like any other. The sun shines, the birds sing, and the breeze whistles by. I've been making good progress through all the books Zane so lovingly picked out for me. I particularly love *The Hobbit* and all things fantasy, but I'll admit I'm a bit of a sucker for the romances, too. I've been spending most of my days in the gardens daydreaming about our future together, hoping wherever we choose to settle down, I'll get to have a room full of books—my own personal library.

I've noticed a change in my appetite lately, certain aversions to foods I once adored. I can't handle the smell of any fish, and for some reason, the texture of bananas makes me gag. It makes me wonder if my kids are picky eaters, because even the thought of eating the fruit makes me nauseous. But apart from that, I'm enjoying my pregnancy. There's something deeply satisfying about looking at my reflection in the mirror, admiring my belly—the bump now more noticeable.

I fully expect today to be another peaceful, uneventful day...

Until I hear the roar of an engine ripping through the neighborhood. I don't think anything of it at first, but then one of Renata's guards runs in—his face beet red and out of breath. He says something frantically in Spanish, pointing in the direction of the noise. When my abuela springs to her feet, I do too.

“What's going on?” I ask.

“He’s back,” Renata says, hurrying inside the house.

My heart skips a beat.

I’m so excited I’m breathless when he walks in through the front door. I nearly trip when I see him, alarmed to see the state he’s in. His left eye is black and swollen, his nose broken, his lip split in two. He walks with a limp, a tilt to his upper torso like he doesn’t have the strength to stay upright. Alarm rushes through me as I run to him, my heart hammering so loud I can barely hear myself when I say, “What the hell happened?”

Zane wraps me in his arms and kisses me, so deep and desperate I can’t help but panic. Something is wrong.

“Zane,” I whimper. “Zane, talk to me. What’s going on?”

“Please forgive me,” he murmurs against my lips.

I shake my head. “I don’t understand—”

He draws his gun from his waistband and points it at my grandmother. I scream, instinctively forcing his hand upward. He pulls the trigger—more a reaction to the sudden jolt than a deliberate pull—the bullet shooting up into the ceiling.

It’s chaos. Renata’s men all draw their weapons, shouting at Zane to drop his gun while simultaneously screaming at me to back up and get out of the way.

“Stop it!” I shriek, holding him back with my hands pressed to his chest. I know for a fact I weigh nothing at all to him, but he doesn’t fight me. I think he knows he might accidentally hurt me if he does. “Nobody fucking move! What the hell has gotten into you? Talk to me, Zane. Now.”

“Esteban and Arturo are outside. They have my family hostage. If I don’t come out with Renata’s head, they’ll kill my brothers and daughter.”

A chill rips through me. Oh, God. This can’t be happening. It can’t.

“We’ll think of something,” I say quickly, so dizzy I can barely see straight. “Maybe we can negotiate. Maybe we can —”

“The negotiation has already been made, my dear,” Renata says coldly. “He’s already agreed, which means he has to die.”

“No!” I yell, holding my hand out to her. I place myself between Zane and her guards, not caring that at least a dozen guns are pointed at me. “Nobody move a muscle. We can work this out. We can think of something!”

“There’s no other way,” Zane bellows. “Either Renata dies, or my family does.”

My grandmother shakes her head in disapproval.

I can’t stop crying. This is all so messed up. Why won’t anybody listen to me? If I don’t think of something soon, I’ll have a pile of bodies at my feet—and maybe find myself full of bullet holes, too. I can already feel my heart tearing into pieces. I have no time to think, no time to formulate a plan.

Out of the corner of my eye, I spot Guadalupe, Renata’s pet snake. Her tank has been moved inside, placed on a low hallway table. The snake in question appears largely unperturbed by all the chaos on the other side of her glass confinement.

An idea pops into my head.

“I’ve got it!” I wheeze, shouting so loud I almost black out from the effort. “I know how we can work around this.”

“Move, Willow,” Renata says coldly.

“Out of the way, darling,” Zane says, just as cold and terrifying.

“Oh, for fuck’s sake!” I hiss. “We can trick them into thinking Renata is dead. Nobody has to die. Yet. Esteban just needs to think my grandmother is dead, right?”

Zane furrows his brow. “He’ll probably want visual confirmation.”

“Then make sure he doesn’t get close.”

Renata continues to glare at Zane. “What are you plotting?”

“You said one bite from Guadalupe is enough to put you to sleep, right? But it won’t actually kill you?”

My grandmother’s expression drops, a realization dawning on her. My words seem to be getting through. “It’s a crazy plan,” she says. “I don’t think Esteban or your father will believe it.”

“They’ll believe it because they want to,” I insist. “They’re desperate and backed into a corner. If we show them what they want to see, well then that’s not our fault, is it?”

Slowly—very slowly—everyone in the room lowers their weapons. Zane does so, too, though his finger remains wrapped around the trigger and his body is rigid against me.

“It’s risky,” he says.

“What other choice do we have?” I reply. “Someone’s going to end up dead, so we might as well try it. We have nothing left to lose.”

The tension in the air is so thick I almost gag on it. Nobody says a word, even though we’re more than a little aware that we’re running out of time. Every second that passes is another second for Esteban and Arturo to grow suspicious. We need this to look quick and messy and unplanned—and we only have one chance to pull this off.

Renata sighs. “Someone get me my snake.”

CHAPTER 37

The stage is set.

Here's hoping they buy it.

I carry Renata's limp body out in my arms, her face and chest smeared with blood. It's mine, drawn from a deep cut across my palm. Willow trails close behind, bawling her eyes out. She hits me across the arm, against my back, her fury so convincing I almost believe her grandmother is dead. As always, my darling wife's phenomenal acting skills may prove useful here. We need anything and everything to sell this act.

Esteban and Arturo get within five feet of us. Too close, if you ask me. Renata's heart rate has slowed and she's incredibly still, but I don't want them to be able to see the slight rise and fall of her chest as she breathes. Thankfully, Willow is quick on her toes. She charges forward, screaming at Esteban as she slams her fists against his chest.

"You're a fucking monster!" she seethes. "I hope you burn in Hell!"

Esteban pushes her away with a menacing smile. "I'll be sure to see you there."

"It's done," I say, setting Renata's body down on the ground. She's so still I'm genuinely concerned the snake might have killed her. She's an older woman, after all. A whole dose of tranquilizing venom must be wreaking havoc on her insides. "Let my family go."

Arturo nods once toward the guards who are dragging Knox, Heath, and Anna forward. Heath can barely stand,

Knox's face will probably scar, and my poor daughter is clearly traumatized. But it's all going to be over soon. This nightmare will finally end, and we can walk away with our hands clean and our ties cut.

Esteban outright loses it, laughing like he's lost his fucking mind. Maybe he was never fully sane to begin with. "Finally," he breathes. "Finally, it's all mine. You smell that in the air? Those are the winds of change, my friend. Well done, Zane. I didn't think you could pull it off."

"My family," I repeat. "Release them."

With a swift wave of his hand, Esteban's men cut my brothers and daughter loose. Heath stumbles forward, but Knox manages to catch him time. Anna runs to me, prying her gag free so she can sob freely. She hugs me tight, pressing her face to my chest.

"Dad! What the fuck is going on? Are you okay? I want to go home!"

"I'll explain everything, honey. I'm going to get us out of here."

Esteban clicks his tongue. "Aww... It's cute you think that." He pulls his gun from out of his shoulder holster and points it directly at Willow. "I'll be taking my fiancé back, thank you very much."

Willow's face goes as pale as a sheet. "You've got to be fucking kidding me."

"I'm a man who knows what he wants, baby girl. Your father gave you to me first, and I do hate sharing. You're going to come home with me, Willow, and if you try and fight it, I'll kill everyone here. The decision is completely yours."

Anger has been simmering in the pit of my stomach for ages. It's finally boiling over. All I can see is red. I should have known Esteban wouldn't let us walk away so easily. He's a lunatic, plain and simple. If you give him an inch, he'll ask for a mile—and to him, that means forcing Willow to be with him against her will.

