



Love
Dangerously

Corrupt
ME

Power Is The End

INTERNATIONAL BESTSELLING AUTHOR

SERENA JAMES

CHASE

Corrupt Me

Love Dangerously, Book 1

Serena James Chase

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About the Author

ABOUT CORRUPT ME

No good deed goes unpunished.

I knew that better than most, but it didn't stop me from using my formidable reputation to save an out-of-depth woman being chased in a dark alley.

As an enforcer for the Donovan Crime Family, I had no time for strays let alone damsels in distress. My world was already complicated, with a turf war threatening my boss's empire. All I wanted was to get her home safe and out of my life because I couldn't afford any distractions, even if they came in a package as tempting as the dark-haired beauty.

I told myself she was off-limits, but she's determined and hellbent on upending my world. Now I'm not sure when it's all over if who I am will shatter her innocence or if she'll be the one to corrupt me.

CHAPTER ONE

GRAHAM

PATRICK DONOVAN LEADS US down the narrow passageway to a four-inch thick, bulletproof door. The six of us shoulder into the wine cellar nestled into the original foundation of Patrick's Lake Forest mansion. The room is expertly chilled to preserve my boss's envious collection of vintage wines.

Through the dusty rows of wine bottles resting on wooden shelves, and behind a false wall made to look like exposed brick hides a panic room for the family. As one of Patrick's enforcers and head of his personal security, I oversaw every detail of its construction, even the secret tunnel that leads to the edge of the backyard.

We take seats around the oak table underneath the domed ceiling. Above our heads, about seventy guests are gathered to celebrate the wedding announcement of Patrick's nephew and his long-time girlfriend, Leanna. We are gathered below them for something less innocent.

Patrick settles into the plush velvet chair. “So, where do we stand with the Garzas?”

His nephew, Jimmy Donovan, is about to deliver the bad news. The groom-to-be leans forward and clasps his hand on the table. “We’ve tried making overtures, but they’re still pushing into our neighborhoods,” he says.

As usual, Jimmy sits next to his uncle with two of his guys, Ryan Murphy and Michael Sullivan, occupying the other chairs directly across from me. To my right is my closest friend, Flynn Macken and to my left is the empty seat where Carey Donovan, Patrick’s son, is supposed to be.

We wait silently around the table as the head of the Donovan Mafia weighs his options until Jimmy says, “We can’t afford all out war. But we can’t keep letting them get away with this shit either. No matter how penny-ante it might be.”

Although the Donovan family’s history in Chicago is both long and brutal, the threat from the Garzas is real. The Garzas are newcomers. They seem to have sprung up out of nowhere, and recently, they’ve been encroaching into our territories, testing our patience. They want to see how many offenses we’ll tolerate before we retaliate violently. The family’s preoccupation with Jimmy’s big, splashy wedding is a good opportunity for them to encroach even further.

“The new mayor is calling for peace. Not to mention he’ll be here any minute,” Patrick says. “Our hands are tied, Jimmy.”

Despite how they made their money, the Donovan family had always had their hands in the political machine that drives the city, and Patrick had invested a lot in the incoming mayor's election campaign.

Justin O'Rourke ran on a platform to lower crime. He was also a good friend of Jimmy's growing up, and Patrick promised to deliver lower crime statistics during his first term. In exchange, Justin would look out for our business interests and keep our people protected from the Cook County State's Attorney's Office.

"The Garzas don't understand how the game is played today. How we all need to behave." Patrick's white hair glistens in the light as he rubs his jaw. "None of us can afford advertisements on the front pages of the newspapers."

What Patrick doesn't say is that even with having someone at the head of the city's power structure on our side, our reputation on the streets can no longer afford to concede ground to the Garzas without inviting more threats. When you're the big dog, you're always being challenged. It's a thin line between looking weak by wasting time on a scrappy Terrier and being blindsided by a big Bullmastiff.

I learned that lesson the hard way in the boxing ring once, and I never forgot it.

Patrick lifts his head and our gazes meet. His silvery eyes, steeped with wisdom gained from decades of fighting and taking, gleam in the dim light. "Graham, this can't be messy," he says.

I nod. My boss has given me the green light to wage war on the Garzas, but he wants me to eliminate them without turning the streets of Chicago into a sea of crimson littered with dead bodies. Patrick looks at me in the way a father might look at his son. Gazing back, I see a hint of apprehension. Perhaps he worries he's let the business with the Garzas drag on for too long. Or allowed Jimmy to do too much talking. Perhaps he fears now for my safety.

Straightening in my chair, I say, "Flynn and I will take care of the Garzas." My voice is calm and sure because I already had a plan.

Patrick nods. "I'm trusting you to make this go away for the family. Don't disappoint me, son."

"For the family," I say.

"Good. Now let's get back to the party before Melissa notices I've stolen the groom." Patrick rises to his feet. We follow behind him again, exiting the cellar. "Where the fuck is Carey?" Patrick says to me as soon as we are back upstairs. "He should be here when the mayor arrives. Do you know where the hell he is?"

I suspect Carey's either fucking off, or just off fucking. I shake my head. "I don't, but I'll come back with him."

Patrick grabs two champagne flutes from a passing waitress, handing me one. "That boy needs to get his head on straight."

I bring the drink to my lips and tip the champagne flute back. The dry bubbles pop in my throat as I guzzle it down.

Taking a quick look around the room at the guests enjoying classical music from the four-piece orchestra, I understand why Carey skipped out on the celebration. But for Patrick, family means every bit as much as business. As his heir, Carey was bound to be in the spotlight tonight. He should have known better than to believe he had a choice not to be here.

“I’ll drag him back here if I have to.”

“At least I can rely on you.” Patrick claps me on the shoulder before he strides off, returning to the festivities.

Finishing my champagne as I stomp into the foyer, I call Carey’s phone. It rings and rings.

“Graham!”

The tiny voice yelling my name from above belongs to one of my favorite people in the world. I look up to the second floor landing. Patrick’s daughter, Neve, giggles at me. She sits with her legs criss crossed, her cheeks resting between her small fists as she holds on to the spindles of the banister.

I smile. “Shouldn’t you be in bed?”

Neve giggles again. “Read me a story, Graham.”

I hate to disappoint any member of the Donovan family, but Neve the most. Taking the stairs two at a time, I meet her on the landing. Neve barrels into me. I yank her off the floor and she gives me a hug.

“Read me Matilda again.”

“I can’t tonight, Neve. I have to find your brother and by the time I do that, you’ll probably be asleep. Where is Margarita?”

Neve shrugs. Her eyes widen, accentuating the innocent look on her face. “If you don’t find Carey will Daddy be mad at you?”

“Your father never gets mad at me. I don’t give him reason to.” Carrying her in my arms, I walk Neve towards the bedrooms. “But yes, he will be. Neither of us want that, right?”

“Right,” she says and grins.

I make it halfway to her room before her exasperated nanny comes running down the hall, apologizing to me in Spanish. I hand Neve over to her.

“No te preocupes,” I tell Margarita. “This stays between us”

“Gracias, Mr. Tate. Gracias.”

Before I head back downstairs, I instruct Neve not to misbehave for the rest of the night. She nods without a second thought, but it’s a meaningless gesture. Neve is wily—even for a nine year old.



My new sports car makes quick work of the trip to Stevie Cullen’s bar where I park around back in the alley. I pause to admire the aggressive lines on the Ferrari. It’s only been mine for twelve days. It still has the new car smell and the high

shine from the showroom polish. Ever since I was Neve's age, I've wanted to drive one of these. The best I ever thought I could do was get a job as a valet at a five-star resort, or one of the golf courses where old, rich guys with nothing else to do play 18 holes in the middle of the day. Owning one had been a dream until now.

A crescent-shaped, neon blue sign illuminates a long row of American-made motorcycles parked perpendicular to the entrance of the Blue Moon Tavern. With so many bikes on display, the bar will be packed with members of the Scavengers Motorcycle Club, and whenever there's a crowd inside Stevie Cullen's bar, something violent has a tendency to occur.

I'm greeted at the door with nods. The Scavengers are responsible for a small portion of our revenues. Carey loves wasting time here. I scan the room, searching for him. All I find are leather jacket members with their old ladies latched to their sides. There's a fresh crop of the Scavengers soldiers. Wherever the new recruits gather to drink and have a good time, women aspiring to become old ladies are usually closeby. Tonight is no exception.

The rest of the bar occupants are regulars from the neighborhood who come here for the cheap beer and watered-down liquor. My gaze does another sweep of the bar, pausing at a woman with her back towards me. Amongst the locals and the bikers, she sticks out. She's too sophisticated for a place like this. Yet there she is, laughing at whatever the bartender is saying to her. The leather skirt she's wearing hugs her hips. I

stare at her ass a little longer than I should before following the length of her legs to a pair of high heels that I'm certain were never intended to walk over these grimy floors.

“Holeee shit. Did someone you love die, Graham?”

The unmistakable voice of Stevie Cullen interrupts my momentary fascination with the attractive brunette at the bar. His tall silhouette steps into the light, blocking my view of the woman. Stevie's always good for a laugh. I chuckle and say, “Nah. Just a Donovan Prince getting married.”

“Ah, Jimmy and his girl finally tying the knot,” Stevie says. “I must've missed my invitation.”

“You must have,” I say.

We both laugh. Although the Scavengers do respectable business for us in their role, we both know the likes of Stevie Cullen would never rub elbows with anyone on Patrick's guest list tonight. After all, even the incoming mayor was expected to be there.

I take a step to my left, glancing over Stevie's shoulder. The woman I was admiring at the bar has vanished and so has the bartender she was talking to; Rafé. Knowing Rafé, he's probably having the time of his life with the naive woman in one of the bathroom stalls. A part of me feels sorry for her. She's not cut out to be a Scavenger's old lady.

Shrugging, I look back at Stevie. “Hey, man. Has Carey been in here tonight?”

Stevie pokes out his lips and shakes his head. “Haven’t seen him in a few days. You lost him again?”

I smile. “He knows how to find his way home.”

Stevie regards me for a quiet moment then a smile breaks across his face. “Yeah. For sure. Glad I caught you though. There’s something I want to bend your ear on. If you’re not in a rush to get back to your party, that is? You got a minute to hear me out on a proposition?”

Stevie’s been in this game all his life. He has a mountain of ambition. The only thing bigger are his failures. Word got back to me last month that he’s been making inquiries about some of our other businesses. My guess is he’s taking the chance to approach me because he’s hoping I can vouch for him with Patrick and Jimmy.

It’s always a good idea to know what your friends are up to as much as you do your enemy, so I decide to hear him out. “Sure thing, Stevie. But only a minute.”

CHAPTER TWO

WILLA

HARD AND SOLID, THE muscles under Rafé's tribal tattoos flex with the slightest move he makes. He feels like I'm holding on to the side of a runaway tank. He's so strong and powerful, it's a wonder the buttons straining against his chest haven't popped open yet.

Putting aside the fact that Rafé sells party drugs to my neighbor and mans the counter at the dive bar on behalf of his motorcycle club, the mere sight of him would send my mother to an early grave. Rafé's not marriage material. He's not even dating material by her standards. The bartender fits inside my life about as well as his wide body fits inside his Scavengers leather vest—perhaps that's a part of his appeal.

Rafé's hands let go of my throat to secure my hips. I wrap my arms around his shoulders as he backs me against the car. Panting, his hot breath hits my face like a blast from a furnace. He growls, low and primal. My nipples harden and I shiver in anticipation when I feel the bulge in his pants growing harder. By the time his lips capture mine again, I'm dizzy.

From somewhere nearby, cigarette smoke travels on the air, mixing with the funk of the alley and the warm, manly scent wafting off of Rafé's skin. I breathe it in. I breathe it all in.

I know I shouldn't lose my virginity to a guy like Rafé, but I've been sending him big, loud signals all night that I want him to fuck me. He must be thinking that I want him to take control now. That I want him to take whatever he wants from me, even if he takes me right here. But I'm not stupid. As much as I believe he's all wrong for me, Rafé has made it clear I'll be no match for him.

Back in the bar, he told me he's not a good guy, that he only sees me as a fun plaything, and that sooner or later he'll grow tired of me. He said he was going to break my heart like all the other girls before me.

I laughed in response.

Rafé grinds against me and a moan escapes my lips. Lost in a new surge of lust, my fingers lace themselves into his long, black hair. In return, he hikes my leg up and sinks his hips between the gap in my thighs. His cock feels thick and I squeeze my leg around him. "Hey, do you live around here?" I suck in air. "Could... Could we go to your place? I don't mind waiting until your shift's over tonight. Or any night for that matter."

Rafé grunts in reply. His fist fights its way underneath my skirt. The tight leather restricts his progress and finally, he says to me, "I'm gonna make you my little bitch. The other Scavengers are gonna be so fucking jealous."

Heat rushes up my face. I want this. I need this. Grinning, I ask, “You want to claim me like one of those women in the bar? That’s never going to happen, you know.”

Rafé chuckles. He pulls away and looks me in the eyes. “I’ve never been with a classy girl like you before. You smell so fucking good I can’t keep my mouth off ya. And that fucking accent you have sometimes. Shit, I bet when I eat your pussy, when my tongue makes you come, I bet that sweet little thing’s gonna spit twenty-four carat gold juices down my throat.”

My breath hitches in my throat. Imagining Rafé going down on me sets every inch of me on fire. My body shakes, so hard. Sandwiched between him and the car door, I’m almost certain he can feel me trembling. He’s such a beautiful man. His brown eyes gleam back at me until he buries his face into the crook of my neck. His tongue licks my skin, giving me a taste of what I can expect when his face is between my legs.

For just a moment, I entertain belonging to him. Of being claimed by Rafé, forever. Could I be like those other women inside the bar, vying for the attention of the newest Scavengers. It’s a magical fantasy. One that fades away as soon as it ignites because I’m still my mother’s daughter and I’m not going to fall for Rafé the bartender.

Grabbing my arm, Rafé spins me around. One of my hands holds on to the roof of the car while the other grips my calfskin purse. Rafé kicks my feet apart, and it jerks my arm. When I lift my wrist, the car’s shiny red paint has a deep gash

in it where the roof and door meet. Mouth agape, I gaze down at the imperfection. Rafé doesn't notice my alarm or what just happened. He crashes his chest into my back and flattens my breasts against the driver's side window.

“How about I fuck you like this, sweet baby?” Rafé says, and yanks my skirt up. “Would you like that?”

I never imagined my first time would happen while I was facing a dumpster with my breasts pressed against a car parked between two dusty brick buildings, but I wanted something uncomplicated. I wanted a bad boy, a heartbreaker, and that's exactly what I got in Rafé.

I am going to lose my virginity in a fucking Chicago alley.

“Answer me, Willa. I said would you like that?”

Despite the fear welling inside me and the tears stinging the corner of my eyes, I nod. Worse than my disappointment in myself for letting things go this far, is the overwhelming shame I feel for being so wet for Rafé that I don't fight him. I don't beg him to stop, or slow down. I don't tell him no. Instead, I tell myself that whatever happens next in this alley will one day become a fleeting memory. I reason that maybe it'll be more pleasurable than I think. Maybe years from now, I'll think about tonight and it'll make me blush while I'm working late, or while I'm at a boring dinner party with the kind of man my mother expects me to marry.

Across the alley, the rear access door swings open and interrupts my string of thoughts and regrets. I gasp when a man exits from the Blue Moon, emptying loud rock music into

the alley. The stranger ramps up my heartbeat, but neither the commotion nor the presence of someone else deters Rafé. He tugs on my skirt again, lifting it and exposing my ass to the coolness of the night.

The man still hasn't seen us. He's occupied with his phone. My eyes narrow on him. Between the amber streetlights and the blue halo glowing in his hand, I can just make out his blond curls, portions of his face. Then he raises his head. I draw in a sharp breath. My eyes blink as he stares directly at me.

“Wait.” I grab Rafé's arm. His muscles ripple in my hand. “Rafé, hang on.”

“Don't start teasing now. I fucking hate that shit,” Rafé says.

“No! Stop. Someone's watching.”

Rafé chuckles. “Don't worry, I'll—“

“Get the fuck off my car!” The stranger's voice sounds like he growls to speak, and I jump at his demand. “Did you fucking hear me?”

“Fuck off,” Rafé shouts back and presses my breasts harder against the glass.

I wince from the weight bearing down on me. The stranger laughs and advances toward us. Unpinning me from the car, Rafé positions himself between me and the blond man. Common sense returning, I shimmy my skirt back in place. Most of me is relieved. My reprieve is thanks to this poor guy.

Whoever he is, he has no clue he's walking into a buzz saw. He's about to be pummeled by a six-foot-two member of the Scavengers Motorcycle Club.

I don't want to watch my beefy bartender beat another guy's face in on our first date, so I grab Rafé's arm. He jerks out of my hand and flashes me an angry look. Rage burning in his eyes, his murderous look directed at me, I reach out and touch him gently. "It's okay, Rafé. Let's just go back inside. We can go to my apartment after your shift."

"Stay out of this. This is Scavengers' business."

After Rafé barks at me, the alley is quiet again. I hear slow footfalls crunching over dirt and asphalt as the owner of the car comes closer. I look in his direction in time to see him move out of the shadows. I get my first clear view of his face and... *Holy shit*. He's alarmingly calm. Also, alarmingly hot. All at once, my body reacts to the stranger in a way that is not appropriate given the circumstances.

This man is too good-looking for Chicago. His kind of face you see in movies and think, "I'd tap that." His jaw is clean, defined, and his cheekbones are so bold they make you forget to breathe until you're able to focus on something else—something like how his two black eyes are pinning you with an unrelenting stare.

"Oh, I— I'm sorry, Mr. Tate," Rafé says. I force my head to turn away from the blond man's strikingly chiseled face. I watch Rafé as his shoulders hunch and his eyes fall to the man's feet in a clear sign of obedience. "I didn't know this was

your ride.” Timidly, Rafé glances up. “It must be... It must be new, right?”

“Yeah, man. It’s new.”

I swallow. It’s safe to assume I won’t be wrapping gauze around Rafé’s fists and fetching a bag of frozen peas from my freezer to soothe his bruised knuckles later tonight. Well, maybe I still will. Just not the way I first assumed. Despite his clear weight disadvantage, the slimmer, blond man has turned Rafé into a submissive, apologetic mess just from one cold look. No punches thrown. No weapons brandished.

“I swear to God, Mr. Tate. Nothing like this will ever happen again.”

Exuding confidence, Mr. Tate deftly slides his phone into the pocket of his jacket. “Go back inside, Rafé,” he says in a nonchalant voice. “I think Stevie’s asking for you.”

Rafé nods. He takes off without even looking back at me. “Sorry again, Mr. Tate. I didn’t mean no disrespect. I was just fooling around.” He gives Mr. Tate a wide berth, leaving me stranded in his wake.

“Wait. Rafé!”

For a big, bad motorcycle gang member, he sure moves surprisingly fast when he’s terrified out of his mind. Rafé slips back into the bar before I could utter another pitiful plea to be rescued.

“You didn’t damage my car, did you?” Without waiting for my reply, the blond man continues, “I just picked it up from

the dealer last week. I custom-ordered it. Every inch of it and I like it a lot already, so I don't want to have to take it back."

I don't know why he shared the story, but I look him in the eyes and scoff. "I'm sure it's fine."