“You’re not taking her anywhere,” I hiss, grabbing Willow’s hand to pull her toward me. I’ve got both my girls in my arms, the two of them trembling in fear. “I did what you asked. The Marrones Cartel, all its assets... It’s all yours. Just let us go.”

Esteban pretends to think about, sighing like the proposition is too hard to contemplate. After a moment, he shrugs. “You know, when I was a young man, my father taught me never to leave loose ends. You never know when they might come back to haunt you.”

“We’re not going to do anything!” Willow snaps. “Why can’t you just leave us alone?”

“What if you decide you want revenge one day? You’ll come after me, I know you will. It’s easier if I just clean this mess up now.”

“No!” I shout.

A single gunshot screams through the air. My heart seizes. I look to my brothers, both unharmed. I look down at Willow and Anna. They’re perfectly fine, too. I’m in no pain, which means I’m not the one who’s been shot at.

When my brain finally manages to focus, I notice Esteban’s suddenly grown incredibly still. Impossibly still, in fact. It takes a second for me to realize the stream of red trickling down the side of his face past his ear. Blood splatters onto his shoulder, staining the fabric. He stares on ahead, his eyes black and empty. I’ve seen this plenty of times before on the battlefield. Esteban might look like he’s awake, but in reality he’s already dead and gone.

His lifeless body slumps forward and lands face first onto the ground, revealing the neatly placed bullet in the side of his head.

Arturo and Esteban’s remaining men panic. It happened so quickly it takes a moment for everyone to realize what has happened. Before they have a chance to react and reach for their weapons in self-defense, they’re picked off one by one by some unseen sniper.

Only Arturo remains, trembling like the coward he truly is. He's not so strong and powerful without back up. Now we see him for what he is, a weak old man clinging onto the illusion of strength and control.

Willow steps forward, ignoring the carnage around us to confront her father. She bends down quickly to pick up Esteban's gun, holding the tip to her father's forehead. Arturo's body shakes, his knees giving out. His cane falls to his side as his hands fly up in surrender.

"Don't do this, Willow," he pleads, the tremor in his voice greatly satisfying.

"How does it feel?" she asks softly, her expression hard and unfeeling. "Tell me, Dad. How does it feel to be powerless?"

"Willow, please—"

"Did you ever love me, Dad?" she whispers. "Did you ever see me as a daughter? Or was I always an object to you?"

"Of course I love you, Willow. From the day you were born."

"And what about Mom? Did you ever love her?"

"Liana was the love of my life."

"Then why? Why did you betray her? Why did you have her killed?"

Arturo shakes his head, his eyes bulging and glossed with tears. He looks truly pathetic, begging on his knees. "Willow, let me explain—"

"What's there to explain? You're a monster. Worse than a monster."

"Forgive me," he rasps. "This isn't you. You're not a killer, Willow."

Her shoulder's tense. I can't see her face, but I can sense her conflict. Arturo's right. Willow may be fierce, but I can't imagine her crossing that line. She's too good, too sweet to go

through with it. I'm not at all surprised when she lowers the gun with a sigh, much to her father's apparent relief.

"Thank you."

"Don't thank me yet," she says coldly. "I'm not going to kill you, but I doubt you'll get very far with the Marrones Family after you."

Arturo's face blanks, his mouth dropping open in horror as Renata's guards emerge from the house—totally unharmed and looking for vengeance. Arturo scrambles to his feet, no time to grab his cane.

"Run along," Willow calls. "Since I'm feeling generous, I'll give you a head start. How about five minutes?"

"Willow—"

"Four minutes fifty-nine, fifty-eight, fifty-seven..."

Arturo turns, hobbling away as fast as he can. He frantically throws himself into the car he arrived in, struggling to twist the key in the ignition. When he finally gets the engine going, the man slams on the gas and peels away in a hurry. One nod from Willow is all it takes for the Marrones men to give chase.

And then we're finally alone.

We've done it.

"What the fuck!" Anna shrieks, gawking at me like I've grown a second head. "What is going on? I swear to God, if I don't get answers I'm going to kick something!"

Willow hurries over to me, tucking herself beneath my arm. "It's a long story," she admits. "I'm Willow. It's really nice to meet you. I'm sorry it's such a bad first impression."

"Look," Heath groans, "I'm happy we're all alive and stuff, but I could really use a doctor."

Behind us, a woman approaches. Natalia has her sniper rifle strapped to her back, casually flicking her ponytail over her shoulder. "You're damn lucky I got your text when I did,

Willow. You're lucky I was only in town for groceries. That could have gone badly."

Willow puts a hand on her hip. "It worked out, didn't it?"

Natalia scoffs, hurrying over to check on Renata. She lightly claps her mother's cheek. "Wake up, Mother. The hard work's all done."

Renata groans, her eyes fluttering open as she yawns wide. "What did I miss?" she asks, groggy.

"Let's get you inside," Natalia says, casting a glance at Heath. "I'll call for a doctor. Try not to bleed all over the furniture, got it?"

We slowly file into the house, Natalia helping Renata take a seat in the living room while I check both Willow and Anna over for any injuries. Heath has sustained the worst of it, but I'm confident he'll make a full recovery. Knox, on the other hand, looks shell shocked. It's hard not to notice the way he stares at Natalia, fascination gleaming in his eyes.

"Who's that?" he asks me under his breath.

"Willow's aunt."

"Hm," is all he says, the tips of his ears bright pink. I don't think he could be any more obvious.

"You should ask her for her number," Heath chides from his chair, his bad leg raised onto a small cushion on the coffee table.

Knox huffs. "Shut up."

I ignore their back and forth, preoccupied with wrapping Willow in my arms. I breathe her in, all at once at ease and calm and content. She's okay, the babies are fine, and now the men who've tormented her for years are finally out of the picture.

Willow kisses my cheek, clinging to me like a lifeline. "Is it over?" she asks softly, only loud enough for me to hear.

I nod. "Yes, darling. It's over."

CHAPTER 38

“Astrophysics?” Willow echoes, equal parts amazed and confused. “That’s so cool!”

“I’ve already got an internship lined up with NASA,” Anna announces with a proud smile.

“You’ll have to tell me all about it. Do you think you’ll sign up for their astronaut program?”

“I’m not sure yet. I mean, it’s always been a dream of mine to go to space, but... I don’t know. I’ve been leaning more toward the engineering side of things. A lot safer that way, you know?”

Willow giggles. “Yeah, I guess that makes sense.”

“If you ever stop by Florida, I’ll be sure to give you a tour of the Kennedy Space Center.”

“You mean it?”

“Of course! I’d love to spend more time with you.” Anna turns to me. “That invite extends to you, too, Dad.”

I smile as I drop off Willow’s duffel bag by the front door. She didn’t come to Mexico with a lot of things, but Renata has spared no expense buying her granddaughter all manner of new clothes—mostly maternity, along with a few things for our babies when they get here.

“I don’t know,” I say lightly. “They’ve got alligators in Florida. Swamps. Mosquitoes. Pitbull.”

“Oh, come on,” Anna replies with a laugh. “Mr. Worldwide isn’t that scary.”

“His music fucking is,” Knox grumbles under his breath.

“I happen to like Pitbull,” Natalia says casually.

My youngest brother clears his throat. “Maybe I’m thinking of a different person.”

I roll my eyes. We’ve been here almost a week—both because we’re waiting for Heath to be well enough to travel home and because Renata needs time to arrange a chartered flight back to the United States—but Knox still hasn’t made his move. I haven’t seen him this smitten since Charlene Milton in the eighth grade. I never thought Natalia was his type of woman—hard and scary and a little bitchy—but I’m not exactly in a position to judge.

“Okay, the car’s here,” Renata announces, stepping in through the front door of the bungalow. “My men will escort you to the airfield. There’s a plane waiting for you. I’ve already tipped border control, so they should let you back into the country without too many questions. If they give you any problems, just mention my name. That usually does the trick.”

Willow stands and hugs her grandmother, kissing her on both cheeks. “Thank you, Abuela.”

“You take good care of yourself,” Renata says, stroking her fingers through Willow’s hair. “And if you need anything at all, I fully expect you to call, alright?”

“I will, I promise.”

Renata turns to me next, giving me a stern glare. “You look after her, you understand? I’m trusting her to you. If anything happens to my dear girl, I will hunt you down myself.”

I chuckle. “I’d rather die than let anything happen to her.”

Renata pats me on the shoulder, discreetly handing me a thick envelope stuffed to the brim with cash. “Consider it a belated wedding present,” she says. “Buy yourself a plot of

land, build a house, live your lives out in peace. I fully expect pictures of the little ones every Christmas.”

“You’ve got yourself a deal.”

After the attempt on her life, rather than punish me, Renata thanked me. She told me knowing I’d do anything to save my family gave her peace and she respected me greatly.

We get into the car together, our bags tossed haphazardly into the trunk. Heath and Anna sit in the back, Willow and I take the middle seats, and Knox is too busy fumbling for something to say to Natalia before he climbs into the front. A part of me thinks he might just leave without getting a word in, but before he does, Natalia grasps him by the chin and presses a hard kiss to his lips.

“Call me,” she says with a flirtatious wink, tucking a scrap of paper into his front pocket.

Knox, my little brother and certified pain in the ass, is at a loss for words. He has no sharp retort, no snide comment. He’s too busy blushing like a schoolgirl to do anything but nod dumbly.

Maybe Natalia is the perfect match for him. Someone has to keep him in line.

Before we know it, we’re off. Exhaustion lingers heavily in the air. Nobody has to say anything. I can tell how eager we all are to get home.



I do end up buying her that house, deep within the evergreen forests of the Pacific Northwest. The property comes with at least fifty acres—plenty of room for us to expand and build and let the little ones play. The first thing we do when we’re officially handed the keys and our movers are done carrying in all of our furniture is christen the bed.

We make love that night, tender and soft and quiet. I savor every moment, every detail. From the gentle curl of her hair to her sweet sighs to the taste of her lips and the feel of her body

pressed against me. We move together as one, unhurried in our pursuit of pleasure. Willow and I have all the time in the world now. Nobody is after us. We've finally managed to carve out a little slice of paradise all for ourselves.

I lose count of how many times I make her unravel. Every languid moan, every intimate touch, every caress blends into one. I'm obsessed with my wife, obsessed with making her feel ten times as good as she does for me. I know with each kiss she gifts me that I'm a lucky man. Every moment spent with her is a blessing I can't even begin to repay her for.

"I love you," I whisper across her lips.

"I love you, too," she murmurs back with a smile.

We lie together, surrounded by fluffy pillows and soft blankets in the quiet hours of the morning, nothing better to do than stare deeply into each other's eyes. I run my hands over her belly, rounder than it was a few weeks ago, warmed by the gentle glow of sunlight streaming in through the curtains.

"Well, husband," Willow hums happily, curling up against my chest. "What are our plans today?"

"I've got a lot scheduled," I admit, pressing a light flurry of kisses against the top of her hair. "I was thinking we'd start off with breakfast in bed, then we'd watch some TV, maybe go set up your library."

She beams up at me. "Really?"

"I spent the whole day yesterday shopping for books. They should be arriving sometime today."

"And then what?" she asks, her giddy joy so contagious I can't help but reflect her smile.

I shrug casually. "A whole lot of nothing."

Willow kisses me sweetly. "A whole lot of nothing... I love the sound of that."

CHAPTER 39

Christmas is officially my favorite time of year. I was never really allowed to celebrate before. No big pine tree, no ornaments, no gifts. The Allegras, the Becerras, the Marrones... Holiday celebrations like this probably didn't mean very much to them. But the Phillips Family?

They go hard for Christmas.

Zane let me pick out the tree, a beautiful tall pine I found on the corner of our homestead. He chopped it down himself and brought it inside. I could suddenly imagine him twenty years younger in that mountain town, dressed in black and white plaid with an axe slung over his shoulder. Our house is decorated from top to bottom in tinsel and wreaths and sparkling ornaments. There's glitter everywhere, but I don't mind the slightest.

Sitting atop our mantle are the season's greetings cards sent all the way from Mexico from Renata, as well as one from Anna down in Florida. Heath and Darlene are busy helping me in the kitchen with turkey, while Knox and Natalia—who I must say make a very handsome couple—are in the living room with Zane keeping an eye on the twins.

Marcus and Leo are fast asleep, lulled by the twinkling lights wrapped around the Christmas tree and soft Christmas music playing on the TV speakers. We don't actually have a chimney, but it was Heath's idea to put a looping image of a crackling fire on the screen. It may not smell like a Yule log, but it certainly feels just as warm and cozy.

A mountain of wrapped Christmas presents sits just under the tree, ranging from small to large to extra-large. Heath and Knox may or may not have gone a little overboard with spoiling their nephews, but something tells me no matter how much I was going to protest, they would have done it anyway.

“I’m thinking of going with Cher,” Darlene says, browsing through one of my many baby name books I loaned her earlier. Her belly is swollen, her little girl expected to arrive within the next three or so months.

“Cher?” Heath laughs from the kitchen. “Like the singer? I don’t know about that one, babe.”

“Miranda?”

“Like from *Sex and the City*?” I ask.

“Athena!”

Knox shakes his head. “Do you want your child to be bullied in school?”

“I think Athena’s badass,” Natalia says, taking a seat on Knox’s lap. She easily wraps her arms around his neck and nibbles on his earlobe. I learned very early on that my aunt isn’t afraid of a little public display of aggressive affection.

Heath enters the living room with a large plate full of chocolate chip cookies fresh out of the oven. “We’ll put a pin in it,” he says. “Though, since we’re in the realm of cool goddess names, how about Freya?”

“Ooh!” Darlene coos. “Now there’s an idea.”

“Turkey’s going to be finished in another half an hour,” Zane says, joining me on the couch. “Do we want to open a couple of presents before then?”

“Me first!” Heath declares, swooping in to pick up one of the gifts with his name on it. I noticed he was eyeing it earlier, smiling like a twelve-year-old instead of thirty-nine.

“Who’s it from?” I ask.

“My favorite niece Anna,” he says, reading the label. He promptly rips into the wrapping, tossing aside the ribbon

without a care. He pulls out several smaller items out of his one big box. “Hair dye, specialty coffee beans, reading glasses, and a mug that says World’s Favorite Uncle.” Heath grins at Knox. “Did you hear that? I’m Anna’s favorite uncle.”

Knox flips him off. “Fine by me, as long as I’m Marcus and Leo’s favorite. That’ll even the playing field.”

“Me next!” I say, moseying over to pick out a box with my name on it. I frown when I realize there are none. “Uh... This is going to sound like a stupid question, but did Santa forget to drop off my presents? Or was I not a good girl this year.”

Zane chuckles. “Turn around, darling.”

I do, pausing when I find him down on one knee. In his hand is a small ring box, opened to reveal a gorgeous diamond ring on a band of white gold. My mouth drops open, my heart skipping a beat.

“What is this?” I ask.

“This is something I should have done a long time ago,” he admits. “I love you, Willow. I think I knew I loved you the moment you told me to get on my knees at gunpoint.”

I roll my eyes. “Not this again. I said I was sorry.”

Zane smiles, the corners of his eyes crinkling. “You deserve the world, Willow. And I have every intention of giving it to you. But to start, I figured I should probably do this for real and ask you—perfectly sober—if you’ll do me the honor of being my wife.”

I throw my head back and laugh. “Of course I’ll marry you, Zane. Again.”

He slips the ring on my finger and gets up, immediately diving in to press a kiss to my lips. “Now, what do you say we celebrate with margaritas?”

Natalia hops up quickly. “I’ll get the margarita mix and ice!”

“I wonder what kind of drunken adventures we’ll get up to this time,” I say.

“I don’t know if we ever went bungee jumping like Heath wanted.”

“That’s a little too wild.”

“What’s wrong? Don’t tell me you’re scared of heights, Mrs. Phillips.”

I snort. “I’m not scared of heights. I’m just thinking about the twins.”

“They can come with,” he teases.