Except for the horrible scratch my bracelet inflicted on the paint earlier. I'll let him discover it on his own though. I turn my back on him and stomp away, training my gaze on the dumpsters at the end of the alley. I still can't believe Rafé abandoned me. I'm so mad I can't even concentrate on my anger, or my embarrassment. Rafé running away is all I can think about, until I start feeling the stranger's eyes on me.

"You have a wonderful evening, Miss," he says.

I hope there's enough light falling on me when I raise my arm and stick my middle finger in the air. I really need Mr. Tate to see me flipping him off. I'm unsure if he got the message until I hear his car door open and close. A moment later, the engine turns over. It purrs at first but builds into a cacophony of aggression as the revving fills the alley with the unmistakable roar of an Italian-built machine designed for speed.

That's my kind of car.

The sound brings back memories of exhaust fumes and electrical wires, and old sketches resting on my father's desk as I played on the floor of his workshop. I smile. It's been years since my father died, and I miss him. I still grieve for him.

Tires scream into the asphalt behind me and the noise yanks me back into the present. The Ferrari—and the man commanding it—whooshes by me, speeding down the alley and blowing dirty air around me. The sports car stops at the intersection by the dumpsters, its brake lights illuminating metal, asphalt, and concrete in a blood-red glow. By the time my mind wonders whether the handsome Mr. Tate might be waiting for me, the car slowly rolls forward and turns left. It vanishes around the corner and the alley turns black again.

As I walk away from the rear of the Blue Moon, I conclude I'm done with Rafé—at least for tonight.

“Damn, sweet baby.”

Sweet baby was what Rafé called me. I glance over my shoulder. No one's there, but I hear footsteps coming from the darkness. I turn completely around, backing away from the voice. “Rafé, is that you?” I knew it wasn't him even before this man steps out into the light. He's wearing a baseball cap and he has a friend. I spin back around and speed walk up the alley.

“Where you rushing off to?”

“Aw, that's not nice, sweet baby. Slow down. We just want to talk,” the other man's weaselly voice returns.

I take off. When I hear them coming after me, I consider trying to remove my heels so I can run faster, but the men would catch me before I could unstrap one shoe. I do my best to avoid tripping over any cracks or unevenness in the asphalt that would make it easier for them to catch me. The terrifying

thoughts flying around my head travel much faster than my feet.

“You might as well just give up.”

“Yeah. You’re not making it out of this alley, sweet baby.”

A chorus of heartless laughter erupts at my back. Fear grips me. I try to scream, but no sound escapes my mouth. The air feels heavy, like it’s weighing me down and slowing my feet. I’m almost at the dumpsters, but I realize the men are toying with me. I know I won’t make it.

Racing towards the end of the alley, I run straight into a pair of bright headlights. The car. My feet. The men closing in on me. We all stop. The engine revs, then settles and the driver’s side door opens. *Are there more of them? More men to drag me into the shadows, hold me down, rip my clothes and body to pieces?* The driver slowly exits from the car. It was him. Again. Mr. Tate.

He walks around to the front of his car, stepping through the bluish beam of light. He stops beside me and says, “Did you gentlemen forget something?”

“Hey, we don’t want any trouble, Mr. Tate,” the weasel says.

“Then I suggest you leave before you get into some,” Mr. Tate says.

Just like Rafé, the two men retreat, skulking away from the calm voice and cold gaze of Mr. Tate. Neither of them look back. This man in a suit. This stranger with a formidable

presence has probably just saved my life. “Thank you,” I whisper. It’s all the strength I have, but I yearn to throw my arms around him and hold on so he can feel my appreciation.

“Get in the car,” he growls.

Mr. Tate levels his hardened stare on me and my body tenses as his gaze burns through mine. Sweat trickles down my temple, the middle of my back. Panting hard and desperate again to escape the alleyway, I tell him, “I...” Trembling, I stammer out, “I have mace. In my purse.”

Mr Tate, my savior, my hero, lets out a soft chuckle. “Well,” he says. “I have a Glock in my waistband. I guess we know everything about each other now.”

CHAPTER THREE

GRAHAM

SHE'S EVEN LOVELIER UP close than at first glance. Standing before me with her eyes big and brown, and full of terror, her jaw drops open. She glances from my smiling face to my waist in disbelief. I can't take offense that she's smart enough not to trust me simply because I came back for her. But whether it was her fear or indecision that nailed her to the spot, I know I can't abandon her now. Julio's men might come back to finish what I interrupted. They're dumb and reckless enough.

I unbutton my suit jacket and reveal the gun at my waist so she no longer harbors any confusion. "I said get in the car. I don't have all night."

Her hair is a darker shade of black in this part of the alley and it caresses her face as the wind passes over us. Other than blinking a couple of times, she doesn't move an inch. She must still be shaken up. I try to reassure her. "If I wanted anything bad to happen to you I wouldn't have come back. Just get in the car."

“I’m not going anywhere with you,” she says, finally finding her voice.

“Well, I’m not leaving you here.”

“They’re gone now. Let me get around the corner and I’ll grab a Lyft or something.”

Even though she’s refusing me, she seems to be waiting for my permission. If she’s hoping I’ll drive off and abandon her, she won’t be happy with me. She might believe that the danger’s gone and she seems crazy enough to believe a woman who looks as shell shocked as she does won’t be a target anywhere else she goes for the rest of the night. Shaking my head, I grab her by the arm and force her towards the car. “No, my way’s better.”

She slams a fist down onto my chest. She might as well have been planting soft kisses on my lips. Where I come from, the shit I’ve lived through, her limp punches were like love taps by comparison. They don’t hurt my hardened skin. Nevertheless she resists, repeatedly thumping my chest with her balled up hand until she opens it and smacks me across the face. Skin on skin contact makes her slap more lethal than her punches. “Let me go,” she screams.

I look into her eyes and grin, but the frown on her face only intensifies. It heightens her beauty. She raises her hand to strike me again, but I catch it before it can connect with my jaw. “Try that shit with anybody else in this neighborhood and I guarantee it’ll be the last thing you do.”

Her mouth forms a perfect circle. We're so close that it would be nothing for me to lean forward and kiss her. *Would she like that?*

I open the car door and shove her inside, slamming it and locking her in before reaching inside my jacket pocket. While I was busy rescuing this woman, messages were flooding my phone. I scan them before I curse and raise my head. The woman I've taken hostage is not amused. That angry hand she slapped me with starts slapping my car window. Her beautiful face scowls up at me. I ignore her, round the nose of the car, and get into the driver's seat. My door slams shut and she angles her body away from me.

"Why the fuck didn't you just follow Rafé back inside the bar?"

Her lips press together and she crosses her arms.

That reaction of hers is fine by me. I know the real answer. She's not accustomed to being in rough environments. More than that, she's not used to men ditching her for any reason.

"What's your name?" I ask.

"Did you know those guys?"

My eyes narrow on her. *Know them?* I knew they worked for Julio. I'd seen them countless times hanging around Stevie's bar and the girls at Vice. Did I know they were opportunists? Not quite good enough to be Scavengers material, but always looking to audition for the motorcycle club? Sure.

“No,” I say. “I don’t waste my time getting to know men like them.”

“But they know you.”

“I’m someone worth knowing.” I stretch across the car and her hand fumbles for the handle on the door. The experience of the last few minutes has rattled her. Terror returns to her eyes, banishing most, but not all, of her disgust for me. I complete my reach for her seat belt and buckle it into place across her lap. “Relax. You’re safe with me.”

“You locked me inside your car.”

“I’m offering to take you home. That’s all.”

“No, you’re kidnapping me.”

Fastening my seat belt, I shift the car into reverse. “Lady, I don’t have time for this.” The entire reason I was out here had finally clued me in on his whereabouts with a string of texts. Carey wasn’t at the bar. He wasn’t at the strip club. He was on his way to Jimmy’s party, and now I’m the one not where I should be. I sigh, gazing out the window. “Any chance you live around here?”

“I’m not telling a violent stranger where I live.”

I scoff. “Violent?”

“You violently grabbed my arm. I should report you to the police.”

I chuckle and maneuver the car out of the alley, pointing us north, recalling the sting her slap left on my cheek. The flesh

inside my mouth connected with teeth. There was no blood though. “Yeah, you should. And make sure not to leave the part out where you assaulted me.”

We pull up to the intersection and idle behind the red light. To my left was the rowdy crew of bikers crowding the front door of Stevie’s bar. My phone rings before I could spot either of Julio’s guys. When I glance at the screen on my dashboard, I notice my hostage holding herself. I ignore Carey’s call and say, “Let me take you home.”

She looks at me. Those brown eyes weaken my resolve when she whispers, “Just let me out of the car here. I’ll find my own way home.”

I glance away, look down the street to the bar. Earlier, I was annoyed. Then she got me frustrated. But now, I’m just mad at her. “Okay, then.” I look directly at her again. “You’re coming with me.”

“What?”

I shrug. “You don’t want me to take you home. Fine. I’ll take you somewhere even you will feel safe.”

CHAPTER FOUR

WILLA

IT'S A SILENT RIDE away from the Blue Moon Tavern, and Mr. Tate has given up on the idea of driving me to my apartment. He correctly predicts that our next destination would make me feel safe. The neighborhood we drive to is posh to say the least. Its streets are full of mansions with lush lawns and tall trees behind brick walls and gated entrances. He pulls up to one of the luxurious homes and enters a number code on the digital security panel. The large, black gate rolls smoothly aside for us and we drive in.

Almost everything I know about my fearsome kidnapper and this part of Chicago are at odds with each other, so I ask him, “You live here?”

He chuckles. “A little better than the alleys you like to get felt up in, huh?”

My cheeks flush with embarrassment and I swallow hard. Each conversation I have with Mr. Tate infuriates me more than the last. “Oh, screw you,” I shoot back.

His eyebrows quirk up. “First Rafé. Now me. Two of us in one night? You going for some kind of record or something?”

I scoff. “I’m not—“

“Sorry, lady. I’m not interested.”

Disgusted, I roll my eyes. *The nerve of him for even suggesting I was trying to proposition him.* Shifting my body towards the passenger side window, I sigh and stare out at the palatial estate while rage bubbles up my throat.

I only wanted to live a little bit. Now some guy who doesn’t know me is calling me a slut for one bad decision that occurred in a few reckless minutes of my life. *Me. Of all people.* I have always been the sensible one. For five years I went to college, lived thousands of miles away from home, all my friends, and family, and I remained pious the entire time. I wonder whether Mr. Tate would judge me so harshly if he knew that about me instead of what he got a glimpse of in the alley. I fold my arms across my chest, fuming less. *It doesn’t matter.* Soon, this horrible evening will be over and I’ll never see Rafé or this jerk again.

At last, we arrive at the end of the driveway where several cars are parked in front of the massive house. Two men dressed in matching uniforms are standing outside on the steps. Mr. Tate pulls up to them. He gets out, hands his keys to the taller attendant, then he bends forward, leaning into the well of the car. His gorgeous face reappearing suddenly traps the air in my chest. He smiles and says, “See. Safe. You can

call yourself an Uber. Or I can have someone call for you. Your choice.”

“I can do it myself.”

His eyes rove over me. Slowly, his smile widens. “Suit yourself. You’re welcome by the way.”

“I thanked you.”

He studies me for another moment. “Yeah. Yeah, you did.”

He straightens, slaps the roof of his car and then he walks off. I watch him stride up the steps leading to his house, vanishing inside shortly after.

“You want me to get you that Uber,” the valet says.

I shake my head. “No, thanks. I said I can do it myself.”

“Okay, you can wait over here. When your Uber arrives, Charlie will need to let him in.”

I nod. Unbuckling my seatbelt, I let out a breath and get out of the car. Faint music emanates from inside the house. It’s drowned out when the valet maneuvers the Ferrari over to a section of the driveway occupied by several equally expensive automobiles. I climb up two of the steps and stand beside Charlie. Preoccupied, he pays me no attention. He presses a button on a walkie in his hand and speaks into the device. “I just let him in. He’s three cars deep and on his way up the driveway. “

“Copy,” a voice speaks back.

Three cars deep? I wonder who that could be. It must be someone important—the real owner of this property perhaps. Once again, though, I’m puzzled. This time by the company Mr. Tate keeps. I unlock my phone, open the ridesharing app. Admittedly, I am a little curious, so I decide to wait before I book my ride home. Finally, three sets of headlights lumber up the driveway. The SUVs are big, and either black or dark blue. The procession pulls up in front of me and Charlie, stopping exactly where Mr. Tate had deposited his sports car. Immediately, men in dark suits file out of the vehicles. A woman is helped from the middle SUV and behind her, another man emerges from inside the car.

Wait, don’t I know him?

“Welcome, Mr. Mayor,” Charlie says, rushing to greet the man. *I do know him.* “Mr. Donovan’s waiting for you inside.”

Mr. Donovan? I think I know that name too, but it couldn’t be. Could it? I can’t believe I’m at the same place, at the same time where genuine breaking news is happening. Of all the people who’ll earn a Journalism degree from Northwestern this year, I’m the least worthy to have stumbled onto this blockbuster story.

“Thanks, man. Make sure you give him a good tip,” Justin O’Rourke says to one of the burly guys with an earpiece.

In a couple of weeks, I’ll take the stage to collect two diplomas from one of the most prestigious schools in the country. I studied diligently, majoring in Journalism to my delight—researching stories and people had always been

intriguing to me—and Engineering, which was my father’s greatest passion. Although I don’t intend on becoming a Formula One engineer like he once was, I don’t plan on being a journalist either. But when will I ever get another chance like this?

“Hi, Mr. Mayor.” I intercept the man, sticking my arm directly in his path. “Mayor O’Rourke.”

Justin O’Rourke waves off one of his fast-approaching bodyguards and shakes my outstretched hand. “Hi, it’s nice to meet you. Are you here to walk me inside?”

I glance at the front door, then back to the mayor. “Um, no. No, I’m not.” I don’t immediately let go of O’Rourke’s hand when he tries to pull it away at the end of our handshake. Instead I follow him as he takes the next step. “My name is Willa Ryerson. I’m a senior at Northwestern. I’m actually the editor of *The Daily* and I write a few articles for *Principle Magazine*.”

“We’re sorry, but the mayor-elect isn’t taking any—“

“We’re okay, Sarah,” Justin says to the woman accompanying him. “It’s always a pleasure to meet a young journalist. Come on. Walk with me.”

I smile at him. “Thank you.”

“You said you were a senior?”

“Yes.”

“You plan on working for the *Sun-Times* or the *Tribune*?”

“Neither.” One of the benefits of having other people heavily invested in the outcome of your life is not having to worry about landing your first job out of college. Between my mother and my godfather, I have my choice between two lucrative public relations positions waiting for me at firms in Washington D.C. and New York City. “No, I plan on moving east, but I’ll be writing full-time for *Principle* this summer, and it would be great if I could get an interview with you before you take office.”

We enter through the large double doors and the soon-to-be mayor of Chicago escorts me to a woman in a plain black dress. On her chest is a little badge that reads Dani with one n and an i. She beams and says, “Welcome Mr. Mayor.”

“Mr. Mayor-elect,” Justin says, then turns away from the hostess and faces me. “Chicago still has a mayor and I want to be accurate for the record, especially since we have a member of the press here with us tonight.”

O’Rourke winks at me and I blush. With his natural charm, it’s easy to see how O’Rourke won the people of this city over. He was winning me over.

“Name, please?” the young woman asks, in a noticeably more icy tone than the one she uses for O’Rourke. I didn’t imagine what I’d do if I’d gotten this far. I hadn’t anticipated having to clear a guest list—although, I should have. I blink. “I said, name. Please.”

“It’s Willa Ryerson,” Justin answers her.

How the hell did he remember that? Despite all the rumors his opponents spread about his character and his shady connections during the campaign, it's obvious the power of Justin's political skills made him destined for greatness.

The woman swipes the screen up and down, searching for my name. "It doesn't appear you're on the guest list, Ms. Ryerson." She lifts her eyes up to meet mine and grins. "I'm sorry. This is a private party. Invitees only. And no press."

My mouth forms a tight line. The woman's taking too much pleasure in rejecting me from the party. The plan forms quickly, which explains why it's half-baked, but twice I've seen how people react to his name and both times, it's gotten me out of trouble. "I came with Mr. Tate," I blurt out. "My name's not on your list because I'm his plus one." The woman's eyes go wide and I smirk. "Well, I'm more than that. I'm his...girlfriend. We're still new, but..." I cross my fingers. "I'm hoping he's the one."

Her face pinks. "Graham didn't mention anything about a date."

"Graham," I whisper. His name spills out of my mouth before I can stop it, but I feel better knowing it. "I said we were new," I remind her politely.

She frowns. "Perhaps I should give him a call."

"I tell you what, ladies." Justin interrupts us. "I'll find Graham and keep an eye on her for you until I do. How does that sound? Sounds good to me." Justin extends his arm, motioning for me to move past the reception area. I don't

hesitate. We separate from his entourage and Justin leans close to me. “Don’t you just hate people pestering you when you’re hungry? Are you hungry? I’m starving. I hope they have some good food in here.”

Feeling warmth pinch my cheeks, I grin, and tuck a clump of loose hair behind my ear. “Yeah, I’d love an hors d’oeuvre and a glass of white wine.”

“No, not wine. Champagne. They’re celebrating tonight.” Justin touches my arm and stops us. “Hey, level with me. Are you really here with Graham? Or were you just lying to get in?”

I swallow and answer, “Yes.”

“Yes, you’re a liar? Or yes, you came to the party with Graham?” His eyes scrutinize me. “Listen, Willa, I know how to handle myself around beautiful women with press badges. If I didn’t, Sarah wouldn’t let you get within a foot of me. So, you can tell me the truth.”

No, I can’t. “I met Graham at a bar. He’s...” *A hero. My hero.* But he’s also arrogant and bossy. I shrug, shaking my head. “I don’t know, you know. He’s a hard man to understand.”

Justin regards me, then nods. “Well, he invited you to the wedding announcement for Patrick Donovan’s nephew. From everything I know about the guy, if he did that you must have made a hell of a first impression on him.”

O'Rourke has no idea how wrong he is about that one. I fake a smile to carry on the pretense, but if the story I told Justin about me and Graham were even remotely true, then I'd be grateful to hear the mayor's words. "Shall we head in?" I ask.

"Right this way," Justin says.

The party reminds me of the ones I have been forced to attend since childhood. My father was a renowned motorsports engineer, and my mother is a former fashion model, my godfather is the owner of a successful racing team, and my best friends growing up were junior karting champions—one of them is now a famous Formula One race car driver. There was always a party, a gala, or an award ceremony to attend. A strange life for a kid, for sure, but I enjoyed most of it.

"As I promised, here's your champagne." Justin hands me a glass, then he touches my shoulder. "Sadly, this is where I leave you tonight. The vultures are already eying me. In this room, there are more vultures than I have meat on my bones. I'm sure Graham's around here somewhere. It was good to meet you, Willa."

I raise my glass to him. "The pleasure was all mine."

He grins. "Before you leave, be sure to get with Sarah. Unlike everyone else in this town, I actually enjoy reading *Principle Magazine*. Get Sarah to bring you by the campaign office. I'll sit with you for an interview."

My eyebrows shoot up. "Really?"