“Absolutely not! I think we’ve both had more than enough excitement for one lifetime.”

“Maybe we’ll just settle for half a margarita each and a nice bedtime story.”

I hum, kissing him again as I press my body up close. “Now that sounds like a lot of fun.”

“Oh, barf,” Knox grumbles under his breath.

I flip him off as I kiss Zane again, happy as I can be. “Merry Christmas, Zane.”

“Merry Christmas, my darling.”

EPILOGUE I

There's a timeless quality to Las Vegas, but I can't quite put my finger on it. It could be the flashing lights, the endless sound of coins spilling from slot machines. It feels strange coming back after so long. Nothing has changed, yet everything has changed. Today is a particularly special day, too, because the last of us Phillips brothers is finally getting married.

I don't know if it counts as a tradition, but I like to think Knox getting hitched at the Little White Chapel on the Strip is more than a little coincidence. First Heath, then me—even if I still barely have any recollection of the ceremony—and now the youngest Phillips brother. There's something nice about having a small, intimate wedding. No need to stress about the catering or figuring out the guest list or burning a hole into your wallet trying to accommodate everyone's expectation of what a wedding is supposed to be.

"God, I'm nervous," Knox grumbles for the fourth time this hour. He readjusts his suit jacket, smoothing out non-existent wrinkles just so he has something to do with his hands. "Is it normal to feel this nervous?"

I chuckle. "We're not going to have a runaway groom on our hands, are we?"

Heath laughs. "You asked her to marry you, kid. Why are you freaking out?"

"I don't know," Knox admits. "I guess it's just really hitting me, that's all. I didn't think Natalia would say yes."

“She loves you,” Willow says. She stands off to the side in a lovely green dress, little Marcus fast asleep in her arms. I’m holding Leo, who’s been wide awake since six this morning and show no signs of slowing down.

Knox shifts uncomfortably from foot to foot. “She’s just so... amazing. You know? Headstrong, confident, ass that won’t quit.”

I roll my eyes. “Save it for the vows, man.”

“I just hope I can give her everything she’s looking for.”

Willow gives my brother a sympathetic smile. “She stepped down from the cartel to be with you, Knox. She wouldn’t have done that if she wasn’t sure.”

“Yeah, maybe.”

The bridal march starts to play over the chapel’s cheap speakers, Natalia entering through the main doors into the small room. She’s dressed in all white, her dark hair contrasting beautifully against the delicate fabric. I’ve only ever known the woman to have sharp edges and a dangerous look in her eye, but I must admit she looks almost angelic today. Her cheeks are a light pink and her smile is one of pure joy as she walks down the aisle to join my brother at the altar.

Willow and I take a seat next to one another in the front row, watching the two of them as they exchange vows and then their rings.

“You know,” I whisper in my wife’s ear, “I don’t think I ever got to see you in a wedding dress.”

Willow grins. “You didn’t carry me over the threshold, either.”

“Do you think we should renew our vows while we’re here?”

She nudges me with the tip of her elbow. “Why not? I think it’ll be romantic.”

Up at the altar, the man dressed as Elvis in a sparkling white getup says in a clear voice, “I now pronounce you husband and wife. You may kiss the bride.”

And just like that, my little brother is hitched. Knox smiles at his new wife, an expression I genuinely used to believe he was incapable of. It's nice to see how much Natalia has changed him, how they've changed each other. I'm so used to seeing them aloof and broody, but together, they appear every bit as soft and in love as the next couple waiting to get married out in the lobby.

“Ready for our Las Vegas honeymoon?” Knox asks her.

Natalia smirks. “I hope you know we're going to spend the whole time fu—”

Willow clears her throat. “There are kids present.”

“So? It's not like they understand me.”

Heath claps his hands, chuckling. “How about we head on over to that all you can eat buffet at the Bellagio? I hear they've got lobster tails on special.”

“Ooh, lobster tails,” Willow says, licking her lips. She turns to me, excited. “I'm going to eat ten.”

I kiss her temple. “You really are a force of nature.”

EPILOGUE II

WILLOW

“I want to go first!” Marcus shouts.

“No, I want to go first!” Leo argues.

“Boys,” I say firmly, “settle down, please. The car isn’t going anyway. You’ll each get your turn in due time, alright? Marcus, you finished all your chores this week, so you get to ride with Dad.”

Leo sighs. “Dang it.”

I wrap my arm over his shoulder and kiss his cheek. He tries to squirm away and pretend like it’s the grossest thing to be kissed by his mother, but I know he’s only kidding. Leo’s been his mama’s boy since day one.

“Come on, kiddo,” Zane says, inviting Marcus to slip behind the front wheel of his truck.

I guide my son to the side of the parking lot. It’s big and empty—perfect for the twins’ first driving lesson. It’s difficult to tell what Zane is saying inside the cabin of the vehicle, but I can tell Marcus isn’t really listening. He goes straight for the gear shift, the whole truck lurching forward and back. I let out a little laugh when I hear Zane exclaim in surprise.

“I don’t see why we have to learn on an automatic,” Leo says astutely. “This just seems unnecessarily hard.”

“Your father says it’s important to learn how to drive a standard.”

“Yeah, but why?”

“Honestly? I’m not entirely sure. I think your dad just likes to do things the hard way.”

Leo snickers. “I think he’s going to go fully gray after this experience.”

“I wouldn’t be surprised.”

After a few more minutes of lurching, my eldest son by exactly four minutes, finally manages to put the vehicle into a slow roll forward. They do a few laps around the parking lot, make a short attempt at parking between the faded stall lines before bringing the car back to its starting position a few yards away from the curb.

Marcus hops out with the biggest smile on his face. Zane looks like he needs a good, long nap.

“Did you see that, Mom?” Marcus asks, rushing over. “I can’t wait to take the truck out on the highway.”

Zane takes a deep breath. “One step at a time, kiddo.”

“It’s my turn!” Leo announces, taking my hand. “Come on, Mom. Hop in!”

I climb into the passenger seat and make sure to buckle up. Leo looks confident behind the wheel, easily able to look over the dash with little adjustment to his seat.

“Okay,” I say as I take a deep breath. “Now, we’ve been over everything in theory, but at the end of the day, there are three very important things to know. Gas means go, brake means stop, and you should always hold the steering wheel at ten and two unless you are shifting.”

“I know, Mom,” Leo says. “Can you teach me how to do donuts?” I glare at him, but my son only laughs. “I’m joking!”

“Hilarious,” I say with a chuckle. “Why don’t you go ahead and drive forward a little bit.”

Leo is by far the more cautious brother, taking his time learning where everything is and how to properly shift between gears. His driving is a lot smoother than his brother’s, no doubt because he has far more patience. We make it around

the parking lot once, twice... Before he finally pulls the truck neatly into a stall and kills the engine.

“How’d I do, Mom?” he asks, looking at me with a glint in his eyes.

I reach over and ruffle his hair, pride swelling in my chest. “Amazing, sweetie.”

“You think so?”

“I mean, you didn’t scuff the paint and the car didn’t explode, so I’m going to say you passed with flying colors.”

We get out of the car and reconvene with Zane and Marcus.

“That was amazing, kiddo!” Zane says with a hearty laugh. “The two of you will be race car drivers in no time.”

Marcus rolls his eyes. “We’ve been over this, Dad. I want to work with Anna at NASA.”

“I wouldn’t mind being a NASCAR driver,” Leo admits.

“Come on, boys,” I say. “Let’s go grab a bite to eat while we’re in town.”

“Can I drive us there?” Marcus asks, hope written all over his face.

Zane pats our son on the back. “Maybe next time, buddy. I want us to get there in one piece.”

“Fine, but I call shotgun!”

“Wait!” Leo shouts. “No fair!”

The twins rush to the car, wrestling to claim the front seat while Zane and I look on. There’s something wistful in my husband’s eyes as he watches our boys.

“They grow up so fast,” he murmurs quietly. “Next thing you know, they’ll be asking to borrow the car to take girls out on dates.”

I huff. “Over my dead body. No dating until they’re in college.”

Zane laughs, dipping down to kiss my cheek. “You’re being a tad overprotective, darling.”

“Damn right I am. I’ll chase those girls away with a bat if I have to.”

“I have no doubt you will.”

“Mom! Dad! Let’s go!” Leo calls from the backseat, rolling the window down. “Do you think we can catch a movie, too? That new horror flick by Del Toro is finally out.”

Zane grins, glancing down at me. “What do you think? Dinner and a movie with the boys?”

I wrap my arm around his waist and rest my head against his shoulder. “That sounds absolutely perfect.”

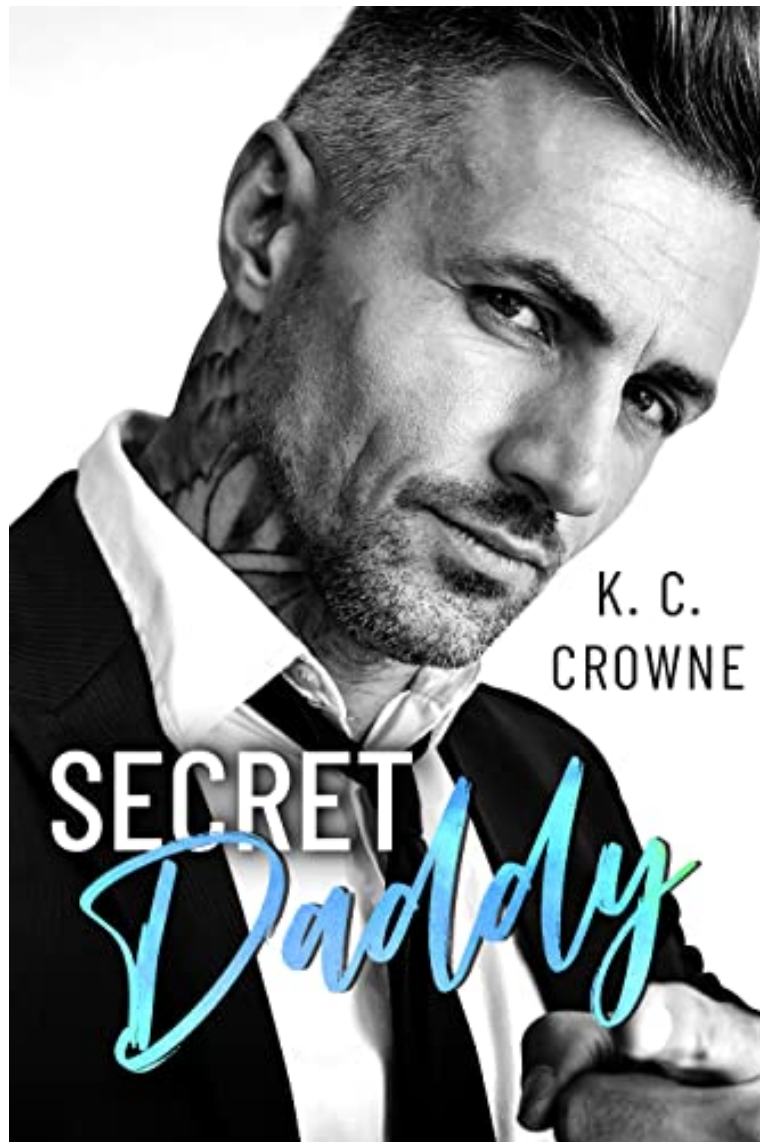
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CHAPTER 1

“**F** **K YOU, YOU CHEATING SCUMBAG!”

This isn't one of my prouder moments. But everybody has their limits, and I'm no exception.

“Marina, calm down,” Corey says over the phone, his voice anything but soothing. “You need to give me a chance to explain.”

“Explain?” I echo, incredulous. “What's there to explain? I caught you sleeping with our wedding planner hours before our wedding!”

People are full-on staring now, not that I can blame them. I'd stare, too, if some teary-eyed, hysterical lady was cussing her ex-fiancé up and down in the middle of the airport's first-class lounge.

This is a nice place, complete with complimentary buffet and champagne, luxuriously spacious leather seats, and massive flatscreens everywhere to entertain you while waiting for your flight. And then there's me, hair still up in partial curls and my mascara all runny, ruining the hours I spent in the makeup chair transforming myself into a blushing bride.

It wasn't supposed to be like this. In another universe, Corey would be at my side, waiting for our first-class flight to Hawaii for our month-long honeymoon. A weaker person might go home, hide in shame and humiliation at having been told the groom was caught fucking the wedding planner on the church organ's keys.

Except I don't have a home to go back to. The house was given to him by his parents. The car's in his name. Every small comfort I took for granted before was only possible because Corey paid for them. After we graduated from high school, he promised to provide. Filled my head with stupid ideas of how he'd go off to work and make all the money, that I wouldn't have to worry about anything. He said he didn't like the thought of me having to work. He'd take care of everything. He'd take care of *me*.

Stupid, I know. So fucking stupid, but hindsight's twenty-twenty.

Screw him.

"You're being emotional, Arin," Corey says bitterly. "Just come home so we can work things out. You're not going on our fucking honeymoon without me."

"Watch me."

"Jesus Christ, Arin. You're overreacting."

"Do you really think I'm going to let you gaslight me into thinking any of this is okay?"

"I can't talk to you when you get like this."

"Get like what? Justifiably angry?"

"Look, I'm under a lot of pressure, okay? All this wedding planning shit... I've been so stressed out."

"I've been stressed out too, Corey, but guess which one of us had enough goddamn self-control to keep their legs shut!"

"I made a mistake, alright? Would you just come home so we can figure this out?"

"Fuck no! I never want to see your face again!"

"So you're just *never* coming back? You need me, Arin. How are you going to support yourself?"

"I don't know. Maybe I'll finally put myself through fashion school. My inheritance from Granny Ruth has been sitting there for me for years. It's about time I use it."

“Not again with this stupid fashion school nonsense! If I’ve told you once, I’ve told you a thousand times. There’s no fucking way you’re going to make a living as a designer!”

I take a deep breath, so angry I can feel my pulse vibrating through my teeth. I genuinely, from the bottom of my heart, thought Corey was my one.

But this betrayal cuts too deep. My pride’s bruised black and blue, and I’m nowhere close to giving him even an ounce of forgiveness.

“Here’s an idea, Corey,” I say firmly and clearly. “Shove your hand so far up your own ass that you can give yourself a handshake, m’kay?”

I hang up, numb from head to toe. My cheeks are warm, my eyes puffy from crying. A few people in the lounge are nice enough to give me pitying looks. Some of them whisper, others shoot judgmental glances in my direction. I clearly don’t fit in here, but I’m not going anywhere. If I’m not going to enjoy a fairytale wedding, I’m sure as hell going to treat myself to the all-you-can-eat shrimp, margaritas, and palm-sized lemon cakes they’re serving for free here.

Beside me, a low chuckle catches my attention.

The table next to mine is occupied by a man in a sharp black suit and polished leather shoes. I peek at him through my clumped lashes, wiping my nose with the back of my hand. My mouth goes dry when I manage to get a good look at him.

Hot damn, now *he* belongs in first class.

He’s older than me, maybe in his late thirties? Dark brown hair like a steaming cup of coffee. Deep, dark eyes that lure you to their depths, an endless abyss that I’m curious to explore. He’s got strong shoulders and a wide chest, and his arms are so big I can see the curves of his defined muscles beneath the straining fabric of his suit jacket. He looks the part of a businessman, but there’s something... gruffer underneath.

Dangerous.

I don’t know what it is. There’s an intensity to him, like he’s seen some shit and lived to tell the tale. Equal parts

mesmerizing and intimidating, raw strength bundled up in an understated yet respectable package. Now I'm staring. My heart stutters when his eyes lock onto mine, an immediate and almost overwhelming heat shooting down to pool between my legs.

He doesn't look away. Neither do I. I can't. He's just too handsome, too mysterious.

And he's laughing at me.

"What?" I demand, hating how my voice comes out all squeaky.

"You need to work on your trash talk."