“Sure. Why not?”

“Thank you, Mr. Mayor-elect.”

“Call me Justin.” He raises his glass to me. “Have a good time tonight, Willa.”

Justin departs and as expected, he doesn't get very far before the first group of party attendees rush him. I take a sip of my champagne and relish it. Spotting a waiter carrying a full tray of shrimp perched on flaky rounds of puff pastry, I pounce on him. Gobbling down the hors d'oeuvre in a single, elegant bite, I wash it down with the rest of my drink.

This is so far from when I was laughing at Rafé's jokes and drinking cheap beer. Since I'm here, I might as well mingle and make the most of it. I might as well gorge myself on bite-sized food and indulge in the excellent champagne. And I should definitely find Sarah to confirm the interview with Justin.

I unlock my phone and send a text to my editor at *Principle*. “You won't believe who I ran into tonight,” I whisper as I type out the words. Excited about the opportunity to practice some real journalism, I forget about my disastrous date with Rafé, the two men in the alley, and Graham Tate.

CHAPTER FIVE

GRAHAM

“HE DOESN’T TRUST ME with what’s important, Graham. I’ve done everything he’s asked me to do and everything you’ve told me to do, but he still thinks I’m a kid,” Carey Donovan says.

“No, he doesn’t.”

“He does. And he loves treating me like one in front of you. I think he gets off on it.”

Carey sulks more than I expect, more than he usually does. I never knew my father. Abandoned by my birth mother, I was left to be raised by my grandparents until they both died. An orphan twice over, I spent more years in foster homes than out of them. Then I met Patrick Donovan. Although I have no real father-son relationship of my own to compare it to, I always admired the way Patrick cared for Carey and Neve. Sometimes, I envied it, so it’s hard for me to see things from Carey’s perspective. To me, he just sounds like a whiny brat.

“Listen to me. Your cousin’s getting married. Just think about that and be happy for him. Enjoy the party.”

“I’m happy for Jimmy,” he says, his face growing increasingly red with irritation. “But I’m talking about me and my father. He didn’t need to send you out there after me like that. Like I slept through my alarm for school.”

“Well, you *were* late,” I tease him, trying to sooth his frustrations.

Carey stares back at my smiling face. He manages half a grin. “You know, you should be the one worried. You’ve been working for him since I was what? Ten? I’m twenty-three now, and he’s still treating you like the babysitter. Sending you out to fetch me.”

Dismissing his gripes, I swallow around the tight knot in my throat and concentrate on the smoky flavor of the Scotch lingering on my tongue. “Relax, Carey. Tonight is about the future. And your father needs you here.”

“For what?” Carey balks. “To be surrounded by some rich pricks who only accepted our invitation so they could cozy up to the new mayor.” He scoffs. “This shit is a fucking tea party. We should be out in the streets, teaching those damn disrespectful Garza sons of bitches a lesson. Showing them who runs this city.”

I take another sip of my drink, observing the people in the room. *They are the ones who truly run Chicago*. Patrick’s only son is headstrong. Carey’s temper has a bad habit of flaring up quickly, and at the wrong time. It’s not only my job to fetch

him and spend hours keeping him from blowing a fuse, I see it as my duty to Patrick for rescuing me from my fate. Without Patrick, I wouldn't be in this suit. I wouldn't be driving a car I had custom-made. Wouldn't have my own business, or live in a penthouse overlooking the lake, the river and downtown. "Take it easy, Carey. It's just one night."

"It's more than that. You know as well as I do he's let Jimmy handle the Garza situation for too long. My father is getting soft, Graham. He's old. It's time for change."

The other guests inside Patrick's house fill the room with soft conversation and polite laughter, making the harsh expression on Carey's face stand out in the peaceful atmosphere. Since I'm Patrick's enforcer and not his son, I can easily place my sense of duty above ambition. Carey might not be able to do that for much longer.

If I had my choice, I'd be at Vice watching Molly strip off her bra on stage instead of listening to Carey fantasize about being king. Playfully, I smack him on the shoulder. "This is where we all need to be." Swirling the ice cube around my glass, I lift it to my lips and finish off the strong liquor. "Besides, I'm handling the Garzas now, so you'll get your wish soon enough. So, do me a favor. Focus on making friends with these rich pricks because Justin won't be mayor forever and one day you'll be the one inviting..." I stop mid-sentence. Stunned by the sight of the woman from the Blue Moon, my jaw drops. "What the fuck..."

"What is it? What's wrong?" Carey asks.

I train my eyes on the brunette. I wasn't seeing things or had too much to drink. It was definitely her. "Nothing, I'll be right back."

"Hold on." Carey grabs my arm, momentarily holding me in place. He might be the boss's son, but no one—not even Patrick Donovan himself—is allowed to put their hands on me. I give him one deadly look and he quickly releases my arm. "Sorry," he says.

"Graham," Jimmy calls as he and Flynn stride up to us. "We should talk about that other business. I want to know what you're gonna do before you do it, okay?"

"I got it, Jimmy."

My tone surprises him and he says, "Graham, I don't doubt your capabilities. None of us do, so no disrespect."

I nod and turn my head to the woman I left outside. A waiter comes up to her and offers her the food on his tray. They exchange a few words, then she declines him with a smile that unsettles me. It punches through my fury. It's so lovely to look at that I feel a hint of calm—and perhaps a shot of jealousy.

"Hey, why don't I stop by the gym tomorrow? We'll talk then," Jimmy says.

Nodding again, I face him. "Sure. Sure."

"Good." Jimmy slings an arm around Carey's shoulder. "Come on, Mr. Stanford University. If I have to suffer through

these boring conversations, I'm going to use your big brain as my human shield."

As soon as Jimmy and Carey leave, Flynn asks, "Everything okay with you? Something you want to clue me in on with the Garzas?"

My eyes can't stop drifting back to the beautiful intruder. I go to unbutton my jacket, almost forgetting about the gun I have on me. This woman has gone from driving me to distraction to throwing me off my fucking game. "It's not the Garzas. I've got them covered."

"So what is it then?"

"Nothing. Just an annoying problem in this room I have to take care of."

"In this room? Don't tell me Justin was telling the truth? Did you really bring a date tonight?"

My eyes narrow on Flynn. "What the hell did you just say?"

"Not me. Him. He said you brought some girl here tonight. That she's your girlfriend. He said her name, but I can't remember. I know it wasn't Molly though."

"What?"

He nods, smiling. "Said you left her outside and didn't add her name to the guest list. Sounded like a whole lot of drama. Which shocked the hell out of us because everybody knows you don't like drama."

"Flynn, what the fuck are you talking about?"

“Just what I was told. Apparently, this one went to college. She’s a journalist.” His grin falls away and he gets all serious. Flynn touches his chest and says, “I’m proud of you for finally fucking a woman who wasn’t on the payroll at Vice. Real proud.”

Amused with himself, Flynn chuckles. I’m seeing red as my eyes fix on the woman again, but this time she notices me and freezes in place. Without another word, I storm towards her. Flynn’s voice fades behind me.

Forgetting where I am and who else is in the room with me, I bump into a few of Patrick’s prestigious guests, blind to their stares of alarm and indignation. “Excuse me, young man,” a petite voice cries out.

Her shrill tone snaps me from the point of absolute rage. I slow my pace and extend an arm in apology, before whirling back around. My eyes frantically sweep the room to find the woman again, but I’ve lost my target. Huffing, I slow down and wait. Suddenly, I catch a glimpse of her silhouette slipping out the door and I dart straight for her.

She’s my problem. I brought her here and let her get inside the party.

I let a fucking reporter worm their way into my boss’s house while he’s conducting business.

CHAPTER SIX

WILLA

I KNEW I WAS taking a huge risk staying this long. I should have left after I confirmed the interview with Sarah. I blame the food and the champagne. Also the thrill of doing something bold like introducing myself to the mayor and crashing an exclusive party. All of it kept me mingling with strangers I have more in common with than the ones at the Blue Moon.

Adrenaline courses through me as I try to escape Graham Tate's wrath. Unlike earlier when I was being chased in an alley, my skin tingles with excitement rather than fear. I hurry out of the room, moving quickly but not too fast to call attention to myself.

Corridors leading to my left and right split the center of the mansion. Straight ahead is the foyer with the reception area and the hostess I tricked into letting me pass security. Beyond that is the exit through the front door—where Graham will surely catch me. I hesitate, wondering if I can reason with a

man like him. Would a sweet apology vanquish the anger from his features? *That would be too bold of me to believe.*

I revert to my cautious self and decide to try my luck getting lost in the house. I glance back at the party before darting to my left. Along the walls, I breeze by framed artwork, trying each door handle along the way. One after another, they're locked tight. At the fourth door, I twist and push. It opens for me and I duck inside.

Safe for the moment, I spin around and shut the door carefully. Stepping away from it, I gaze at the doorknob, waiting to see if it turns. Every passing second brings hope that no one noticed me entering the room. Relief builds in me, swelling until I hear voices at my back and the tail end of a conversation I wish I could un-hear. Then terror strikes me when the door swings open.

The tips of Graham's ears are bright red. His alluring face is tinged with a hint of sweat. Huffing and scowling, eyes locked on mine, he follows me into the room.

I try to utter an apology, but I'm cut off.

"Willa Ryerson?" Justin's voice says. "And Graham Tate. It's good to see the happy couple together."

"Couple?" The other voice I heard before, the one who spoke those damning words to the new mayor, comes forward from the patio. He steps around Justin and into view. He's older, gray, and pleasant like a sophisticated version of Santa Claus without his red suit and beard. "Graham," he says. "You've been keeping her a secret?"

My father used to tell me nothing good ever comes from lying. “Always tell the truth, Willa girl. That way you don’t have to remember what lies you’ve told to which person.” I should have never lied. Look at where it’s gotten me.

Taking in a deep breath, my gaze turns up to Graham’s face. His expression has changed. He strides over to me and wraps an arm around my waist. He pulls me into him and our sides press together from chest to thigh. Graham’s body is hard, his muscles tense. His hand behaves like my body belongs to it. Like *I* belong to him. He grips my side and I gasp. A wave, hot and fervent, surges through me when his fingers tightens on my hip. Intense, the pleasure deliciously overwhelms the pain. I can’t ignore my body’s response, or control it. Heat flushes my skin and pools deep in my middle. I bite my bottom lip and force my eyelids not to flutter.

Graham chuckles besides me. “I was just waiting for the right time, Patrick,” he says.

Patrick Donovan and Mayor Justin O’Rourke. Together? Fuck!

“Well, now is as good a time as any,” Patrick says. “It’s nice to meet you, dear.”

The older man offers me his hand. Graham squeezes his fingers deeper into my sides. I shake Patrick’s hand and grit through a smile. “Willa Ryerson, Pleased to meet you, Mr. Donovan. You have a lovely home.”

“Oh, all the credit goes to my wife, Melissa. I’ll let her know you like it, but you are the real story,” he says. “I have

known Graham since he was..." Patrick waves a hand in the air around the level of Graham's waist. "What do you think, Graham? About this high?"

"About that," he answers and relaxes his hold on me.

It's frustrating, trying to parse the stories about Patrick Donovan, the notorious Chicago crime boss, with the older gentleman in the suit standing in front of me. I feel a mixture of confusion and compassion as he smiles warmly and sends Graham prideful looks.

"Young lady, I've seen this boy grow up to be a man. I've watched him go from sullen to someone who enjoys life, almost to the extremes, but you are the first woman anyone's ever described to me as his girlfriend."

"They're new, Patrick," Justin says. "Don't jinx it."

"I wouldn't want to do that." A smile parts Patrick's lips, then he looks at Graham and says, "So, why were you two playing around in my office? I hope you weren't planning on fucking on my desk."

Justin bursts out laughing at the crass suggestion and so does Patrick. Soon after that, Graham joins them and I force myself to add to the chorus.

Patrick slaps Graham on the shoulder. "That's for keeping me in the dark, son."

Graham nods. "Well, we'll get out your way, right, baby?"

I can clearly see my reckoning in his eyes. I smile wide and continue to play nice, hoping that the act buys me a measure of

forgiveness. Graham's hand moves. He rests it on the small of my back and ushers me out to the corridor, shutting the door.

“Um, Graham, I—“

“Shut up.”

Instead of heading back to the foyer, Graham drags me down the corridor. We turn down another hall and head directly through a door. The lights switch on, illuminating the elegant white bathroom with beautiful modern fixtures.

“Who sent you?” Graham shuts the door, locks it. “Start talking.”

“What? No one sent me.” He yanks my purse from my shoulder, opens it and dumps the contents onto the gleaming marble counter. Reaching out, Graham blocks me effortlessly with one arm and half of his imposing body as he rifles through my things. “Hey!”

“You just happen to be at Blue Moon getting friendly with one of our guys. You snuck into this party. Introduced yourself to the mayor. You expect me to believe those were coincidences?” He picks up my lipstick, pulling it from the case and twisting up the product before he sets it down. “Tell me who sent you. Who are you working for? Are you really a reporter, or are you a cop?”

“Stop it.” I slap his broad shoulder. “Stop asking me stupid questions and messing with my stuff.”

Graham shoves me off him and I stumble back against the door. “Are you wearing a wire?”

My mouth falls open. “A wire? Are you crazy?”

Graham’s hands grab my waist again. “You’re the crazy one.” He drops to one knee like he’s about to propose, but we are wildly far from that reality. “Stand still,” he growls.

“What are you doing?”

“If you set me up. If you tricked me into bringing you here and if you’re wearing a wire to record my boss, Willa Ryerson, I’m going to find it.” He grabs my right ankle. His palms, rough and calloused, snake up my leg, disappearing underneath my skirt.

“You can’t...” I gasp. “You can’t do that.”

“Move and I’ll kill you.”

“Is that what you do? Kill people for Patrick Donovan?”

Graham’s head snaps up. “If I have to. Yeah. Now. Don’t. Move.”

His voice traps me in place. Graham’s hands travel over my knee, inching higher and higher. I swallow, flinching when his fingers brush near the apex of my thigh. My heart pounds faster. Time slows down for me. I’m afraid, but so fucking turned on I want Graham’s touch to go further. I let out a breath when he switches to my other leg and repeats his search in reverse.

Since I’m not a cop, Graham doesn’t find a wire where he started searching. Satisfied, he stands and presses a palm against my stomach before he dips his fingers beneath the waistband on my skirt. He pulls the leather taut from one side

to the other, then around my back. All the while, he's scowling at me.

One arm still wrapped around my back, Graham presses three fingers in the middle of my ribcage and slowly moves them up my body. Each movement of his hand brings a sensation of arousal and dread. Stopping to investigate the clasp in the front of my bra, his palm rests on my chest. A part of me desperately wants to feel his hand cupping my breast, but I stay very still, holding onto a breath like it might be my last. Then Graham's brown eyes look directly into mine. I start comparing his touch to Rafé's. It's ridiculous. I'm ridiculous, but since it's only happening in my mind, I let the fantasy take root.

Suddenly Graham lets me go. "Shit." He rakes his fingers through his hair, pacing the stone floors. "No one sent you?"

I shake my head.

Graham points a finger at me. "Don't," his voice rises a touch, "lie to me."

"I'm not," I whimper.

He releases a breath. Graham walks up to me, holding my stare. There's just a small space between us when he says, "Listen to me, Willa. This is very important." He pauses, then asks, "Did you see or hear anything while you were in that room? And, Willa, I swear to God, don't you dare lie to me."

"Graham, I didn't. I swear."

CHAPTER SEVEN

GRAHAM

I CAN'T TELL FOR sure whether or not she's lying, but if Patrick believes even for a moment that she is a threat to us, then it won't matter. Shaking my head, I tell her, "Get your things. We're leaving."

"Where are you taking me now?"

From the sound of her voice she still doesn't fear what I might do to her next. She either thinks she's very good at charming me, or she's the most naive woman I've ever met.

"Graham, did you hear me?"

"Yes," I bark at her. "I'm finally taking you home like I would have done if you had just listened to me."

"Well, you should've listened to me and left me at the bar. I hope you had a hell of a time feeling me up for no good reason."

My jaw tightens. I grit my teeth. "Do you have any idea what kind of shit you put yourself in? I don't know who you think you are, but Patrick Donovan is not a man you fuck with."

You must have a fucking death wish, you know that. Or maybe you think you're too pretty to get yourself killed for no good reason."

Willa's mouth twists tight and she unpins herself from the door. Her face drops out of sight and she goes over to the counter. She picks up her phone, the tube of lipstick, her college ID, and the rest of her belongings. She slowly returns them to her purse one item at a time, her hands trembling. *Good.* At last a sense of fear must be sinking into her consciousness. *That's real good.*

She wasn't wearing a wire and her phone wasn't recording. Willa might not be a pretty honey trap one of our rivals dispatched to gather information on us and she may not have had an ulterior motive when she stole her way into the party, but my gut tells me I shouldn't let her out of my sight.

Her soft, innocent reply to my question of what happened when she interrupted Patrick and Justin's private meeting didn't calm me. Lips quivering, her eyes searching mine, I had to back off the interrogation. I was standing too close, looking too deeply into her eyes. Her gaze dissolved all my anger. What was left was a sense of responsibility.

Leaving her alone in my car, I had inadvertently unleashed more harm on her than Julio's men would've inflicted at the bar. Although they smiled at her, neither Patrick nor Justin will hesitate to make a problem like her disappear permanently. They won't need a good reason. They'll just look to me to

make it go away. If this woman isn't honest with me, I don't know how long I can protect her.

“Come on. It's time for you to go.”

Willa lifts the strap of her purse over her arm and rests it on her shoulder. I open the bathroom door and she crosses the threshold back into the hall. We walk side-by-side down the long corridor to the foyer. The gap between us narrows when an older couple passes us on the right. They smile at us. Willa smiles back at them.

At the reception area, I move even closer to Willa and Dani frowns at me. Willa would've had to get past her to enter the party. Dani is also Molly's friend. I'm sure she'll tell her everything she saw and heard here tonight.

Flynn eyes us with a curious look on his face. “Good night, you two love birds,” he says as we exit through the mansion's front entrance.

“The mayor certainly loves his gossip,” Willa says.

“You certainly can tell a convincing lie.”

While we wait for my car, Willa glances at me a few times. Finally, she says, “Seeing he's known you since you were this high.” She gestures with her hand the way Patrick did. “I'm guessing you're not his son. Not his legitimate son, anyway. Am I right?”

“Yeah, that's right.”

She scoffs and mumbles, “That explains your obvious daddy issues.”

Willa's insult stings, worse than the slap she landed across my face in the alley. I shoot her a dark look, and her head jerks away from me. Her body stiffens and she stares straight ahead until Sammy parks the Ferrari in front of us.

"I'm gonna need that address now," I say as we buckle our seatbelts. "What is it?"

"You're someone who admits to killing people for a mafia boss. What does that make you? An enforcer?" She only pauses for a breath before she continues, "You threatened to kill me. What kind of person are you? And why the hell would you think I'd tell you where I live?"

Her tone is too judgemental for me. I don't respond to any of her questions.

"I'm not whoever you thought I was," she says, emphatically waving a hand.

There's something in Willa's protest I still don't trust. It gnaws at me. "Fine, I believe you," I say. "But I am who you think I am, and unless your plan is to come with me for the rest of the night, you better tell me where you live, now."

While she was busy smacking my shoulder in the bathroom, I took her driver's license from her purse. I don't need her to tell me where she lives. I just want to test if she'll lie to me, and how good she is at it. She gives me the correct street, but not the accurate number of her apartment building. She's a reasonably good liar. I make note of that as a smirk spreads across my face.

“Thanks, for being...honest with me, Willa.”

She nods, but perhaps this is the moment when she realizes there was an item missing from her possessions because she smiles and around the corners of her lips I detect a hint of tension.

The rest of the car ride Willa wisely keeps her mouth shut, leaving me to think. Mostly about carrying out my plan against the Garzas, but at times those thoughts are interrupted by my passenger's perfume, which intensifies every time we're in close proximity. It's a light floral scent that has a heady quality to it. She must wear it to smell as intoxicating as possible for anyone who is near her. Until now, I hadn't breathed her in, or admired her body while I tried to find any listening devices she might have had on her. I had one goal in mind then.

I've witnessed too many poor, naive, and foolish people fall victim to terrible circumstances when they were in the wrong place at the wrong moment. What I did to her in the bathroom was intrusive, violating. But it was for her own good.

Feeling less and less now like Willa might've stormed into my life to cause havoc, my thoughts drift back to the moment in the alley when I sniffed cigarette smoke in the air and caught a glimpse of a large figure hiding in the shadows. The thought crossed my mind that Julio with the help of Stevie Cullen saw an opportunity to catch me off-guard and took it. Those two guys could've been behind the Blue Moon waiting for me. Willa and Rafé could've saved my life.

“Ah, Graham,” Willa says, “You just drove by my apartment. It’s a few blocks back there.”

“No, I don’t think it is. You’re not as good a liar as you might believe, Willa.”

I speed through another set of green lights, parking near the doorman posted outside her building. Leaning forward, I gawk up at the skyscraper. “On-campus housing has gotten expensive.” I ease back into my seat and look at her. “Should I invite myself up?”

Willa definitely gives off the vibe of a clueless rich girl playing in spaces she doesn’t understand. I don’t think she’s faking that at all. She finally looks at me, frowning and pouting like a brat. If by some miracle she’s undercover, then the cops spared no expense using her as their asset. Her purse alone costs what her doorman makes in a year. With that hint of a British accent to go along with her pricey outfit, jewelry, and her high-end makeup brands, Willa seems naturally spoiled rotten. And above all that, nothing about her haughty attitude could be taught at the police academy.

I can safely eliminate her as a cop, but now I’m still nervous that she might be a journalist digging for a story. They are just as dangerous to our organization as police. “Who do you write for, the *Tribune* or the *Sun-Times*?”

“Neither,” she says.

Her body language reads low energy. That and the birthdate on her ID confirms she’s not a seasoned reporter nor a

dedicated one. I reach inside the armrest and pull out a black Sharpie. “Give me your arm.”

She balks. “What for?”

Taking the cap off the marker, I grab her wrist and hold it firmly while running the tip of the marker along her skin, smearing ink up to her shoulder. She doesn’t resist. “Stop by this address sometime.”

“This is a touch dramatic, don’t you think? You could’ve just asked me to type it into my phone.”

When I look up from her arm, her eyes narrow at me. I smirk. “No, my way is better. The marker is permanent, so I know you’ll think about me the next time you’re in the shower.”

She scowls. “You better hope this comes off in the shower.”

Recalling my hands underneath her skirt, I imagine her naked under a spray of water, the steam rising around her like a halo. Her hair, long and dark and sleek, clinging to her skin, over a shoulder, down one of her breasts. In my imagination, water drips from her lips and slithers along her throat, collecting in the hollow of her neck, spilling down her curves to the soft mound between her thighs. I insert myself into the imagery, standing at her back, spreading soap over her body.

I pull in a sharp breath, indulging in the idea of me and her being together. The clumsy way Willa flitted about the evening, bouncing from a rough biker bar in the arms of a guy like Rafé to shaking hands with Patrick Donovan and the

mayor is proof that people like her can't survive long in my world. Melissa, Patrick's wife, is a rarity. She flawlessly juggles the roles of suburban housewife and mafia moll. Maybe with my insistence and some practice, Willa could become my Melissa.

"Let me get your door," I tell her.

Willa takes my hand as she eases out of the car. She straightens, bouncing in front of me.

"I still want you to have a wonderful evening, Willa."

She brushes hair out of her face, licks her lips and says, "As far as assaults go, I think we're even."

"The jury's still out on that."

She steps around me, sauntering towards her apartment building. "Trust me," she says over her shoulder. "My lawyers are better than yours."

Even though her face is hidden from my view, I know she's smiling. I linger by my car until she is well out of sight before I hop back into the Ferrari and head in the direction of Vice.

From start to finish, my plan to rid us of our Garzas problems revolves around Jessica Cruz, the enthusiastic bartender at one of the strip clubs I oversee. She's been working there for almost nine months. For almost all of that time, she's pressed me for a promotion. Every girl who starts out at the strip clubs wants to move up to the Donovan Lounge, the private club where Patrick frequently conducts business. Although the patrons still get drunk and handsy, The

Donnie's clients are more refined, the hours are better, and the tips are bigger. Much bigger.

"Hey, Jess. How's it going tonight?"

"No one's spilled their drink on my t-shirt yet, but it's early," she says, wiping down the counter.

We share a laugh and Jess asks me if I want my usual. "No, not tonight."

"Here to pick up Molly? Her set just finished. She should be out any minute."

"Actually, I wanted to talk to you. There's a waitress spot open at The Donnie, if you're still interested."

Her eyes light up. "Are you serious?"

"Yeah, you haven't changed your mind, have you?"

"No!"

I smile. "Good. Stop by the gym tomorrow and we'll talk. I'll be there all afternoon."

Giddy, Jess's narrow shoulders rise up to her ears. "I'll be there at noon," she says.

"I know you will."

I get up from the barstool and head to my booth to wait for Molly. Unlike a lot of the other waitresses and bartenders working for me, Jessica Cruz is reliable. She comes to work early and leaves late. She never calls out sick and with the exception of nagging me about moving over to the Donovan

Lounge, she gives me no grief whatsoever. She has been the perfect employee, and that might've been her biggest mistake.

It took me less than a month to confirm my suspicions that Jessica was one of Chicago's finest, working undercover at the club I managed. She wants to get close to Patrick and I'm about to offer her the chance.

Or so she thinks.

CHAPTER EIGHT

WILLA

“YOU LOOK A LITTLE tired, sweetheart. Are you getting enough sleep?”

“I just got out of bed, mum.”

“That’s a poor excuse, Willa. I taught you better than that,” my mother says. “Look at me and I’m more than twice your age.”

“It’s already the afternoon where you are, mother.”

My mother scoffs and starts one of her stories from her modeling days. Andrea Ryerson is beautiful. And she is always camera ready. Lifting my cup of coffee, I swallow a mouthful of the hot drink and let her recount her ‘how to look your best in any situation’ speech. I feign listening, nodding my head, and fixing my face to seem as though the latest lesson is sinking in.

“No, you’re right, mum. Thanks again for the advice.”

“You leave me for a few years and you forget everything I’ve taught you,” she says. “Speaking of which, I spoke to

Dennis Ridley. Imagine my surprise when he informed me you still haven't given him an answer about the position."

I set my mug down on my desk and shrug. "I'm still debating."

"What's to debate? Was the salary too low?"

"No," I say, shaking my head. "The salary is fine."

"Is it New York then?"

"No, both jobs are so amazing, mum. I really appreciate it, but I need time to figure some things out." I edge forward in my chair, closing in on the laptop screen. "I was even thinking about maybe staying in Chicago for a year. Maybe more."

"Hmm," my mother says, then her eyes narrow on me. "Darling, what's that on your arm?"

I glance at my exposed skin and pull my robe back over my shoulder, concealing the traces of black permanent ink still visible even after a long shower last night. "Something I'd rather not talk about."

"Willa, my dear, is anything the matter?"

"No, it's nothing. I swear, mum."

"Tired eyes, your big mug of coffee, and whatever that is on your arm. I don't know why you just can't tell me you were out late last night." She pauses. When I don't say anything, she continues, "Well, I hope it was a memorable time. Don't make it a habit, or you'll surely regret it."

If my mother knew the half of it, she would have me on a flight back home to London immediately after graduation. Last night was more than memorable. It was impossible to forget. After scrubbing my skin nearly raw, I went to sleep and woke up thinking about him: Patrick Donovan. As the mafia boss's words to Justin O'Rourke replay in my head, I fixate on the many lies I told and whether one of them will get me in trouble.

"I should let you go now, mum. I still have some studying to do."

My mother sighs. "Of course, I want you to start finalizing your plans, Willa. You have your entire future waiting for you. Don't squander opportunity."

"Yes, mom. Talk to you again soon, okay? I love you."

"I love you, too."

The call was a success. I broached the subject of turning down the job offers waiting for me in D.C. and New York City with my mother without having the conversation devolve into an argument. I'd consider that progress, even if I haven't made up my mind about any of it yet.

Reaching for my mouse, I reposition the cursor to an open tab on my browser with a news article about the first and last time Patrick Donovan was prosecuted for allegedly being the head of a criminal network. More than two decades ago, charges were brought against him and his brother, Thomas. Both men beat those charges. Before the trial ended though,

there was speculation of jury tampering and accusations of judges being paid off.

Clicking from tab to tab, reading the same articles I read until I fell asleep at my desk, I resume taking notes on the man. Fifteen pages of handwritten notes later and I slump back in my chair as my phone rings.

“Hey, it’s me. Did you get it?” Paul asks. “Just tell me you got that fucking interview with O’Rourke.”

I laugh. “Honestly, I’m surprised, if not a little disappointed, you waited until now to call me and ask.”

“This is good. You sound confident. Dare I say even cocksure.” Paul enjoys teasing me about my hybrid American and English upbringing, never passing on an opportunity to poke fun at my accent for the two years I’ve been writing stories for the political magazine. “You got it, didn’t you? You got it. You got it. Tell me how you pulled it off.”

I fill Paul in on my chance meeting with Justin O’Rourke, leaving out the more interesting bits like being stalked in an alley, Patrick Donovan’s clandestine meeting with the mayor, and the many personal warnings I received from my grumpy hero.

“So, what’s next? What’s your plan?”

“I’ll call his aide tomorrow and try to get in there as soon as possible before O’Rourke changes his mind, or someone else on his team changes it for him.”

“Good plan. You need help with the research or the angle?”

Paul prefers hard questions, with follow up questions that a journalist hoping to make a living doing this kind of work stays clear of. I know that's why he likes me. He knows my family has money and connections, and I always made it clear to him that I didn't want to be the next Diane Sawyer. "Don't worry about me, Paul. I'll get you the interview you want."

"That's why I like you."

"I know."

We end the conversation and I walk my mug over to the sink. I fix myself a bowl of fruit, glancing periodically at my laptop. Before I realize what I'm doing, I'm back in my chair, leaning forward and opening a new tab. I type in the address Graham penned on my arm. "A gym," I whisper to myself. "A boxing gym."

I slip the silk fabric off my shoulder and rub the faded black ink stubbornly clinging to my skin. The address is correct. He invited me to a boxing gym.

Giant parts of Graham Tate appeal to me. First off, the man is gorgeous, but even the dangerous air he carries about himself is alluring. I still blush thinking about his hands searching underneath my clothes for a wire.

At my age, I'm behind on dating. It was reckless of me to ask Rafé out and it's stupid to keep thinking about the weight of Graham's chest resting on top of mine.

"Why would you invite me to this place, Graham?" I swivel back and forth in my chair, wondering. "I guess, there's only

one way to find out.”

CHAPTER NINE

GRAHAM

MOLLY ROLLS ONTO HER back, baring her breasts and half her torso next to me in the bed. After her Saturday night shifts, she's always exhausted. I pick her up from Vice and she spends the night at my place. Molly likes it because I let her sleep in and I make her breakfast whatever time she finally gets up—she loves my omelets.

I can take or leave our Sunday morning routine. I don't get sentimental. Molly understands that and she knows that what we have isn't meant to last. Sex and conversation are one thing. Declarations of love and long-term commitments fly in the face of being a mafia enforcer. Wherever I go, violence follows me. And one way or another, that violence will hurt anyone close to me.

Whenever I start with a new girl from the strip club, I explain my dating rules. A lot of them are looking for something more, so after a few nights we walk away. No hard feelings. But Molly accepts them. She's older than me. Done this a few times before with guys like me.

Gazing down at her naked skin, I consider waking her up to go another round, but I abandon the thought as soon as I hear my phone vibrate. I rifle through my clothes strewn over the floor where Molly tossed them last night after she ripped them off me. Patrick's name flashes on the screen. I answer, "Good morning, Sir. Is everything okay?"

"I'm on my way over to you," Patrick says.

"No church this morning?"

"I sent Melissa along with the children. I needed to speak with you first. I'm getting out of the car now. Answer your door, son."

"Yes, sir."

Six days out of the week, I'm overseeing the personal security for the Donovan family, various crews working for us, and running half a dozen side companies, including the Donovan Lounge, Vice, and my boxing gym. My Sunday mornings belong to me. Religiously, Patrick takes his family to church and I'm free to pursue whatever I want. Usually, that's women.

Fornicating on the Sabbath is exactly what my Catholic foster mother would expect from me. Her expectations were always low. Since she never bothered to give me the chance to know her, my birth mother might think less of me too, but what she thinks about me matters even less.

With my boss on his way up to my penthouse, I only have time to rush out of bed and throw on my pants from last

evening. Patrick's already knocking by the time I head downstairs, taking the steps two at a time. He hammers his fist on the door and I rush to pull it open.

“Sorry for the wait. I had to get dressed.”

Patrick nods and shoulders into my penthouse, stomping by me. He heads to the living room, taking a seat on the sofa. I join him, sitting in the leather arm chair across from him. “I know Jimmy's anxious to hear what I'm gonna do about the Garzas.”

“Graham, you think I'd miss church for an update on the Garzas? What am I hearing about your girlfriend doing an interview with Justin? Is that shit true?”

I open my mouth, but I have no fucking idea what to say to that.

“Graham, why aren't you in bed?” Molly appears at the top of the stairs, dressed exactly the way I left her in my room. Naked, from the top of her straight blonde head to the bright pink nail polish on her toes, she says, “Oh, hi, Mr. Donovan.”

I spring to my feet and take a couple of steps towards the stairs. “Molly, get some clothes on and go back into the room until I'm done.”

Her smile widens. “Grow up, Graham. It's nothing he hasn't seen before.”

“For fuck's sake,” Patrick says.

“Molly! Just go! Now!”

Startled, she jumps. Molly tiptoes away from the railing before spinning around and going back inside the room. I let out a held breath. When I turn around, Patrick's face is disgusted. I swallow and retake my seat. "Sorry about that." I point up to the bedroom. "Molly stays with me on Saturday nights. It's just easier on her like this."

Patrick leans forward and says, "I hope to good God you have a better handle on the other one you're fucking than you do with this one, or we're all fucked. I thought you were smarter than this. You know if she finds out you're still fucking around with Molly, she won't accept it. A woman like that wouldn't tolerate playing second fiddle to a stripper."

"Molly's not just a stripper."

"Not the fucking point." Patrick's voice ticks up. "The point is a stripper can't hurt us. But a pissed off journalist can. I don't want her telling our secrets, Graham,"

"She won't."

"Are you sure about that? She sashayed into my office last night. What did she hear?"

"Nothing. I asked her and she told me she didn't see or hear anything."

"Oh, yeah? And then what happened? You dropped her off, drove to the club and picked up Molly to bring back here so she could spend the night with you. Fuck, Graham, I expect this kind of shit from Carey. Not you." Patrick stands. "Get your house in order, son."

Visibly upset with me, Patrick storms out. The stubble along my jaw irritates my fingertips as I rub my face, trying to figure out how I let Willa Ryerson become such a serious pain in my ass. Once again, I'm going to have to stop her from getting herself killed.

“Shit!” I sigh. “Molly! You can come down now. I'm gonna make us omelets. You want some juice? Not orange. I think I have spinach. Molly? You hearing me?”

When I place the carton of eggs on the counter, she appears in the living room wearing last night's clothes and carrying her overnight bag on her shoulder.

“What are you doing? I said I'm making omelets.”

“I'm leaving, Graham.”

I grin. “Come on, Molly. You walked out here with nothing on, right in front of Patrick and acted like it was no big deal. You didn't expect me to get upset about that? The man is like a father to me, Mol. Look, I'm sorry for barking at you like that. Patrick was—“

“Yeah, I know. I heard Patrick. I heard *everything* Patrick said. Who else are you fucking, Graham?”

Great, now she's mad at me too over a relationship that doesn't exist. The worst part is I can't tell her or Patrick the truth without looking like I'm a fucking idiot. “Molly, don't listen to Patrick.”

She crosses her arms and shifts her weight onto one leg. “Who is she, Graham? Who is this woman you and Patrick are

so terrified might find out about me.”

This isn't us. I try to remind her of that. “Molly, come on. We've been together for months, why would I start lying to you now?”

She rolls her eyes. “There are so many reasons why you'd lie to me. But,” she pauses, then says, “You don't have a single reason to lie to Patrick. You never have, so fuck you, Graham. I don't need to have some other woman feeling like she's playing second fiddle to a stripper.”

“If you heard that, then you heard what I said to him.”

She scoffs. “How long have you been fucking her?”

I squeeze my eyes shut for an instant. “Molly, I'm not fucking anyone else.”

“Then who the fuck is this?” She threw a thin, white object at me. It flutters to the floor. The driver's license lands face up on the hardwood floor and it feels like an hour goes by. It must have fallen out of my pocket at some point. “Yeah, that's what I thought,” she says.

Molly's halfway to the door before I raise my head. I watch her strutting out of my apartment and I'm sick of this day already. “I'm gonna call you later tonight.”

“Don't fucking bother,” she says.

“I'm gonna call you, Molly, and you better pick up.”

The door slams shut and I walk across the living room. Blowing out a deep breath, I bend down and pick up Willa's

driver's license. Wishing I had sent her back into the fucking bar with Rafé, I stare at her face. I flick the corner of the card with a finger and say, "I knew you were trouble the moment I saw you."

CHAPTER TEN

WILLA

THE GYM IS HUGE. To the right of the entrance are five pro-style boxing rings—the unique feature that separates this place from your typical Planet Fitness. The promotional videos online proudly take credit for the success of a few professional boxers and some promising amateurs. In that section of the interior are a dozen men—and a few women—taking in a sparring match. On the opposite side of the ground floor, a handful of people are lifting weights or running in place on treadmills.

Directly in front of me, two sets of stairs lead to a second floor. From my position by the front entry, I can't see what activities are going on up there and a posted sign warns that access to the upstairs is restricted. Tucked between the two staircases is a front desk and next to it, an unmanned smoothie bar. I walk forward, still uncertain whether Graham Tate stole my driver's license to lure me here, or if he took it as insurance in case he decided to kill me like he threatened to do last night.

I recognize the older man standing behind the counter. His picture was displayed on the website as one of the gym's prominent boxing trainers. He has the phone attached to his ear. When I reach him, he covers the receiver with a hand and asks, "Can I help you, miss?"