A shiver slithers down my spine, goosebumps crawling down the length of my arms. His *voice*. Deep and rich, so low I can feel his words vibrate in the pit of my stomach. It's enough to leave me breathless and my brain blank. I have no clue what I'm supposed to say.

Thankfully, I don't have to say anything because he makes the first move, reaching into his inner pocket to pull out a handkerchief. The corner is embroidered in delicate burgundy thread, the initials *DC* decorating the corner.

Talk about fancy. Who casually carries around handkerchiefs these days?

"The wedding planner on your wedding day," he comments once I've taken the handkerchief from him. "That's low."

I frown. "You heard that, huh?"

"Hard not to."

Wiping my eyes, I briefly wonder if I'm one of those girls who can pull off the hot mess aesthetic. Signs point to unlikely. As if these last forty-eight hours haven't been mortifying enough, I now find myself sitting not five feet away from one of the most gorgeous men I've ever laid eyes on and I look like shit.

Hey God, it's me. Would you mind —oh, I don't know— giving me a break?

“You’re better off without him,” the stranger says.

I fight the urge to roll my eyes. The last thing I want right now are unsolicited comments about my crumbling personal life. Instead of telling him to mind his own business, I say, “I don’t know what I’m going to do.”

“You’ll be fine.”

His response is blunt, but it isn’t exactly harsh. I actually appreciate his directness. I can’t count how many people have tried to console me, coddle me, spew all sorts of Pinterest quote board BS about how love is a journey, how marriage takes work and *blah blah blah*. Buddy over here is the first person since my disastrous would-be wedding to give me a straight answer.

“I just don’t get it,” I mumble, scrunching up the soft silk of the handkerchief in my hands. “It was his idea to get married so soon. He clearly wasn’t ready, so why...” I shake my head. “Sorry. You probably have a flight to catch. I won’t keep you.”

He glances at his wristwatch, and I notice how big his hands are. Thick knuckles, beefy wrists. I catch a glimpse of ink gracing his skin, but it disappears beneath the crisp cuff of his sleeve. “If I didn’t want to talk to you, I wouldn’t...” He arches a brow slightly, expectant.

“Marina,” I supply. “My friends call me Arin.”

He doesn’t smile, but I swear I catch a glimmer of something in those dark eyes of his. “Marina,” he repeats, testing my name on his tongue. “A pleasure.”

I snort, too exhausted to worry about sounding foolish. If I haven’t scared him off already, I doubt my dumb laugh will do the trick. “And you?” I ask. “Do you have a name, or are you trying hard to keep up your *international man of mystery* vibe?”

The corner of his lips tick up into the smallest of amused grins. He sticks his hand out to shake, easily enveloping my smaller one. His palms are deliciously rough. For a moment, I wonder what they’d look like wrapped around more than just

my fingers. My skin tingles at the thought of his hands gently gripping my knee, slipping beneath my shirt...

“Dominic,” he says, pulling me from my thoughts.

I smile. The name suits him. “Dominic,” I repeat. “So, where are you flying off to today?”

“Milan, and then a quick stop in Sicily.”

“Business or pleasure?”

“A little of both.”

I nod slowly. “Got a girlfriend waiting for you over there?”

“What gave you that impression?”

“Well, you’re not wearing a ring, so I assumed...”

Now he grins for real, the sight so unexpectedly charming I forget my train of thought. “Is this your roundabout way of asking me if I’m single, Marina?”

I clear my throat, heart pounding in my ear. What am I doing? Why is it suddenly so hot in here? You’d think a first-class lounge could afford proper air conditioning.

“Can’t a girl be curious?” I ask, arching a brow.

“I’m not attached,” is his vague answer. “And what about you?”

“Oh, I think it’s pretty obvious that I’m *very* single right now.”

He chuckles again, the sound once again making my knees tremble with burning desire. What is it about this man that makes me want to melt into a puddle? “No, I meant where are you flying off to?”

My cheeks warm, though I can’t tell if it’s because I’m embarrassed or insanely turned on. “Hawaii. I’m going on what’s supposed to be my honeymoon.”

Dominic clicks his tongue in disapproval. “What a shame.”

“What is?”

He tilts his head to the side slightly and regards me, his intense dark eyes sweeping over me slowly. It's amazing how naked I feel beneath his observant gaze. I feel like he can see right through me, can see every minute breath and small shift of muscle and maybe even read my thoughts. Nervous excitement crackles inside me; the air around us is thick and tense. When I nibble my bottom lip, his eyes dart to watch the motion with an almost hungry darkness.

"A beautiful woman," he says, "all alone in a romantic place. Your ex is a damn fool for treating you this way."

I'm the first to glance away, unwilling to let this man see me cry. I've known him for less than ten minutes, but there's no denying how easily he sees me. I'm an exposed nerve, yet I trust him to be nearby. Maybe it's *because* we're basically strangers and that's why I can afford to be so open with him. Anonymity can be liberating that way. That, and I can't stop thinking about how it might feel to just let it all go.

I want to forget all about my disastrous wedding, my cheating fiancé, my lack of direction or plans for the future. I thought I was all set for a picture-perfect life, complete with house in the suburbs, a white picket fence, and a couple of kids running around. Now that it's all gone straight out the window, I'm suddenly aware of how free I am.

Free to make mistakes and learn from them. Free to live for myself. Free to look into the future and do whatever I want. I'm a twenty-one-year-old woman capable of making my own decisions—screw what anybody else has to say about that. And right now, what I want is to listen to my body.

My body aches for more. I crave his hands on me, his lips. My fingers itch to know what his hair feels like, if his body is as hard and muscular as it looks. I want to lean in and press my mouth to his. After almost five years of only knowing Corey's touch, I want to erase him completely from my mind, even if only for a little while.

"Dominic?"

"Hm?"

I lick my lips, hesitant. I've never done anything like this before, but I can tell by the way he leans forward and hangs on my every word that I'm not crazy. He feels it, too, this pull toward one another.

"When's your flight?" I ask him before my nerves give out.

"Not for a couple of hours. You?"

"Same."

"Hm." Dominic nods once, as if reading my mind. "Come with me. I'm going to help you forget all about that cheating fiancé of yours."

CHAPTER 2

The Centurion Lounge at JFK doesn't let just anybody walk in through their big blue doors. My first-class ticket alone isn't good enough to grant me access. But when Dominic flashes his Amex Black, the peppy receptionist welcomes us in with a big smile and a sweeping motion of her arm. The place is relatively empty—no doubt thanks to the exclusivity—but that's not what I'm choosing to focus on right now.

It happens fast.

Dominic has clearly been here before because he guides me to the back section of the lounge where the private showers are. He takes my hand and pulls me inside, immediately moving in to crash his lips against mine, his demanding tongue sweeping over mine like it's new land to claim.

I'm rigid and awkward at first. This is all so new, after all. I've only kissed one other person before, and it turns out he's a cheating douchebag. Kissing Dominic is like trying a new cocktail. The taste, the feel, the tingling sensation he leaves on my lips—it's all exciting and new and requires a bit of adjustment.

"Relax, Marina," he says, loosening his tie as he speaks.

"I've never done this before," I admit, thirstily helping him with the top buttons of his shirt.

Dominic pauses, pulling away a few inches. A soft whine escapes me at the sudden lack of warmth. "Are you sure you want to do this? We can stop at any time."

“I’m sure,” I rasp, tugging at his belt greedily. “I’m just letting you know I don’t... have a lot of experience, that’s all.”

“With quickies?”

I roll my eyes. “Sex in general. I’ve only been with—”

“The cheating scumbag?”

“Yeah.”

“Don’t worry, dolcezza. He was just a boy. I’m going to show you how a real man fucks.”

I shiver, my knees practically jelly. The wet heat between my legs is starting to grow unbearable. “Then what are you waiting for?” I mutter against his mouth.

It’s all the permission he needs. Dominic circles me in his arms and lifts me up. I wrap my legs around his hips instinctively, clinging to him as his lips slot together with mine. His kisses are rougher, but I like it infinitely better this way. He’s rough and demanding, proof that he wants not just my mouth, but the very air I’m trying to breathe. It’s all-consuming and wonderfully dizzying.