"Hi, I'm wondering if someone might have left something here for me. A driver's license."

"Hang on, let me check lost and found." He pulls open a couple of draws, rifles through them. "I'm not seeing anything, hun. Let me look in one other place. Gimme one minute."

I nod and he returns to his phone conversation. Slipping one of the glossy cards from the acrylic holder on the counter, I scan the slick brochure. Whoever manages the marketing for this place does an amazing job. I glance up at the older man, then back down to the brochure again, pretending to read it. "Um, I've never heard of this place before."

"One second, sweetheart," he says, holding up a finger. "Yeah, two dozen should work this month and don't skim on the quality." He cackles, then ends the call. "We don't advertise much."

"Yeah, I guess." Resting one arm on the counter, I ask, "Do you, do you know a Mr. Tate?"

"Who? Graham?"

"Yeah. Is he here?"

“Mr. Tate don’t usually come in on Sundays. He’s usually with...” The older man pauses, looks me up and down. “How do you know Graham?”

“Be careful with that one, Teddy.” Graham’s voice washes over us like rain. He appears in the middle of the staircase, dressed in a t-shirt that clings to his chest and black sweatpants that... *Fucking hell*. I try to keep my eyes on his face instead of his very visible dick print. Graham continues down the stairs, holding a small, brown paper bag in his hand. Taking long strides, he walks up to the counter and says, “This one tried to knock me out last night.”

“No shit?” Teddy says, almost beaming at me. “You don’t look so tough.”

Graham holds up two fingers. “She went at me twice. Once in the alley behind the Blue Moon.”

“When was the other time?” Teddy asks.

Staring at me, Graham says, “That doesn’t matter, but I’m telling you, she’s a tiger.” His smile broadens. “How’s it going, Teddy.”

“I didn’t see you come in. Are you trying to make a liar out of me? I just told her you don’t come in on Sundays. Whatcha doing here?”

“Snuck in through the back door,” Graham says, his eyes never leaving mine. He winks at me, then he turns to Teddy. “I’m meeting someone.”

Teddy looks at me. “Her?”

“No, not her,” Graham says, chuckling before he glances at me. “No, she’s something of a surprise.” Graham lifts the bag and hands it to the old trainer. “For you.”

“Chicken or eggplant?” Teddy asks.

“Eggplant. Heat it up this time, you savage.”

“It was damn good cold.” Teddy deposits the bag next to the phone and raises his head. “You wouldn’t know it by the looks of him, but he makes a better parmigiana than the old women in my family. God rests their souls.”

I laugh. “I don’t believe it.”

“Believe it. His cooking is half the reason why people around here love him so much.”

“What’s the other half?” I ask.

Teddy shrugs and says, “He’s the boss.”

I glance at the brochure in my hand. Graham’s full of surprises. Strange, sexy ones.

“Teddy, let me know when Jess gets here. Send her up to my office.”

“Sure thing, boss. You gonna give the tiger the tour? Or you want me to get one of the guys?”

Graham drums his hands on the counter. “No, she’s all mine. This way,” he says to me.

The tour begins with a quick walk past the boxing rings, the spin studios, and weight room. Graham points out where the mens’ and womens’ locker rooms are. He remarks that there’s

a large sauna on this floor and a smaller one upstairs that he uses. We take an elevator that Graham opens with a keyfob up to the second floor. There are only five other people on this level and Graham explains that this area of the gym is reserved for their VIP members.

“People like Patrick Donovan?” I ask.

“Yeah, people like him.” Graham reaches an arm high above our heads and grabs hold of the chain attached to the punching bag between us. His muscles flex, pushing at the edges of his t-shirt and I dare not look down to see what’s happening below his waist. I do notice a gold necklace peeking out from under his collar. “Patrick came to see me at my apartment this morning. He never does that on Sundays because that’s time he spends with his family. They go to church together.”

“Church?” One of my eyebrows quirk up and I fear where Graham’s going with this story. “What did he want?”

“To talk to me about my new girlfriend.”

“Oh, that.”

“Yeah that, Willa.”

“I’m sorry I lied about that.”

“That little lie of yours is causing me a lot of grief.” Graham leans against the bag, lowering his face closer to mine. “I think it’s only fair that you do something to make up for it.”

My chest rises faster. If by something he means sex, I wouldn’t bat an eye at the suggestion. I feel my body inching forward, drifting further inside Graham’s orbit. I arch my

back. In another minute, I might be kissing him. “Okay. What do you want?”

Graham doesn’t glance away. He maintains eye contact with me and leans in further. “You’re not doing the interview with O’Rourke, Willa.”

I take half a step forward. “You can’t stop me.”

“Yes, I can. But I won’t have to.”

“Why? Because your way is better again? Because everybody is either afraid of you or they love you?”

Graham’s nostrils flare. His brown eyes narrow on me, and he says, “Wait right here.”

He leaves me standing by the bag and clutching my middle, breathing air in through my mouth. Luckily, I’m alone and no one sees me mentally fanning myself. Except for the two of us, the second floor is deserted now. The space has no walls. Instead, it’s organized into zones with one boxing ring that resembles the one downstairs, only it’s larger. Other areas are sectioned off with equipment that favors boxers. I noted the signs pointing to a corridor for the other sauna and another arrow that directs to more lockers.

“Ready?”

I whip around and Graham’s back, holding a pair of red gloves.

“What are those for?”

“These are for learning. Specifically for learning how to protect yourself and they are why I gave you this address last night. Your punches need a lot of work. With my help, you might be able to survive your next nightly stroll down a dark alley.”

“You want to teach me how to fight off rapists?”

“We’re gonna start with boxing and then we can get into self-defense. Drop your bag and put these on.” Graham helps me with my gym bag, setting it aside before returning with the gloves. He unlaces them. “Don’t be shy. Stick your hands in.”

I do as I’m told and Graham tightens the laces on the gloves. “What now?”

He positions himself on the other side of the heavy bag and says, “Punch. As hard as you think you can.”

I hit the bag.

“Sad,” he says.

“Aren’t you supposed to be teaching me?”

“I want you to show me what you’ve got first. Come on now. Hit the damn bag, Willa.”

I throw my fist directly into the spot where Graham’s handsome face would be if the punching bag wasn’t between us.

He shakes his head. “Again. Harder. Get mad.”

I try again and he lets go of the bag and walks behind me. Graham grabs my hips. “Bend your knees. Sink into a boxer’s

stance.”

Before I can ask what the hell he means, the space between his body and mine shrinks to nothing. His chest cradles my back. Our thighs touch and our hips join. If his arms were around me, we’d be embracing. I fight the urge to melt into him.

Graham nuzzles his face next to my ear and in a low, deep rumble says, “This is a boxer’s stance.”

My eyes flutter. A breath escapes my lips. Barely above a whisper, I say, “Okay.”

One of Graham’s hands moves slowly from my hip to flattening across my middle. His fingers press into my stomach. “Firm belly,” he says and his lips brush against my earlobe. “Yes, just like that.”

Another lost breath. Another tiny whimper.

“Now, you’re almost ready,” Graham says.

He reaches out for my arms and I want to scream. I want to beg him to keep his hands on me. But I swallow around the desperate plea threatening to tumble off my lips.

“Boxing is all about training your muscles.”

I nod, unable to speak.

“Train your muscles properly and you’d be surprised at all the things they can do.”

Each word Graham whispers in my ear feels like a long lick of his tongue tasting the most intimate parts of my body. I lose

every sensible thought as Graham directs the correct delivery of my punches. He doles out instructions and my body responds, following his commands. I don't really hear them. I'm not even paying attention to them. All I can feel are his arms around me, his chest and rock-hard stomach holding me up.

“Hey, Graham. Jess is here.”

Teddy's shout snaps my mind back into my body. But my body continues to obey Graham and he doesn't stop to notice the trainer and the tall woman standing next to him wearing a workout outfit similar to mine.

“Keep going while I'm gone,” Graham finally says. “Don't stop. This won't take very long.”

CHAPTER ELEVEN

GRAHAM

“YOU HANDING OUT PRIVATE lessons now?” Jess says.
“Or do you just have to look like her to get one?”

I chuckle and say, “Don’t you start with me.” Before she takes a step into my office, I block her. “Leave that outside for me.”

She nods and drops her gym bag by the door, then she walks in ahead of me. “I’ve never been up to the second floor before. Teddy showed me around a little bit. It’s really nice.”

“Yeah, I put my heart and soul into this place. You don’t have your phone on you, do you?”

Jess shakes her head. “It’s in my bag you told me to leave outside.”

Good. One less device to worry about. Stomping over to my desk, I point to the sofa. “Take a seat.”

Like the perfect employee, Jess follows my instructions. She heads for the sofa, while I switch the surveillance video feeds on my monitor. Bracing myself with one hand on the

back of my chair, I search for the camera angles covering Willa. I find three of them, then I glance up at Jess. “Why don’t you take off your jacket.”

Jess hesitates, then she says, “Is this some kind of fucked up couch audition, Graham? Because I work my ass off for you at Vice and I never complain. Besides, I didn’t think you were that kind of guy.”

I’m not that kind of guy, but before Jess and I can talk about anything inside these walls, I need to know she’s not dumb enough to record any of our conversations. I straighten and tell her, “It’s your choice Jess. Everything that’s going to happen between us in this room from now on will always be your choice.”

She eyes me with the hardened look of a cop, but Jess unzips her jacket and eases out of it. “There. Are you happy?”

“No. Keep going.”

“Graham, are you fucking kidding me!”

I bend and open the top drawer on my desk. Taking the grip in my hand, I place the gun on the desk. “Like I said before, the choice is yours. I’ll wait.”

Jess struts over to my desk, her eyes ablaze with disgust and anger. She huffs, then turns her back to me. Stripping out of her sports bra, she glances over her shoulder and I curl my finger around the trigger. I’m sure this sort of thing had a chapter in her training manual for undercover work. For her sake, I hope she was paying attention.

Slowly, Jess turns towards me. Her face is red, but stony and any affection she once had for me as her boss is long gone now. Holding her breasts in each hand, she says, “Satisfied?”

I look down at the monitor. *No hidden microphone paste to her chest? Yeah. I'm over the fucking moon.* Even though Jess poses a clear and present danger to me and everyone in Patrick's organization, the last thing I want is to get her killed. She's UC, but she's got a kid. For that and more, I'm grateful she hadn't walked in here with a plan of her own. My plan is dangerous enough for the both of us.

From each of the three different camera feeds, I watch Willa, still tapping away at the heavy bag like a princess swatting away flies. Neve punches harder than her. Willa is a pathetic sight at boxing, but at least she hasn't given up. *That's a redeeming quality.*

“Put your clothes back on, Jess. I'll wait.”

I train my eyes on Willa, analyzing her sorry boxing form. To get her any good at striking an effective punch will take several lessons. I didn't give her the address to my gym to see her in workout gear. I did it to plant a seed in her head. Even for rich girls, the world can be a fucking awful place. She needed to take better care of herself. It seemed to me, nobody's ever told her that before. But I liked her dark hair, the smell of her perfumes and those few minutes her body was against mine. Her ass also looks amazing in those leggings from every angle on the cameras. I wouldn't mind admiring it some more.

“After all of this, I better get the fucking job,” Jess says.

From the corner of my eye, I see her jacket is zipped up again. She plops down on the chair in front of my desk and I finally look up from the monitor. Jess is angry and I get it. Since the day she interviewed with me, I’ve been nothing but nice to her. A good guy. A gracious boss. Someone who looked out for her. Someone she trusted.

I take a seat across from her, keeping my hand on the gun and my finger on the trigger. “This wasn’t to humiliate you, Jess. I needed to be sure we could talk openly.”

“Fuck you. You’re just another piece of shit like the rest of Patrick’s crew,” she says.

“And you’re a cop.”

Immediately I see tension in her neck and she reaches for her throat, touching the space between her collarbones.

“Yeah, you’re a fucking cop trying to get close to my piece of shit boss so you can lock us all up. That’s why you want to work at The Donnie so bad.”

Jess blinks. Fumbling for her words, she stutters. “I... No... Graham...”

I shake my head. “Don’t lie, Jess. Lying now is only going to piss off the guy with the gun pointed at you. No, what you want to do right now is to listen to the man with the gun and when I’m done talking, make the right choice.”

My plan was set in motion last night at Vice. It solidified when I opened the door for a sheepish Jessica Cruz to leave

my office. As I swing the door wide, Flynn has his arm raised in the air about to knock. When Jess sees him she jumps, looks at me. She's terrified, worried that I lied to her and that I was setting her up this entire time.

I touch her shoulder. "It's okay. Flynn's here to see me. Why don't you do your workout up here today. You can trust me, Jess. You have to."

She knows I'm right. Jess isn't stupid. I'm taking a risk too, choosing to keep her secret, and positioning her even closer to my boss. For better or worse, we're in a partnership. I grab the bag from off the floor and hand it to her. "Here. Don't forget this."

"Thanks," she says. "I think I'll go to the sauna, if that's okay."

"Yeah. Sure."

There's a long silent moment while Jess walks meekly through the doorway in the direction of the sauna. Flynn waits until she's far enough away before he speaks. "What's that all about?" he asks.

Flynn's my best friend and he has a boyish face that betrays the instincts he's honed over the years. It's deceptive and crazy deadly. I can't confide in him or any other person in our crew what my plan is to end the Garzas. Anything other than our complete silence and both Jess and I could lose our lives.

"She's having a hard time at Vice with some of the guys."

“Which ones? Let me know and I’ll take care of it,” Flynn says.

“Nah, it’s alright. I’m moving her over to The Donnie. She’s earned it.”

Flynn studies me. “You sure? She hasn’t been with us that long. Can we trust her?”

I gaze down the hallway at Jess slinking by the boxing ring. *I pray to God, I can.* “Yeah. I think she’s good.”

Flynn blows out a deep breath and points a thumb over his shoulder. “Well, your girlfriend’s in danger of knocking herself out over there,” he says.

We both laugh.

“I mean, she’s got heart but her aim is...” He jiggles his open hand. “She’s a—“

“A bit of a princess. Yeah, I know.”

Flynn laughs again. “I mean, don’t get me wrong, Graham. I can clearly see the why, but she’s nowhere near as tough as you like them. I think... I think I’ve seen Neve hit that bag harder.”

Of course he has. I started Neve on the heavy bags when she was five. Grinning, I slap Flynn on the shoulder. “Come on. Let’s go rescue my girlfriend. I don’t think this place is insured enough to cover the losses if she hurt herself on the premises.”

“That is for damn sure,” he says.

Flynn's smile widens as we draw nearer to Willa. He's eager to meet her. *I bet they all are.* I'd never choose to be with a woman like Willa. It would have to be under some crazy circumstance like the one we found ourselves in that could bring two people like me and her together. We might've eaten at the same restaurant on the same night. Or made eye contact as we passed each other on Michigan Avenue. But the two of us sharing this much time in each other's company would have to be something like fate.

As soon as she sees us approaching, Willa drops her arms to her sides. "Hey, I didn't stop," she says with a kilowatt smile plastered on her face.

Damn, what a face. "I know. I was watching your form on the camera."

She frowns and looks around the ceiling, then back at me. "Gross."

I laugh. "The camera's are for security."

Willa rolls her eyes and sticks her arms out at me. "Well, thanks for the lesson. I enjoyed it."

So did I. Standing close to Willa again reminds me how fucking good she smelled when I held her in my arms earlier. I could barely concentrate. My cock was on the verge of taking over that lesson—and it's threatening to take charge again.

"This is Flynn." I take Willa's hand and start untying one of the laces. "Flynn, this is my girlfriend, Willa."

She glances from him to me and we share a knowing look. Then Willa beams and says to Flynn, “Who are you?”

Fuck! She’s bold. Does that shit translate in bed? If it does, I’d play along with her lies for a time. I would fuck a princess once in my life. *Who wouldn’t?*

“Is she always like this?” Flynn says. “I’m fucking speechless.”

I sigh and gaze into Willa’s eyes. The short answer is, I think so. “Flynn is my best friend. Be nice to him.”

Willa fakes a princess smile. She frees her hand from the glove and offers it to Flynn. They shake. “I was just kidding. Graham’s told me all about you. Can’t get him to shut up.”

Grinning at her performance, I lower my head and work the lace on her other glove. Flynn does what he does best and flirts with her. As best friends, jockeying for female attention is one of our things. Which one of us wins, usually depends on the particular woman. With Willa, though, she’s more Flynn’s type than she is mine. I prefer them tough and street smart like Molly. Princesses were definitely left to Flynn’s appetite.

I wonder if that’s the reason I don’t like them talking to each other so much.

“Okay, you’re all set. Here.” I hand the gloves to Flynn. “Could you take these back to my office? I’m gonna walk Willa out.”

Flynn lets a lazy smile spread across his face. When he takes the gloves, he raises them in the air and takes one step

back. It's only then I realize that I'm not smiling at all.

"Message received," Flynn says. "If you two are headed out, I'll see you later tonight, Graham. Willa, it was nice to talk to you. If only for a little while."

"Same here," she says.

Because Flynn is my best friend, I try caging my temper as he takes the hint and leaves quickly. I position myself between him and Willa, blocking him from her view as I snap her bag up from the floor. Where all my anger is coming from, I'm not sure. I'm leary of it, but I don't fucking resent it either.

CHAPTER TWELVE

WILLA

FLYNN HAD DONE NOTHING to deserve the suspicious look my boxing coach gave him, but it's obvious Graham has a low tolerance for witty banter and a cute smile. He introduced Flynn as his best friend and then asked me to be nice to him. I was. But perhaps too much. I'd hate to see how Graham reacts when other men are around his real girlfriend if this is how he behaves when it's just me and the other man is his best friend.

Maybe there's history between the two of them that I don't understand yet. *Yet? What am I saying?* I only came to see Graham out of curiosity, and to get my ID back. I'm beginning to sound like I want to be around this place. Like I want to hang around Graham and Flynn and Teddy. I can't. Especially since Graham thinks he's going to make me pass up a huge opportunity like Justin O'Rourke.

I'm not afraid of Patrick Donovan and I don't care if I caused Graham grief with his pseudo-father. I swear I don't. I want this interview. I need it. This might be the one

opportunity I get to finally figure out what *I* want to do with my life. Whether I want to continue living in Chicago, moving out of state, or slinking back home with my tail between my legs.

“Hey, I meant it when I said I enjoyed the lesson.”

“I meant it when I said you were horrible at it,” he says. Graham hands me my bag. Slowly, his face softens into a smile that touches his eyes. “Keep coming by. I’ll set you up on a VIP account so I can train you up here. My treat.”

Well, shit! Now he’s being nice. “Wow, that’s...incredibly generous of you, but I think you should just return my driver’s license and then we should call it.”

He tilts his head. “Call it?”

“Yeah, wouldn’t that be better for everyone?”

“What do I tell everybody about us?”

There is no us, but already, there are two important people in his life who believe there is. I guess I understand where he’s coming from. “Tell Patrick and Flynn that I broke up with you.”

He smirks. “That’s unbelievable. They know me. They wouldn’t believe that.”

I chuckle. I preferred the cocksure grin on his face to the cold stares he subjects others to when he’s angry. Teddy’s words resurface in my mind and I wonder who are all the people in Graham’s life who love him. Obviously, Patrick Donovan is one of them. And the reverence Graham shows

him indicates that the feeling is mutual. I suspect Graham and Flynn have a brotherly relationship. And I'm sure there has to be a woman—or multiple women; his mother at least—who love him. What are they like? Are any of them like me?

At the foot of the stairs, Graham takes his phone out of his pocket and says, “Give me your number.”

I scoff. I thought we'd gotten beyond his bossiness. I thought we had a moment upstairs—several of them. “Do you ever say please to a woman?” The words come out before all the different implications of what they might mean register in my brain. “Scratch that,” I say.

“And you wanted to call us quits.”

My face burns with embarrassment and affection for him. Graham hands me his phone. Sighing, I take it and dial my number. I wait for my phone to ring, hang up, and say, “There. That's my number.”

His stare wanders over me again.

“Graham Tate. Fancy seeing you here, man. How the fuck have you been?”

We both follow the voice to a man with dark sunglasses blocking his eyes. Slicked back and jet black, the sheen of his hair competes with the gleam of all the shiny little diamonds adorning his necklace. The man is tall and muscular, and his tanned skin is covered in tattoos from the backs of his hands all the way up his arms to his chest. Cutting the distance between us, he settles by our sides and removes his glasses.

Graham's expression is neutral, but he extends his hand to him. "Julio. It's been a while."

"Yeah, man, it has."

Julio looks at me. Looks me in the eyes, then immediately stares at my chest. I glance at Graham and catch the moment when his neutral expression shifts back into that hardened glare he had with Rafé. *Oh shit!*

"You know you still owe me that match," Julio says, lowering his gaze further, taking in my ass.

Graham clears his throat and the act reclaims Julio's attention. "You know something, I think you're right. I do owe you that match" Graham says. "How about right now?"



Just like I had the night before at the party, I overstayed my time in Graham's company and now I'm about to watch him fight another man. Back upstairs in the VIP section, the large space is being transformed into a low-budget version of a Friday night boxing match in Vegas.

Ten minutes ago, Flynn and a few other guys I don't know wheeled folding chairs from a closet and positioned them around the boxing ring. Meanwhile, more new faces enter from the elevator or the stairs. Some of them grab chairs and take a seat.

"You look nervous, Willa." Graham says.

Feeling a knot twist in my stomach, I turn away from the crowd as more bodies join the fray. Teddy continues to tighten the laces around Graham's wrists. Enthusiasm radiating off him like a heat wave, Graham continues to bounce off the concrete floor on his toes, revving himself up. His broad shoulders stretch tightly against his t-shirt. He's in impeccable shape. Even through our clothes, the hard contours of his muscles had been impossible to ignore while our bodies were locked in that boxer's stance. But Graham's not as big as Julio, who might actually be bigger than Rafé. If I look nervous it's because I absolutely am.

"Are you any good at this?" I ask. Graham was already staring at me, but now so is Teddy. He's stopped working on the gloves and he looks puzzled. "I feel like I should ask, since..."

I don't finish because Teddy's standing with us and I already feel so awkward and out of place.

"This is her first time watching me fight, Teddy."

"Well, she's in for a treat then, huh Champ?" Teddy pats his gloves and says, "You're all set."

I feel somewhat relieved knowing Teddy is confident. According to the gym's website, the old trainer is a first-rate boxing coach and Teddy just called Graham, Champ. That's a good sign. It has to be.

"Don't look so scared, Tiger," Graham says when we're alone. "I can handle myself in the ring."

“Graham, he’s big.”

“I’ve fought bigger. It’s nice to know you’re concerned though.”

“I feel responsible. You’re only doing this because of the way he looked at me downstairs.”

A crooked smile splits his face. “Nah, that’s not it. You remember last night, when you asked me if I knew those two guys in the alley?”

It scares me more the day after to think about what could’ve happened to me behind the bar than it did while it was happening. I nod.

Graham plants both feet firmly on the floor. His arms drop and he crowds me. There’s a sinister look in his eyes. “I grew up with four sisters, Willa. Two older than me, and two younger. Those guys from last night, they work for him.” Graham points a glove at the ring where Julio’s climbing in between the robes. He leans into me and says, “In a few minutes, I’m going to get into that ring and teach Julio a lesson he’s never going to forget, and by extension, I’m going to show the two fuckers who came after you that there are rules. Break those rules, and I’ll deliver consequences even their boss can’t escape.”

My eyes go wide. “Wait, what?”

“Kiss for luck?” Graham says, glee once again brightening his brown eyes.

I'm still reeling from his revelation as he smiles broad and boastful at me. Jogging backwards for a few deft steps, Graham turns and continues over to the ring, pausing to punch the air with jabs of his fists.

All of a sudden the cacophony of sounds is deafening. Although I'm standing by myself at the edge of the room, I feel claustrophobic. I walk over to the chairs, searching for Flynn or Teddy in the crowd. I find them both at the corner of the ring, coaching Graham. I take one of the few remaining empty chairs in the middle row, next to one of the few remaining women in the room.

"Hello," she says.

"Hi, I hope this seat wasn't taken."

"No, you're fine."

I recognize her. She's the tall woman Graham met with earlier. Jess, I remember him saying.

"Um, I'm Willa."

"Willa Ryerson? Graham's new girlfriend?"

I frown. After just one day, my lie has ballooned beyond my intentions. Now even this random person thinks Graham and I are dating. How the hell do any of these known criminals get away with serious crimes when they all gossip this much?

Jess studies me, then she says, "You're from England right?"

Now, my brows narrow. Sure, some people can immediately tell where I grew up just from me saying certain words, but I hadn't said much to her. "How, how did you know that?"

She shrugs. "Oh, Graham must've told me."

That is bullshit. But I can't think of what she would gain from lying to me about that. Suspicious, I ask, "How do you know Graham?"

"He's my boss. Not here though." She breathes in deeply and says, "Actually, he just promoted me. I'm gonna be working at the Donovan Lounge."

"What's that?"

She gives me a skeptical look. "It's basically one of those exclusive social clubs. Except it's for these guys," she says, waving a finger around the room and I get the sense that she doesn't like the people around us very much. "Well, the ones with a high enough rank, anyway. The club is private. Membership there isn't just exclusive. It's like an initiation. On any given night there's nobody there but them, lots of girls, expensive drinks, and cigar smoke. Or that's what I've heard. I've never seen the inside of it myself."

"I guess they can keep some things a secret."

She laughs. "Maybe not for long, and definitely not forever."

"What does that mean?"

"Nothing," Jess says. "Just that no one outruns the inevitable."

Ranks. Private social clubs with exclusive member lists. Inevitable destinies, inescapable fates. The entire thing reminds me of why I left home after boarding school—minus the death threats and the dark allegiances. “Well, I hope the job works out for you.”

Immediately her eyes lock onto Graham. “Yeah,” she says. “Me too.”

A bell dings. Like a match, it sets off a roar from the crowd. Half the room starts chanting, “Killer, killer, killer”. Many of them pump their fists in the air. “Killer, killer, killer.” Like a pair of magnets, Graham and Julio skate towards each other, meeting Teddy in the center of the ring.

“Okay, everybody knows the rules. No bells. Each man fights like hell until the other concedes or can’t get off the mat,” Teddy says.

Graham and Julio nod their heads. They touch gloves, then Teddy backs away and Julio raises both arms. He slams his fists down on Graham’s and starts bounding around the ring. A small contingent of guys cheer. Julio rushes Graham and fires a shot at his midsection. His blow, the first blow connects solidly and I recoil. Graham absorbs the hit. He barely seems to move except for dancing on his toes with ease and grace. Julio charges him. Another right-handed punch is thrown, finding Graham’s jaw. It staggers him. I gasp. Tensing in the chair, my hands ball into fists on my lap. I squeeze my eyes shut.

“You okay?” Jess asks.

I feel her hand on mine. Looking over at her, I nod. “Yeah.”

“Don’t worry, your man’s got this. Watch.”

I clasp my fingers around Jess’s hand and hold on to her. Julio tries to punch Graham twice in the face, but he blocks one, and ducks out of the way of the other. The move leaves Julio off-balance and as if Jess had a crystal-ball view into the future, Graham fights back. He twists at the waist. A second later his fist cuts through the space between his and Julio’s body and hammers into Julio’s chin. The shot drops him flat on his back. Julio’s arms stretch out at his sides and he doesn’t move. Graham pounces and punches. Something wet hits my cheek and reflexively I react, rubbing my fingers over my face. When I pull my hand away, red smudges cover the tips of my fingers. I hear the sound of flesh being pounded. I look up and watch as Graham hammers Julio’s face.

Left fist, right fist, left again. More blood splatters across the mat and almost every other body in the room jeers at the sight. Julio’s men are horrified, their faces pale as if all the blood has drained out of their bodies. Gripped by fear, they watch as Graham destroys their boss’s face.

I can’t sit still for another minute. I have to get out of the room. Bolting from the chair, pushing through a couple of bodies, I hurry over to the locker rooms. The noise dies down. I slam my back against the wall, close my eyes and suck in air. Heat spreads over my skin. Some of the warmth stems from witnessing the savage beating. But I have to admit that the rest is a shameful amount of lust for Graham.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

GRAHAM

KNOCKING JULIO ON HIS ass took some suffering, and a huge dose of pretense on my part. For Julio, it required an overabundance of self-belief.

On the surface, Willa's doubt had merit. Julio is bigger than me. He's taller too, but all he knows is how to deal a heavy punch. His strikes punished my jaw, my sides. I suffered through the pain because I needed him to grow in confidence quickly. Once I made him believe he had the advantage over me, I didn't even have to put much thought into the execution. Landing that perfect uppercut to his chin felt like breathing. Truthfully, after I got in his head, it was no longer a fair fight. Still, Julio's a tough son of a bitch. He hasn't conceded yet, despite his face being bloodied. I know I broke his nose.

Hovering over him, I bring my forearm down on his throat. "You had two guys posted outside of Stevie's bar last night. Are they in here now?"

Julio chokes on his blood, spits up more. Slowly, he turns his head to the left side of the ring. I follow his stare to the

men gathered in his corner. I'm not convinced at all that they were just being opportunistic. A larger scheme could be playing out against me, or they might be gunning for my whole crew, my entire family. And Willa might have inadvertently stepped into it. Seeing the alarm on the faces of Julio's men warms my heart though.

I force my arm further up his throat. His chin juts out and he gags as I apply more pressure. "If you don't already know what happened in the alley last night, ask them. When they tell you what they almost did, I want you to think about this moment. The humiliation you're experiencing right now. Think about the pain you're feeling. Think about how I can keep my arm where it is until you never breathe again. And then, I expect you to make them pay for what *I* did to you today. For how badly I'm embarrassing you right here. Be. Vengeful. Julio. Do you understand?"

Feebly, Julio nods. He tries vocalizing, but all I hear is a strangled breath escaping his lips. Nodding as best as he can with my weight pinning him down, he taps my shoulder. Finally, he concedes.

I shove off him and onto my feet. The room explodes in hooting and hollering as Teddy raises my arm. Joining in their revelry, I holler right back at them and they roar louder at me. These are men I consider my family. What I did to Julio was just as much for them as it was for Willa and for me. I let their cheers wash over me. I soak it all in. Their shouts, their adoration.

Scanning their faces, I don't see Willa's among them. That doesn't surprise me. I wouldn't expect that she could sit through one of our fights. But a jolt of panic strikes me when I see that Jess's chair is empty too.

"That was brutal. Even for you, Graham," Teddy says, removing my mouth guard. "What the fuck did he do?"

"Something he shouldn't have." I smile. For an instant, a hint of nervousness betrays Teddy's stoic features. He whips the white towel from his shoulder and wipes blood off my gloves before letting me go over to my corner. I glance back at Julio getting picked up from the mat. "Make sure one of the guys cleans up this mess."

"Sure thing, Champ," Teddy says.

When I reach him, Flynn swallows me in a hug and messes up my hair. "Nice work, brother. You were a little too fast though."

"This one wasn't supposed to be entertaining. I was proving a point."

Flynn chuckles. "Always a fucking beast."

He opens the ropes and I climb through them. "Did you see where Willa and Jess went?" I ask him.

Already focusing on clearing the second floor, Flynn just points in the direction of the lockers. "Your girl took off and Jess went after her."

"You keeping an eye on her for me?"

Flynn pauses and looks at me. A few of the guys clap me on the shoulders as they walk by, offering congratulations before heading back downstairs.

“It wasn’t like that, Graham. I hope you know that.”

I nudge him in the chest with a fist. Teddy must’ve missed a spot because when I take my fist away, my glove leaves a smear of blood on his shirt. “Yeah, I get it, but she’s off-limits, Flynn. Let everybody know.”

He nods and I leave him to go find Willa. The warning isn’t just bravado. It’s practical. Both Willa and Jess are liabilities for me and a danger to themselves—Willa more so because unlike Jess, she hasn’t fully comprehended all she has to lose.

I enter the hallway that leads to the sauna and the lockers. Jess sees me coming first. Willa has her back against the wall, clutching her midsection.

“Hey, look. Graham’s here,” Jess says.

Willa looks down the hallway at me and straightens. Biting her lip, she watches as I approach her. “I told you not to worry,” I say to her, tapping her on the thigh.

Chest still heaving, immediately Willa turns and walks through the locker room doors. I get a sinking feeling in my stomach. The urge to follow her nearly overtakes me, but I need to handle Jess first.

Arms crossed before her chest, the undercover police officer actively trying to infiltrate my crew says, “She’s okay now. I talked to her.”

“What about?”

“Hey, I’m not gonna risk our deal over your latest fuck toy.” Jess sighs. “I’ll see you at The Donnie tonight. I’m gonna go now. You’ll have something concrete I can use on the Garzas?”

“I will.”

Jess steps by me. “For what it’s worth,” she says, continuing to walk to the exit. “She’s actually a nice girl. Way too good for the likes of you, if you ask me.”

My mouth opens to fire back at her critique but I holster the protest and push open the swing door to the changing rooms. Provoking my enemy while I’m using them against another isn’t a smart move. Besides, whether Jess believes I’m worthy of being with someone good is pointless. I already know that I’m not.

Willa’s sitting on the bench in front of my locker, bending over with her palms pressing on the cushioned seat. She doesn’t look at me when I draw near. She’s probably hoping I unlock my locker and hand over her gym bag so she can leave.

I straddle the bench next to her. Resting an elbow on my knee, I bend forward so I can get a better look at her face hiding behind all that glorious black hair. With my other glove, I brush aside her long ponytail. “Your little adventures in courting bad boys finally over, Tiger?”

She turns her face up at me. Her cheeks are flushed, and it might be my imagination but I swear her lips are plump like they were when I first saw her making out with Rafé last night.

“There are all kinds of bad boys out there, Graham. You’re just one type.”

Until now, Willa’s been a pain in my ass, an innocent thing playing with falling knives. Her words catch me so off guard, they force me to sit up. She doesn’t feel so much like a princess anymore, or like someone I could never be worthy of no matter how hard I tried. She’s real. I can touch her and she might even feel me.

I notice my mouth going dry and how my throat is tight. My pulse is racing faster, but more notably, my cock’s getting hard from how beautiful she looks. How sexy she smells. What I think she might look like naked.

Willa even provokes daydreams. I’m imagining fucking her on this bench. Bent over on all fours. Sitting on me with legs tucked behind my back. Her on top of me. Me on top of her. No matter the position, she feels good. Her pussy is tight around my swollen cock and she’s wet. Feeling every inch of me inside her, she screams my name as I make her come and clench around my shaft, drenching me in her warm juices.

Suddenly, Willa reaches for my face and I freeze. Her fingers touch my jaw. “Are you hurt anywhere else, or just here?” she asks me as her thumb grazes my lip.

The cut is inside my mouth, but she must be able to see signs of the wound. It isn’t painful and it’s only now I taste a

hint of blood on my tongue. I shove her hand away. “Jess said she had to talk to you, but that you’re okay now. So, are you?”

Twisting towards me, she draws in a deep breath and smooths a palm down the length of her ponytail, twirling her fingers through the curls. Her chest rises with the action and my imagination starts running wild again.

Instead of lowering her arms to her sides, Willa drops them on my shoulders and climbs onto me, straddling my hips. I grab her, clumsily holding her up, my boxing gloves robbing me of the feel of her body in my hands.

She lowers her mouth, but I jerk away. Confused, her gaze narrows and her eyes search mine. “What’s the matter? Oh my gosh, do you have a real girlfriend?”

“No. I don’t.”

“Then what’s wrong?”

She was. A thousand times over, she was. When I told Flynn that Willa was off-limits, it wasn’t just a warning for him and the rest of the crew. It was also a reminder to me. “Julio must’ve gotten me in the side,” I say to her.

Willa eases out of my arms. Gently, she presses her fingers against my ribs. I watch her, wanting to forget all the reasons she’s wrong. Pulling in a sharp breath, I feel my tongue lick my lips.

“Does it hurt when I do this?” she asks.

I chuckle. “You didn’t go to Northwestern to be a nurse, Willa.”

She stops poking me, takes her hand away and huffs. “You’re not actually injured are you?”

Shaking my head, I place my hands between us. “Willa Ryerson, I told you, you’re not my type.”

A coy smile tugs at her lips. “Wow,” she says, then laughs. “Okay, I guess it’s all in my head then.”

I detect the note of sarcasm in her voice. I’d bet everything I own she’s never had a man reject her before. Left to its own will, my cock would have us living out my fantasy from moments earlier. It’s tempting, but when my life is over Willa Ryerson will be a footnote in it.

Besides, I have to sort things out with Molly. We may never have called ourselves boyfriend and girlfriend, but seeing her reaction this morning, Molly might have stronger feelings about us than I thought.

“You mind unlacing these for me? I’ll get your bag out of the locker.”

She seems surprised. Her eyebrow quirks up. Nevertheless, she loosens the gloves. “How soon can I have my license back? I might need it tonight.”

“You hooking up with Rafé at the Blue Moon again? Say hello for me.”

Not looking up at me she says, “If I see him again, I will.”

That was a joke, right? It had to be. There’s no way she would dare go back to him. Not after the way he just left her in the alley like that. *Would she?*

“All done,” Willa says. “Time for me to go.”

Few words pass between us after that. Every time I make a funny remark that Willa doesn't acknowledge with a giggle, I worry that I might have pissed her off. *Shit!* I hate the way that worry makes me feel, but it's probably for the best. I have Jimmy's bachelor party to attend tonight and I need to have the Garza situation wrapped up before his wedding.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

WILLA

NO MATTER WHAT GRAHAM says, it isn't just in my head. The way he punished Julio's face to teach him and his men a lesson. The way he acted in front of me around his best friend. From the way he looks at me alone, I know he wants me just as much as I want him.

Sitting in the back of the Uber, I sigh. My phone vibrates in my hand and I read the text from Jess reminding me to send her my address. I send her a text back with my information and a question. The three little dots in the bubble pop up on my screen and I wait. A minute later, she assures me that Patrick Donovan will be at his nephew's bachelor party at the club tonight—for a little while at least. When she asks me why I was so keen to meet him, I ignore her question.

Researching a criminal enterprise takes a lot of work. I sat down behind my desk three hours ago after getting home from the gym and didn't get up again until my stomach started to complain. Opting to make myself something substantial to eat, I prepare a big bowl of ramen noodles with some leftover

rotisserie chicken, two soft boiled eggs, and a few slices of jalapeños for heat.