Dominic carries me into the shower stall, the polished tiles cool to the touch. His big hands are surprisingly deft, peeling my clothes off piece by piece with amazing fluidity. I don’t even have time to feel awkward about it—because on some level this *should* be awkward. God knows it was the first time Corey and I had sex. Back then, I’d been self-conscious and unsure with no idea what I was supposed to do.

But Dominic leaves no time for doubt. He looks at me like he’s ready to devour, pressing hard kisses against my throat, down to my chest, squeezing my breasts while teasing my pebbling nipples with his teeth. He sucks marks against my breasts, a hand slipping between my legs to gather up the slick heat there. A heady groan rips itself from my lungs when his fingers slide over my folds.

“Hurry up,” I rasp. “Shouldn’t you be naked by now?”

Dominic rises to full height, peering down at me with a mischievous glint in his eyes. “It’s called foreplay, dolcezza.

Ever heard of it?”

I chew on the inside of my cheek. “Honestly? Corey didn’t usually—”

“Don’t say his name.”

Swallowing, I nod. I don’t even want to think about him right now. “My *ex* didn’t usually bother with that stuff.”

“Stuff,” Dominic grumbles derisively. “Dear God, you were really going to marry the man?”

“I didn’t know better.”

“Now you do.”

He brushes the pad of his thumb over my sensitive clit, sending sparks flying through my body. Pleasure ebbs and flows through every fiber of my being, punctuated with his kisses and caresses. I claw at his shirt, eager to see him naked and equally exposed. The hard press of his cock against my thigh thrills me, hard and hot and doing its best to escape the confines of his pants.

He works me over with his fingers, teasing me until I’m on the edge of insanity, so consumed by pleasure I can’t help but scream against his shoulder as I crash into my climax. I accidentally bump the shower knob, turning on the high-pressure spray. We’re drenched through in seconds, steam filling the already hot space.

“I’m sorry,” I half-laugh. It’s hard to feel genuinely bad now that his shirt is transparent, revealing the mosaic of dark tattoos beneath the white fabric.

Dominic doesn’t seem too upset. “That’s fine. I’ll just buy a new suit.”

He finally—*finally*—shrugs off his shirt while I reach between us and make quick work of his belt. Hooking my fingers over the waistband of his pants, I push down and marvel at the sheer size of him.

Good God, the man’s massive. His cock springs free, hard and standing at attention. Corey doesn’t even compare. I know

it's not the size of one's tool that matters, but how you use it—and I'm starting to get the sense that Dominic has both.

“Are you, um...” I lick my lips, the spray trickling over my hair and shoulders.

“It's a little late to be shy, dolcezza.”

“Clean. Are you clean?”

“I am but let me grab the condom I have in my wallet.”

“Okay. I mean, I'm on birth control, but there's nothing wrong with being extra careful.”

Dominic leaves for a minute. I stay under the warmth of the shower's spray, willing my heart to calm down. This is exciting and wild. I don't believe in fate or karma, but my chance run-in with Dominic is starting to feel like a sign from above, reinforcing that leaving Corey's sorry ass was the right decision.

Why waste my time with a selfish boy when I can have a man instead?

When Dominic returns, his cock is sheathed and ready for me. He holds me close, his arms secure and comforting. It's strange how safe I feel with him. His kisses take a more tender turn, gentle and teasing as he presses his weight against me, my back pinned against the shower wall. I bristle against the cold, but quickly adjust, too distracted by the earthy scent of his skin and his tattoos to care.

“I'm going to ask you one last time,” he says. “Are you sure you want to do this?”

I nod. “Yes, Dominic. Please fuck me. Help me forget about him.”

“I'll do you one better. When I'm done with you, you'll forget how to *walk*.”

I barely recognized the pitched moan that bubbles past my lips. “I can't wait.”

Dominic grabs my thigh and lifts my leg, hooking it over his hip for better access. He doesn't get straight to it, rubbing

the head of his cock slowly over my wet folds. My pussy clenches around nothing, desperate to feel full. He distracts me with a deep kiss, tongue dancing over my own in a waltz for dominance. He lifts me like I weigh nothing at all, pinning me against the shower while my feet dangle on either side of him. I gasp, circling his neck for stability.

“I’ve got you,” he mutters, pressing the head of length against my entrance. “Ready?”

“Please. Please, please, *please*—”

He shoves into me, my walls stretching to take him. The sensation is divine. I’m so full and warm and drowning in pleasure. I don’t think I’ve ever felt this way before, complete and satisfied before the fun has even begun.

Dominic’s first thrust is careful, testing the waters, but then his pace picks up. Before long, we’re fucking in earnest, our bodies moving as one as we work together to find pleasure. The hot slap of skin against skin makes me even wetter. His hot, low grunts against my ear make me feral.

It’s almost shocking how quickly I lose control. The tight, bright coil in the pit of my stomach suddenly burns with such intensity that there’s no time to brace against the euphoria flooding my veins. I moan languidly against Dominic’s mouth, clinging on for dear life as ecstasy erases my thoughts.

“Oh, *God*,” I pant, breathing in the steam. “Wow, that was —”

Dominic huffs, snapping his hips against me. Sparks fly across my vision. “Not done with you yet.”

“But I—”

“You’re going to give me one more.”

“What?”

“You heard me.”

My head spins. *Holy crap, what did I get myself into?*

Dominic sets me down carefully so I’ve got one foot firmly planted on the shower floor. I lean against the side,

hands pressed against the wall as Dominic lifts my outside leg and slots himself between my thighs. The new angle is heavenly, the head of his cock sweeping over a spot I'd only ever read about. It's a new kind of pleasure, this sweet spot, something so deep and powerful that I don't have the words to describe it.

He grasps me by the chin, holding my gaze as he thrusts his cock in and out of me. "Lovely," he praises. "So nice and tight for me, dolcezza. Tell me, has he ever made you feel this way?"

"Dominic—*oh*—"

"Tell me."

"N-no, never."

He curses in something that sounds like Italian. I'm about to ask him what he said, but he interrupts my train of thought with another bruising kiss. He pumps into me faster, harder, the head of his cock sweeping over my sweet spot over and over again until I shatter around him, my whole body trembling as the climax claims me. It's a good thing Dominic's holding onto me because my jelly legs likely would have collapsed out from under me.

"That's it," he encourages roughly, breathing in the scent of my wet hair. "Absolutely wonderful." He kisses my cheek, surprisingly sweet for a man being so deliciously rough.

Dominic turns me around so I'm facing the shower wall, my palms pressed up against the tile as he bends me over. The water trickles over my back, but the only sensation I'm focused on is his big hand stroking the length of my spine, dipping down to grab my ass. His softening cock rubs against my cheeks with a satisfied hum.

"Such a tease," I grumble, backing up slightly to grind against his length.

He claps me across the ass, not hard enough to be painful, but it's definitely still a shock. "Such a gorgeous body. You're so beautiful, Marina, you know that?"

I squirm, unsure what to do with all this praise. I think Dominic senses my mild discomfort because he asks, “That bastard didn’t tell you that often.”

I shake my head. It’s so weird that *now* is the moment my brain decides to feel ashamed. Not when Corey was caught fucking our wedding planner, not when I screamed bloody murder in first class, but now when it’s painfully obvious how little Corey actually cared about me. Compliments were rare, and what little praise I did get was half-assed and often empty.

“Bella mia,” he says with a sigh, slipping an arm around my waist to pull me against him. I don’t think I’ll ever stop marveling at how gentle this giant man is capable of being. “Why did you even agree to marry him?” he asks, a whisper.

A single tear betrays me, slipping down my cheek just to be washed away with the rest of the water. I’ve been too angry to cry. The irony isn’t lost on me. I recognize how strange it is for me to feel safer and more open with a stranger than with the man I was going to marry. Yet it feels like the most natural thing in the world to wear my feelings on my sleeve. For some reason, telling Dominic my deepest, darkest secrets is as easy as breathing.

“Because I loved him,” I admit. “I loved him more than he loved me, and I was too naive to see it until it was almost too late. I was an idiot, that’s why.”