I turn my attention to Justin O'Rourke, slurping my soup and watching his campaign videos on my phone. Remembering the words Patrick Donovan spoke to the mayor when they thought they were alone gives me chills now that I know more about what the man is capable of. But walking away from what this all means makes me feel like a fucking coward, and I hate that feeling more.



“This place of yours is amazing, Willa. My college dorm room was nothing like this. It’s really good being rich, isn’t it?” Jess continues gazing around my apartment. She seems especially taken with the view from the living room. “I’m jealous. I’m almost thirty and I have a little matchbox. It’s got a couple of windows where I can see the neighbors walking by outside. Just their legs.”

Jess laughs and I smile, stepping into my heels. For the last couple of years, I’ve lived in this apartment. I wanted it for the view and, if I’m honest, the isolation. Social interaction with your classmates has a lot of value. It adds to that full college experience, I’m sure, but I don’t feel like I’ve lost out on anything by living away from campus. I’m going to miss this place.

“So are you gonna be a journalist?”

I almost confess the truth to Jess. That I'll probably be miles away, living in Washington D.C., working for some former politician's son who needs to clean up his image before embarking on a campaign of his own. Instead, I feel close enough to Jess to share a dream of mine from years ago. "Yeah, I'm thinking maybe an investigative journalist."

She looks at me. "Really? I would have pegged you to be one of those tv news anchors."

Looking at myself in the mirror, I frown. "Not even when I was young I wanted to do that."

When I turn around Jess wasn't gazing out the window anymore. Her head's down and her finger rests on my handwritten notes about Patrick Donovan. Going over to her, I close the notebook and stuff them in my drawer. "Is this why you invited me out tonight? To get to know me better? To spy on me for Graham?"

Jess balks. "Willa, I like you. I'm not spying on you for your boyfriend," she says. "But let me warn you if your big idea was to fuck Graham Tate to get information on Patrick Donovan then I'd strongly advise against it. These people are dangerous, Willa. Graham included. No amount of pillowtalk with him is gonna get you the dirt you're looking for."

"Graham's not a monster," I fire back. "There are worse people living in this building than Graham Tate. Besides, my interview is with the mayor. I don't even care about Patrick Donovan." Jess continues to give me a skeptical look. Something really awful could've happened to me, but Graham

came back and saved me. He protected me. He still is. I know there's more to my defense than having an attachment because he rescued me last night, but I put aside those other feelings—for now anyway. Rationally speaking, Graham's heroic. "Look, if you don't believe me, then why don't you go to the club without me."

She sighs and says, "Something about you is so off. Why would you even date a guy like Graham?"

I raise an eyebrow at her. *Because he's fucking hot. That's why.* "Are you kidding me?"

Jess shakes her head, laughing. "Okay, I get it. The man looks like he was carved out of stone and from what *they* say he's carrying a lot of weight down there and he knows exactly how to use it," she says, which causes my body to react in unspeakable ways. "Willa, he's an enforcer for the mafia and you are not of this world."

I let her finish. Let her words hang in the air between us for a while, then I say, "What's the part about him carrying a lot of weight down there again?"

I grin and Jess laughs. "Yeah, you're just dickmatized like the rest of them."

Despite the seriousness of Jess's question and her words of caution, we can laugh about the situation. We plan to eat dinner and then head to the Donovan Lounge. While we're in her car, Jess makes a few more inquiries about me and Graham. She makes another plea for me to be careful around him and Patrick.

I take notice of some of the things Jess says, how she seems to know things about me that she shouldn't. How, when she excluded me from Graham's world she included herself in it.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

GRAHAM

AS JIMMY'S BEST MAN, Carey took complete control of all the bachelor party plans. We're only a third of the way through the evening's festivities which always begins with a gathering inside the Donovan Lounge. It's customary for all the guys in the crew. After we leave here, our numbers will dwindle as we move from location to location.

"And these are from my personal stash," Carey says, handing out bags of little pills to all the guys inside the billiards room. Although the private club caters to some of Chicago's most prolific dealers, The Donnie prohibits drug use on the premises to limit our exposure to dumb cops trying to flex their muscles. When Carey reaches Jimmy, Flynn and me, he sticks his fingers inside his breast pocket and presents three blue-tinted bags. "I saved these for us."

Flynn spits out his cigar and takes two of the bags, offering one to Jimmy beside him. "Thank you very much," he says. Flynn shakes out two of the pills. They had the Superman

emblem stamped on them. He places both on his tongue and briefly shuts his eyes.

Nonplussed, Jimmy stuffs the drugs in his pocket, then guzzles the whiskey in his hand and heads over to the bar, taking Flynn along with him. I snatch my bag from Carey's hand. He knows better than to bring this shit inside the club. One dumb move and we're fighting petty drug charges and opening ourselves up to stiffer investigations. "Seriously?" I ask him.

"Come on, Graham. It's his fucking bachelor party. Take the pills."

Letting out a long breath, I pry open the bag and take a couple of the pills. "Okay, give me whatever else you have on you that can get us into some shit tonight." When he scoffs, I lower my voice. "Now."

Emptying his pockets, Carey dumps more of the bags onto the billiards table. "That's everything," he says. "Jimmy, how much longer are we gonna be stuck here? Graham's not having any fun. I think he's jonesing to see Molly already."

Jimmy and Flynn chuckle. Scooping up the bags of Ecstasy, I head for the door. "Come find me, later. I need to take care of a few things before we can go."

The guys all nod, except for Carey. He grins. Raising his drink in the air, he shouts, "Next stop, tits and asses."

Raucous laughter and the typical jeers erupt inside the room. The guys are so hyped up, I can still hear them on my

way down to the security room. I stroll the halls, passing twenty-foot tall wood-paneled walls crossing over hundred year old marble floors. While you're in the club, you're surrounded by opulence and history.

There are guys from our operations with expensive cigars between their fingers. Some I recognize, a handful that I don't. We exchange nods and go about our business. Everywhere you turn, dozens of girls in tight outfits wander from room to room. I wouldn't mind getting to know them, especially the ones fucking me with their eyes. I gaze back, but don't indulge any further. With so many people here tonight, security is the priority.

I make a brief stop in the kitchen, then the men's room. Punching in the five-digit code outside the security room, I unlock the door and enter. My guys are stationed in front of the screens, monitoring practically every inch of the building. Jose spins in his chair and nods at me. Angling by him and Alex, I go over to the safe and press my thumb on the scanner. The door clinks open and I deposit all of Carey's contraband inside. I'll come back and remove them tomorrow. "Hey, have either of you seen Jess come in," I ask.

"Yeah," Jose answers. "She walked in about five minutes ago...with a friend."

My gaze rises up, uneasiness immediately tying my stomach in knots. "Was she with one of the girls from Vice? Someone you know?"

"No, never seen her before."

“Shit,” I say, slamming the door shut on the safe. “Show me the video of them coming in.”

Jose switches the image on the screen directly in front of us. I rest one hand on the desk and the other on the back of his chair, my fingers tapping the leather cushion. Second by second as Jose rolls back the video feeds, I tap faster.

“Here we go,” he says. “There. There they are.” My hand settles and my finger grips the chair the instant I see Willa come into view. Jose zooms in on her face. “Damn, is she one of the new girls here? I hope so because I’m gonna need her phone number.”

I give Jose a pointed look. “Where are they now?”

He wipes the smile from his face and turns around. After a few minutes he locates Willa and Jess by the bar in the Redd Holt Room. I sprint out to the hall and race back up the stairs. Immediately, I see Jess coming straight for me.

“Okay, I’m here,” she says.

“Why is Willa with you?”

She rolls her eyes. “She’s just tagging along. Give me what I came here for.”

I reach inside my pocket and hand over the drive to Jess. “There’s enough on this to form a solid case.”

“How did you get your hands on the Garzas’ info, Graham?” she says looking down at the drive in her hands.

“You should probably get that to someone tonight.”

She raises her head and says, “Is that your polite way of telling me to leave?”

“Trust has to go both ways, Jess. I’m handing over useful information to you. Now use it, and do what I tell you to do when I tell you to do it. Keeping your secret can get me killed. You take out the Garzas and the others for me—“

“Others? You have dirt on other crews?”

“Yes, Officer Cruz, and you can have all of it once you show me you can get this done.” I point at the drive with the information on the Garzas. “Do that and the job inside The Donnie is yours.”

“Hey, that wasn’t the deal.”

“It is now. Get the Garzas, get the job. You should go.”

Jess stuffs the drive in her pocket and sighs. “I have to get Willa.”

I shake my head. “I’ll take care of her. You should go take care of that before someone here finds you with it and gets curious.”

She doesn’t like how tonight has turned out, but she knows better than to force her hand. I leave Jess and head towards the Holt Room. Lurking inside the doorway, I spot Willa with the bartender. I pull in a breath, let it out through my mouth and my shoulders relax despite fearing that the undercover cop might be using Willa to gain leverage over me.

Approaching the bar, my eyes rove over Willa. Once again her ass has a stranglehold on my stare. Creeping up from

behind, I crowd the back of her. She doesn't notice me and I lower my face to her ear as she brings her glass to her lips. "What are you doing here?" I ask.

Willa nearly spits out her drink. I hold the small of her back and she turns around, coughing. Her face is flushed, giving me a glimpse of what she might look like while in the middle of a climax.

My hand travels up to her side. I touch her cheek. Willa's brown eyes are slightly hooded but they sparkle in the light. My breath hitches in my throat. I brush her face. Her skin is so soft, it tingles mine. "Are you alright?" I ask.

Looking up at me, she nods. "You scared me."

She smiles and I grin back. Suddenly desperate to continue feeling the electric charge passing through our skin, I keep running my fingers across her cheek and I keep feeling the current between us knifing through my body. *Fuck, Carey!* His drugs are kicking in. "You look so beautiful, Willa."

She leans her face into my palm and her warmth lights my body on fire. I can't take my eyes off hers. I want to kiss her, fuck her. I want her to love me. Worse, I want to try to love her. Something I swore I'd never do. Not just with her, but with every woman.

My phone rings and it finally breaks the spell Willa has over me. I pull my hand away and reach inside my pocket. Sucking in a breath—the first one I think I might've taken in the last couple of minutes—I answer, my voice rough with annoyance. "Who's this?"

“It’s me,” Patrick says. “Come up here. I want to talk to both of you.”

My boss hangs up and I look over my shoulder to the balcony. Patrick steps closer to the glass railing surrounding his booth. He points two fingers at me, then at Willa before he uses them to summon us. I put my phone away. Facing Willa again, I take her hand and interlace our fingers. “Grab your purse and come with me.”

Before we get to the elevator, I duck into a corner of the hallway where I know the cameras won’t record us. My heart pounds against my chest. I try to think fast but all my mind keeps running back to is that I have to protect her. “Willa, I need you to really listen to me now. Patrick’s going to tell you not to do the interview and you have to agree, okay?”

Willa looks from my eyes to our hands, and back to hold my stare again. “Okay,” she says.

I let go of the breath. “Thank you.”

Her eyes flit between mine and our hands. “Graham, you’re acting weird. Are you okay?” She reaches out for me. Her finger grazes my jaw and my eyelids flutter, almost shutting. The party drugs are heightening all my senses, corrupting my emotions. But it’s not just that. It’s Willa too. *Shit, it’s all because of her.*

From the secret nook in the hallway to the elevator to Patrick’s private booth, I refuse to let go of Willa’s hand. We walk in together and I don’t break our connection until she takes the chair next to my boss. He hands her a champagne

flute and Willa takes it. “It’s good to see you two here. But why is she here, Graham? This is a bachelor party. Not the wedding,” Patrick chuckles and looks from me to her, leaning in. “No girls allowed.”

Willa giggles. She surveys the lounge from the overlook and says, “I see plenty of girls here, Patrick.”

He points at her, looking at me. “You landed yourself a real smart one. College girls, huh? She reminds me of my Melissa.”

I hover by Willa’s side, fixated on her and fighting to get a grip on my emotions. They fight me back and I move closer to Willa. Before I can get a word out, she says, “Mr. Donovan, Graham mentioned that you might have some concerns about my interview with the next mayor. I want you to know that I’ll call his office tomorrow and let him know I’m not interested in doing it anymore.”

“No, no,” Patrick says. “I want you to do the interview.”

“You do?” I blurt out.

Patrick takes a sip of his champagne, giving me a second to tame my heart rate. *I’m gonna need an hour to do that.*

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

GRAHAM

ACROSS FROM ME IN the elevator, Willa smiles from ear to ear. “So, it looks like I get what I want after all.”

She laughs and I’m so high that I start laughing. Patrick changing his mind is a relief. He doesn’t see her journalism or the article as a threat anymore, but she’s not in the clear yet. Regardless of what he says now, Patrick can find a number of different reasons to think this is a bad idea for him.

Slumping against the wall, I rake my fingers through my hair. “Ah,” I groan, my body full of cum and frustration.

“What’s the matter, Graham?”

“You. You’re born rich and fucking gorgeous. The world just falls at your feet, doesn’t it?”

Her smile has morphed into a coy, sexy as hell grin. I want to fall at her feet and bury my face in her pussy. My cock pushes against my pants. *Goddamn Carey*. The fact that she can seduce me while we’re three feet apart doesn’t bode well

for a hands off approach to dealing with my Willa problem. “Don’t look at me like that right now, Tiger.”

“Why not, Graham?” she says, eyeing me like she’s about to eat me alive. Not only would I let her devour me, I’d welcome every second of it and thank her when she’s done.

The elevator stops and the doors roll open to the main lounge. Eyes locked on each other, neither of us move until I punch the close button and press the one for the garage. I forgot I have to get her out of here. And on top of that, there’s not enough willpower in me to keep from making another huge mistake with Willa. My fingers are twitching, hopeful they might have another chance to touch her.

We exit at the garage level. Willa walks one step ahead of me. Of course, my eyes are watching every move she makes. So when she stops suddenly, I stop as well. “Where are you taking me tonight, Graham? Back to your place for some of your delicious eggplant parmigiana?”

We chuckle at her joke. Shaking my head, I ask the question that’s been gnawing at me since I saw her on the security video. “Why did you come here, Willa?”

She licks her lips. “I wanted to see you again.”

Fuck. It’s the answer I didn’t know I wanted to hear. Now that I have, I cut the distance between us and grant my fingers their wish. They trace her cheek, her chin, her bottom lip. She turns her face and slowly takes my thumb into her mouth, her gaze never straying from mine.

Willa moans around my thumb in her wet mouth. I fantasize about her pussy being wetter and my cock damn near explodes. Leaning into her, I fist her hair while my other hand grabs her ass. There's no more separation between our bodies. She needs to know what she's doing to me. She snakes her arms around my back. "Kiss me," she says and to my ears it sounds like she's begging me.

"Is that what you want from me, Little Tiger? Sweet kisses and a rock-hard cock?"

Not even remotely interested in the answer, I yank her into me. Our mouths crash together. At last, I'm tasting her and if I was expecting it to be like a ten, I'm soaring through triple digits. *Is this what Heaven feels like?* With all the fucked up shit I've done in my life, I never thought I'd come close to experiencing it. But here I am, floating like there are wings on my fucking ankles.

When she gasps, I steal the tiny breath that escapes her lips like it's my only chance to keep living. I start to panic knowing this kiss will never be enough to satisfy my craving for her. We finally break apart and Willa slumps in my arms. She gulps. Mouth slightly open, she pants and I dive back for more. Swallowing her mouth again, this time Willa is the one who doesn't hold back.

She grinds her hips against my cock and a low, mean groan rumbles in the back of my throat. "Fuckkkkkk," I whisper. Every inch of me is switched the fuck on and I fight like hell now to slow the heat igniting my veins like wildfire.

“Graham,” Willa says. Her brown eyes are dreamy and her lips are plump. “Cook something for me. Tomorrow night. You can explain if that’s a good fuck or a bad fuck.”

I sigh and press my mouth along her jaw. Nuzzling my face by her ear, I tell her, “Don’t ever come back to The Donnie without me or my permission. And stop being friends with Jess.”

“I like Jess.”

I kiss her throat, suck and lick her skin. “I’m gonna have one of my guys take you home.”

She groans. “Stop pushing me away, Graham.”

I do exactly what she asks me not to. I break the embrace, detaching our bodies with the exception of our hands. She doesn’t protest but she does drag her feet a bit, slowing us down as we walk towards the garage.

“Graham, please,” she whines.

The woman is such a fucking brat. Right now I love it. Tomorrow when I wake up from this high, I won’t. Leading her through the door, the cracks in my resolve grow deeper the closer I get to telling her goodnight.

“Tomorrow night, Graham. Please.”

I chuckle. “Sammy, take my girlfriend home and nowhere else, please.” I give him Willa’s address. He nods, cracks open the back door for her. Willa gives me that same look from inside the elevator and I fucking crumble. Two seconds later, I

hear myself telling Sammy, “Pick her up at the same place tomorrow night. Seven o’clock?” I ask her.

“Seven o’clock works for me.” Smiling, Willa hooks her arm around my neck and tries to give me a quick kiss. I stop her from leaving me too soon, but our new kiss gets interrupted anyway.

The garage door swings open loudly. Flynn, Carey and Jimmy lead the way as the others file out into the parking structure. “Oh, no wonder you’re not answering anybody’s call,” Jimmy says.

“Sorry, it must be the bad reception in the building. I didn’t hear my phone ring.”

“Is this one of the new girls?” Carey asks. “She can ride with me. You work at Vice, honey?”

Flynn taps him on the chest and shakes his head. “No, man. She doesn’t.”

I usher Willa into the car and watch as she buckles herself in. “No detours, okay?”

“I’ll be good,” she says.



Willa and I are a major topic of conversation with the guys for several minutes as we drive from The Donnie to Vice. Without the euphoria from the drugs and Willa, my face would normally be unreadable. But I show more enthusiasm for the bullshit story about her being my girlfriend than I should.

“Hey, let me know if you need me to do anything about Molly tonight,” Flynn says.

“Look at this,” I say to him and show him the rows of calls I made to Molly all afternoon. All of them went to voicemail. “She’s pissed at me about Willa. Patrick let it slip this morning while she was at my apartment.”

Flynn nods. The SUV maneuvers through a section of uneven road and rocks us from side to side. Moments later, he says, “So, Molly knows about her. Does she know about Molly?”

His question has an unspoken message in it: My Little Tiger will never accept my dating rules. It might also be Flynn’s way of letting me know that if I fuck things up with Willa for even a minute, he’ll be there to comfort her.



Like the lounge, the strip club belongs to us tonight. As we walk in, the music blasts through the speakers courtesy of the DJ. The dancers applaud us. They’ve been waiting. As soon as we storm in, everyone fans out and takes one or more of the dancers with them. No one looks twice at Molly, so she has no other choice but to talk to me.

Standing by herself on the stage, I walk up to her with my hands in my pockets. I loosen my tie. “Why didn’t you pick up any of my calls, Mol? I said I’d call.”

She shifts her weight onto one leg with her arms crossed before her. “I’m not going with you.”

“Come on, baby. I’m high right now. I just want to watch you take your clothes off and dance for me.” I offer her my hand. “I brought a lot of cash and I’m feeling generous. Please, baby. My dick’s been hard since I left The Donnie.”