He kisses the back of my shoulder, the crook of my neck. “You’re not an idiot.”

“You don’t even know me.”

“Yet I feel like I’ve known you my whole life.”

I turn just enough to offer him a smile. “I was thinking the same thing.”

Dominic kisses the corner of my mouth. “You’re not an idiot, Marina. There’s nothing wrong with loving someone despite their flaws. What’s unforgivable is how he didn’t give you the same level of love and devotion in return.”

I laugh softly. “You should write a romance advice column.”

“If I ever get fired from my day job, I’ll consider it.”

“Thank you, Dominic. I really needed this.”

“I have a proposal for you,” he says as he pumps some complimentary guava and papaya scented shampoo into his hand. “It’s going to sound crazy.”

“I’m down for a little crazy,” I reply with a smile.

“Don’t go to Hawaii. Come with me to Italy.”

“Are you serious?”

“This... connection,” he says slowly, “it doesn’t happen to me often. I’d like to spend more time with you, and I’d rather not think about you spending your honeymoon all alone.”

I grimace. “It’s sad, I know.”

“Come with me, then. I’ll cover all the expenses.”

“Do you want me to be the pleasure portion of ‘business and pleasure?’”

He gently pinches my ass, earning himself a bubbly giggle. “That’s not a no.”

I take a moment to think. This is all happening so fast. I’ve never been the kind of girl to fly at the seat of my pants. I like to plan things, be organized, micromanage every penny. Spontaneity has never been a part of my character. My choices are always safe and calculated and without risk.

Deep down, I think I was looking for security when I said yes to marrying Corey. A loving husband, a couple of kids, and a big back yard for them to run around in. That’s what people are supposed to want out of life, right?

Not having sex with a stranger in an exclusive VIP lounge at JFK. Not traveling to a foreign country on a whim with a handsome stranger. But my safe choices are what landed me here. If I pass up this opportunity, I might regret it one day.

I look at Dominic and nod. “Let’s do it.”

He smiles, a real, genuine smile that lights up his whole face. It’s so beautiful, my heart skips a beat and my breath

hitches.

Maybe there is such thing as fate.

CHAPTER 3

“**Y**ou have a private jet?” I exclaim, gawking at the luxurious cabin.

I’ve only flown economy, so an entire plane to myself is enough to gob smack me. There’s a fully stocked mini bar with polished glass tumblers, a small fridge loaded with all sorts of chocolate-covered fruits, a big TV built into the wall of the cabin, spacious white leather seats, and even a bathroom in the back complete with a functioning shower.

“Courtesy of my employer,” Dominic says. He’s checking something on his phone, brows knitted in a steep frown.

“Everything alright?”

“Need to make a phone call. Make yourself comfortable. I’ll be back in a few minutes.”

“And then we’re off to Milan?”

Dominic nods, flashing that rare grin of his. “Then we’re off to Milan.”

He climbs down the steps of the jet, phone pressed to his ear as he speaks in rapid-fire Italian. I settle into my seat, giddy as hell. Not only have I met a dashing stranger, but I’m also going to one of the biggest fashion capitals in the world!

Ever since I was a little girl, it’s been a dream of mine to be involved in the world of fashion. I used to pour over Granny Ruth’s old magazines from the fifties, sixties, and seventies that she had stored up in the attic. Watching fashion trends change over time was incredibly fascinating. I was less

concerned with the models who wore the clothes and enthralled by the artistic process that went into a designer's piece. From finding the right material to stitching it all together by hand to selling it directly to a client or retail... Everything about the fashion cycle blew my mind.

I had every intention of going to fashion school with the hopes of one day becoming a designer. I used to dream about my label being up there with the big players—Prada, Gucci, Chanel, Dior. Corey had other plans for me. He wasn't exactly subtle about his disinterest in my passions, going on and on about how I'd have a better chance of winning the lottery than making it as an independent designer. No chance in hell. Besides, what does a married woman need with a career if she's got a good, all-American husband to provide?

Looking back, I realize now how foolish I'd been, placing all my faith in him. He kept me financially dependent on him at every turn. Maybe him cheating on me is a blessing in disguise. At least now I realize I've dodged a bullet. I can't imagine what would have happened to me if I'd legally tied the knot.

These changes... They hurt like hell, but for the first time in a long time, I'm hopeful that I can turn things around. I won't let anybody stand in the way of doing what makes me happy.

Heavy footsteps climb up the jet's stairs. At first, I think it's Dominic returning to join me. I'm disappointed to see it's someone else entirely, though they're dressed in similarly cut suits. The man is a couple inches shorter than Dominic, and he has short black hair and dark green eyes. When he smiles at me, I catch a glimpse of the hole in his teeth. The man's missing his right incisor, making his grin gappy and off-putting.

"Hello, gorgeous," he drawls. "I didn't know the boss was treating us to some in-flight entertainment."

I frown, my stomach growing tight. "Um, hi? I'm Arin. Are you the pilot?"

The man approaches me without hesitation, dipping in to take my hand and press a kiss to the back of my fingers. It's jarring how he shoves himself into my personal space like he owns it. "I'm not the pilot, baby doll," he says. "But I can get my hands on a uniform if that's what turns you on."

A chill rakes through me. *Ugh. Creep.*

I take my hand back and squirm in my seat. "Dominic's going to be here any minute. He said he had to make a call."

Gap Tooth blinks, looking surprised. "You're Dom's girl? My, that's a surprise."

"Why would that be a surprise?"

"Oh, nothing. It's just that my dear colleague promised to swear off hiring escorts for these sorts of trips." Gap Tooth winks at me. "Got in a bit of trouble with our boss not too long ago, you see. He was accidentally charging the company card. You're one hell of a babe, so I'm sure your rates are through the roof. I keep telling him cash is the way to go. We don't want that kind of paper trail lying around, do we?"

I stand, absolutely disgusted. I can't believe what I'm hearing. "I'm not an escort!" I hiss. "How could you say such a terrible thing?"

Gap Tooth takes a step back, his face blank. I can't tell if he's putting on a show or if he's genuinely caught off guard. "You're... not a high-end hooker?"

"Of course not." My face is hotter than the surface of the sun.

He puts his hands up in mock surrender. "I'm sorry, lady. It was an honest mistake. I'm just so used to Dom letting loose on these international business trips."

My heart twists in my chest. "You mean... he does this often? Bring girls with him, I mean."

"Oh, yes. All the time. He has a new girl on his arm every week. Really, you'll have to excuse me. I didn't mean to offend."

I grit my teeth, refusing to cry. What the hell is wrong with me? First Corey, and now I've been played for a sucker by Dominic? But how can that be? I swear to God, what I felt when I was with Dominic was real. Fleeting and new, but sincere and intimate. He was sweet and encouraging, made me feel safe and comforted. Was I just another notch in his belt?

The more and more I think about it, the more I realize how silly I'm being. Did I honestly expect to fly off to Italy with him for a couple of weeks of wild fun? I don't know a thing about him. I don't know what he does for a living, I don't know who he works for, and I don't even know his last name.

Without another word, I storm off the jet, climbing down the steps in a hurry. I need to get my life in order, do some real soul searching. I'm tired of playing the naive fool. It's time to grow the hell up and take charge of my life. No man is going to take advantage of me ever again.

Dominic spots me a few yards away. He hangs up hastily and half-jogs to catch up to me. "Marina? Where are you going?"

"Fuck you," I hiss, shoving past him.

"What's wrong, dolcezza? Tell me what happened."

"Why don't you ask your buddy on the plane?"

"My buddy on the... You mean Milo? What the fuck did he say to you?"

I shake my head, so angry at myself I want to scream. "I thought we... You made me feel special, Dominic. Turns out I'm a dime a dozen to you."

Dominic's face is cold and hard. "Whatever he said to you, it's not true. Marina, wait—"

He tries to take my hand. I pull away.

"Have fun on your trip," I grumble bitterly before walking away.



END OF PREVIEW

Click here for the entire story.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

K.C. Crowne is an Amazon Top 10 bestseller.

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