Molly rolls her eyes.

“Look,” I say. “None of the other guys are gonna come within ten feet of you tonight. You want to be pissed at me? Fine. Be pissed while I’m fucking you so hard you scratch my back up again.”

She tries to suppress the grin. Molly giggles when I grab her and hoist her in the air. Carrying her over my shoulder, she yelps when I slap her ass. I can’t wait to turn both her cheeks pink with my handprints.

In the reserved room, Molly gives me the private show I need to somewhat cure me of my Willa hangover. Except for her skyhigh heels and my tie resting around her waist, she’s naked. Freshly waxed. When I questioned her about all that extra emotion from this morning, Molly admitted she was upset at first, but later went to get her pussy done because she expected us to fuck tonight.

“Come here, let me feel that pussy.”

Molly rests a knee between my thighs, kisses me on the lips. “Not yet. First, I’m gonna suck all eight beautiful inches of your dick. Would you like that?”

“You know I love it when I hit the back of your throat. You gonna be a good girl and let me fuck that mouth? Come on,

show me how much you like my big cock inside you.”

Molly moans and I can see how bad she wants me. She quickly crouches down in front of me and starts unbuckling my belt. She grips me in her hand, frees my cock and I groan. For a flash of a moment, I think of Willa.

“You ready for me, baby?” Molly says and I blink. Returning to the room and the woman I’m with, I level my gaze on her. We lock eyes as she runs her tongue from the base of my cock to the tip. She moans and I grab the back of her head, eager to close my eyes and imagine me, Molly, and Willa in a threesome while her mouth is on me.

“Wait,” she says. “I want you to take me.”

“Okay.” I lean forward and reach for her arms.

“No, Graham. I mean I want you to take me to Jimmy’s wedding.”

There isn’t going to be a plus one for me at the wedding. “We’ll talk about it later.”

“No, I want to know now that you’ll take me instead of Willa.”

“Fuck, Molly. Not this shit with Willa again?” I settle back into the sofa and try to take her with me. But she stiffens in my hands. I pull her towards me again, but harder. No, not harder. I’m insistent and in spite of her resistance, I easily bring her lips to mine. “Willa’s not coming with me to the wedding. No one is.”

“That’s not what everybody’s saying,” Molly whispers against my mouth. “Dani told me that Leanna updated the guest list. She said Patrick told her to.”

“What? When?”

“I don’t give a fuck when. Why don’t you stop lying to me.” She rips out of my arms. My head is pounding. The instant headache stabs my skull so hard, I have to squint to be able to see Molly. Her face is a mixture of desperation and anger. “Take me, Graham.”

My blood pressure rises. Not in a good way. I don’t like this behavior from Molly and I don’t like being backed into corners. She knows that. *Why the fuck is she acting like this?* “No,” I tell her.

She scoffs. “Daddy wouldn’t approve, huh? Fine. We’re done, Graham. Leave my money on the table. She can have you and your daddy issues.”

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

WILLA

PLANNING TO ARRIVE FOR dinner at Graham's a little later than the agreed time, I took a few extra moments to look my damn best for him. My heels are high. My hemline reaches the middle of my thighs, and I know I've chosen the right dress because Sammy, despite trying not to, continues eyeing me in the rear view mirror.

Excitement and anticipation surge through me as I ride the elevator up to the top floor. For all his talk about my apartment, Graham lives in a penthouse, in a nicer building than mine. That doesn't surprise me. His suits, that red sports car. They all signal that he not only has money, but he likes to spend it on flashy things.

Stepping off the elevator, I strut up to his door at 7:20 pm. When I knock, Graham pulls open the door after a couple of seconds. He's wearing a tight black dress shirt with the top two buttons undone and a pair of black slacks.

"You're late, Tiger." I'm beginning to adore the names he calls me. They make my knees weak when he says them in

that low voice. And when he smiles at me like he's doing right now, my heart rate spikes. What if I'm falling for Graham? *Oh mercy*. Checking his watch, he says. "Even though *you* can't tell time, I'll forgive you because you look so amazing in that dress."

"I thought you'd like this one, so it's the one I wanted on me tonight." Because I want him to rip it off me, of course. "I'm glad I have confirmation."

Graham chuckles. "Come in. Please."

I smirk and take a couple of steps into the apartment. I start to feel giddier about our dinner. Since I like Graham so much, I know it'll be okay when I lose my virginity to him. Better than that, I can see myself being with him, even introducing him to my mother if I decide to spend more than the summer in Chicago.

Graham has enough style and sophistication to fool her for a while. She wouldn't immediately dismiss him based on his appearance like she would Rafé. Of course, there's his gorgeous face. But Graham also wears expensive suits. He has no visible tattoos and he knows how to navigate social parties like the ones my mum pushes me to be a part of.

No one in my world would ever suspect Graham of being a criminal. All I'd have to do is make up some story about why his boxing gym is so successful that he could afford all this. My mother wouldn't care to look very deep.

Although the aroma of fresh tomatoes and herbs is intoxicating, the view from beyond the living room steals my

attention. The doors lead to a stone patio. There are cushioned chairs, a fire pit, and a hundred and eighty degrees of Lake Michigan.

“You like what you’ve seen of my place, so far?”

I glance at him over my shoulder. “It’s okay.”

Grinning and shaking his head, he says, “I was never expecting to impress a princess like you. How many balls have you been to all your life?”

I laugh. “Stop being so sensitive, I was just joking. This is stunning. I want to go out there.”

With my eyes trained on the patio, I take off for the french doors. Graham catches my arm. “Hang on. There’s something I need to clear up about last night. You want some wine?”

I nod. Graham heads to the kitchen and I follow him. “The food smells amazing.”

He points to the counter. “You asked for that back,” he says.

Sliding onto the stool across from a pile of grated parmesan cheese on a cutting board, I pick up my driver’s license. I slip the ID card into my purse while Graham busies himself with removing the cork from a bottle of red wine. “Why did you steal it in the first place?”

“Because I’m a thief. That’s what thieves do,” he says, chuckling.

I grin. “What else do you steal? Hearts?”

A smile tugs at the side of his lips. “Haven’t stolen one of those yet,” he says.

Resting my chin in my palm, I watch him, dreaming about lying in his arms later tonight. Since I left him at The Donnie, I haven’t been able to stop thinking about him. I spent the entire day thinking about having sex with him. Wondering what kind of lover he’ll be in bed with me. I’m leaning towards the rough type who grabs your throat while he’s hammering you senseless. I’m predicting multiple orgasms for me, especially since my panties are already soaked.

I might still be a virgin, but I’ve kissed lots of guys and gotten close to cutting up my v-card a few times. Many of my boyfriends didn’t mind waiting a while because I sucked them off. My mouth salivates just thinking about sucking Graham off. At this point, I want to forget about dinner and get him out of those pants.

“This probably won’t impress you either, Tiger,” Graham says as he pours wine into two glasses. He lifts one of them and hands it to me. “I think it’s rich-girl approved. But I hope you like it.”

Graham picks up his glass and walks around the counter. He stops in front of me. “Cheers.”

I clink my glass against his and say, “Cheers.” He waits for me to drink. I take a small sip and the juicy flavors of the wine are incredible together. The acids are so well-balanced. I can’t even pretend to not love it. “Wow. This is amazing.”

“I thought you’d like this one the best, so that’s why I chose it.”

Graham finally takes a mouthful of the wine, his gaze wandering from my eyes to my lips. He rests his glass on the counter and clears his throat. His features morph from the coy, sexy looks he’s been giving me into something unreadable . “Willa, last night was,” he pauses. “That kiss was...”

Amazing! Everything I’ve ever wanted. Hot! All of the above! Yes, it was all of that and more.

He sighs and says, “It was Jimmy’s bachelor party. I had a little Ecstasy and I was feeling... a lot of things.” As he continues, my heart sinks with each word he tries to use to explain to me that what I felt as this amazing connection between us wasn’t really that at all. “If I wasn’t high, I probably wouldn’t have kissed you and I probably wouldn’t have agreed to having dinner with you at all tonight.”

No! Don’t tell me that. Don’t break my heart.

Graham touches me on the hip and says, “Hey, but I’m glad you’re here anyway. And Teddy wasn’t joking. I am a really good cook. You’re gonna love this dinner.”

NO! Don’t be the hero again too! Mentally, I scream. But I hope my face isn’t falling apart. I suck in my bottom lip and hold it with my teeth so I’m not pouting.

The timer in the kitchen goes off and Graham looks over to the oven. “That’s the parmigiana.” On his way, he grabs oven mitts, then removes the baking dish from the oven. The

wonderful aroma of the roasted vegetables and sauces intensifies around us. I get up from my stool and walk over to the living room. “You don’t mind extra cheese on yours do you?”

“No, I love cheese,” I say, trying to smile so he doesn’t hear my disappointment.

I want to cry. Graham’s not marriage material either, but I really wanted this. I imagined it being beautiful and memorable. I feel hopeless now. Guzzling the wine until my glass is empty, I force back my tears. I sulk by myself in the living room until Graham invites me to the table.



If I don’t stop to think about Graham rejecting me again, I’m having a good time. Just from the stories he’s told me tonight about himself, I could write a book. A thin one. And he really is a good cook. It’s not fair that someone else will get to eat dinners he lovingly makes for them when the food tastes this good and he only made it for me as an apology.

From the dinner table, we move to the living room. “You want another glass of wine?” Graham asks.

I stare at my glass. There’s two, maybe three more mouthfuls left in it. Sighing, I shake my head. He pours the rest of the wine into his glass and sits beside me. “It’s a clear night. You still want to go out on the patio.”

My enthusiasm for Graham, his penthouse patio, our dinner has all waned. “No, another time maybe.”

With the wine glass in his hand, he settles into the sofa beside me with a grin on his face and says, “Okay, maybe.”

I catch myself too late. Shaking my head, I say, “No, I didn’t mean to sound like I was inviting myself over.” Graham chuckles—probably at the sight of me blushing. I groan, pick up my glass. I don’t stop drinking until all the wine is gone. Feeling foolish, I roll my eyes at myself. “I don’t even care anymore.”

“What’s that?” Graham says.

I set my glass down and look at him. “What is wrong with me, Graham? Why can’t you just...”

Frustrated, I turn away. I can’t bring myself to finish my second embarrassing question. And I can’t bring myself to look him in the eyes again. If I do, I think I’ll cry. Graham’s glass appears in my view as he places it on the table next to mine. I feel the cushion shift underneath me and his body settling next to me. His hand captures my chin and he turns my face toward his.

When our eyes lock, I swear I’m pouting more than any other time in my life. But at least I hold back the tears. Graham pulls me close. Was he going to kiss me out of pity?
Fuck that!

“Would you rather that I hadn’t have been honest with you about last night?”

Yes. “No,” I say.

A crooked smile spreads across Graham's face. "Now that I've gotten to know you a little better, Willa, it's easier to tell when you're lying." He chuckles. "Let me try again. Would you like me to kiss you now?"

My chest rises. I nod.

"Yeah?" he asks.

"Yes." I climb onto him. With my legs spread, the hem on my dress rides up to my hips. Gazing in his eyes, I bury my fingers in his hair and he tugs on the zipper at the back of my neck. "Call me, Tiger," I whisper against his lips.

"Do you like that?"

"No. I only like it when *you* call me that."

Graham's brown eyes darken, his pupils dilating instantly. He brushes the tip of his tongue over my mouth and then he captures my lips. His embrace tightens around me and he hoists himself off the sofa, taking me with him in his arms.

"You were all I could think about today," I say into our kiss as Graham carries us up the stairs. "I've never been kissed like this before, Graham. Never."

His footsteps slow and I kiss him deeper, trying to encourage him to take me to his bed even quicker. "Please, Graham. Please fuck me."

"Don't worry, you'll get your wish. I promise by the time I'm done with you you'll be screaming my name in all sorts of new ways."

God, please let this be real. I kiss him, my eyelids fluttering. “I want to be yours tonight.”

He stops. “Mine?”

I open my eyes. We’re at what I assume is his bedroom door. Blinking, I wait, holding onto a breath. What made him stop? What was he thinking?

“Graham?”

“You want to be mine tonight?”

I lower my face and kiss him. “I want to be yours.”

He smiles, and takes a step forward. “Alright,” he says. “Show me.”

Graham takes us into his room and drops me on his bed. Landing on my ass, I giggle and kick my heels off. His hands grip my legs. His strong fingers dig into my flesh and sweet pulses ignite in my cunt. *Is sex really going to feel this good?*

Heat swells over me when Graham yanks me towards him and the hem of my dress rides up exposing my underwear. “You belong to me now, Little Tiger,” he says. Graham traces a finger up my inner thigh to the frilly edges of my thong. Slowly, the finger disappears underneath the lacy fabric. “Every inch of you is mine tonight.”

I gasp. My mouth hangs open as Graham’s finger curls around my thong and he starts moving it up and down. My face turns red hot when he uses his other hand to massage his huge dick print in his trousers.

“Oh, you’re so nice and wet, princess. You’re already making a mess of my finger.”

I whimper, realizing that my pussy juices are smeared all over his knuckle and relishing the feel of it gliding over my swollen clit.

“I’m going to fuck your pussy all night. And I’m going to enjoy every second of it. So will you,” Graham says, rubbing the digit on my slippery flesh. “Promise me you’ll fight like a tiger.”

I throw my head back and squeeze my breasts in my hands. Graham’s hand moves faster between my legs and my hips buck in response. Writhing from his touch, and wanting him so bad, I edge nearer to my breaking point. My body shudders. I scream his name.

“That’s my Little Tiger. Say it again.”

“Graham!”

“Louder. Don’t be my princess now. Be my tiger.”

Graham speeds his movement and my pussy explodes into waves and waves of spasms. I yell his name, over and over. Every time my cunt pulses I yell out, “Graham.”

“Look at me,” he says, his voice even deeper than usual. I feel his hand around my throat and I open my eyes. Graham plants a soft kiss on my mouth. “You were so hot, Willa. Watching you just now, I never want to see anything else other than the sight of you cuming. Ever.” He kisses me again, his

eyelids heavy with lust. “You’re so fucking beautiful. And you’re mine.”

He climbs on top of me and I finally feel his body pressing down on mine. His hips settle between my thighs and I moan, feeling the stiffness of his cock. Since he’s been honest with me from the moment I walked through his door, I have to be completely transparent with him now. “Graham, there’s something I need to tell you.”

“What is it, My Little Tiger?”

I hesitate, then I swallow and say, “Graham, I’m a virgin.”

His eyebrows narrow and his grip around my neck loosens. “What?”

“I’m—“

“No, Willa,” he says and pushes off me. “You’re a... No.”

I reach for the buttons on his shirt. “Graham, it’s okay. I’m ready. I want this, and I want you to be my first.”

“Well, I don’t. Virgins are too much fucking baggage. Get up,” he says. “Get out.”

“Graham—“

“No! I *don’t* fuck virgins. I have rules.”

“Wha— You have rules?”

“Yeah. Everyone does, Willa. Even you. The difference is, I swear by mine. Get up.”

Graham yanks me off the bed, spins around and snaps up my shoes from the floor. He storms out of the bedroom and

leaves me. After a stunned moment, I go after him. By the time I reach the landing, he's collected my purse too. His expression is cold. He wasn't even this surly the night we met.

"Sammy's waiting for you in the garage," he says.

"Are you really going to do this?"

"Willa, this isn't a joke or game for me. This is the kind of life I have to live. My rules are simple. They keep me alive and out of trouble."

"And there's nothing else to consider?" I hear my voice cracking. *Can I hold back the tears?* "There's no room for anything or anyone that doesn't fit?"

He sighs. Graham stays quiet for a beat, then he says, "No, Willa. There isn't."

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

GRAHAM

A MAN WHO LIKES his habits, Patrick Donovan still reads the news in print. Unfortunately for me, the delivery guy for his neighborhood gets the paper to him while it's still dark outside. After reading the front page of Thursday's *Tribune*, Patrick calls me before dawn.

"You did good, son," he says.

Not yet quite awake, I grumble, "What did I do now?"

"Check the news."

Obedying, I sit up in bed. Without having to search for the source of my boss's delight, I read the alert on my phone that came through while I was asleep. A small smile parts my lips.

"That was you, right?" Patrick asks.

It was. With the assistance of Jess.

"Why don't you come over to the house this morning. We'll have a family breakfast before the girls leave for the resort,"

Patrick says. “Oh, and I want you to know that I’m very proud of you, Graham. You’ve made me very proud today.”

The smile on my face widens. A deep sense of belonging that I get sometimes when I deliver a victory to Patrick swells in me. I act quickly to tamp it down. Better to contain those emotions than to be disappointed by them eventually.

I hang up with Patrick and fall on the mattress, hoping to drift back to sleep. This week has been unpredictable since Sunday morning, and I’d rather be asleep through the rest of it. I’m emotionally exhausted from Molly ending things between us and now Jess coming through for me with the Garzas. Sandwiched between those extreme highs and lows is Willa. My Little Tiger wanted me to break one of my rules, and I flat out refused. Now, I’ll have to let Patrick know that my fake girlfriend and I have decided to call it. He’ll be disappointed, but after the news from today I’m certain it won’t bother him for long—if at all.

With the arrests of five members of the Garza family, the Police Commissioner declared the total dismantling of one of Chicago’s worst criminal networks. He thanked the good police work of dozens of dedicated officers who—he claimed—tirelessly put together the case against the Garzas.

Months of my hard work got them the paper trail they needed to shut down the Garza’s operations permanently. After I handed her the information, Jessica Cruz walked that evidence into the police station. The commissioner should have thanked me, and my useful spy.

Before I leave for breakfast with Patrick, I take an extra precaution. I place the recording I made of Jess agreeing to accept information from me that could take out an annoying enemy into my personal safe. If for even a moment Jess believes she has anything against us, she'll have to risk all that good police work the commissioner lied to the press about. The cases against the Garzas and others I have plans for will need to be retried, or they'll get thrown out because the police broke procedures to acquire that evidence. Reputations will be damaged. The Police Commissioner will look like a fool, or corrupt.

It'll be too much for Jess to risk. Besides, by the time I've fed her enough dirt to take out our enemies, Mayor Justin O'Rourke will be so grateful that Jessica Cruz will get promoted, and she'll no longer be a thorn in my side.

Since I've been up for hours, I'm starving by the time I set out to have breakfast with the family. I walk up to my parking spot preparing to call Jess when I notice a long scratch on the roof of my car. "Fuck!" My voice echoes in the garage. Mentally tracking all the places I've been, the damage to my Ferrari could've only happened the night Willa and I met.

The gash gives me one more thing related to Willa to think about—as if I needed one. I haven't been able to stop thinking about how fucked up our evening ended on Monday night. Or how we've avoided each other since.

I make an appointment with the dealership to have my car swapped out while they repair the paint. By the time I sort

everything out with them, I'm already at Patrick's mansion. I'll have to call Jess later.

"Graham!" Neve shouts as she sees me walking into the huge formal dining room. She jumps off her chair and rushes me. I scoop her up and return her hug. "Sit next to me."

"Okay, that's enough," Melissa says and signals to me to put Neve down. Melissa likes me, but she hates how badly I spoil Neve. She's convinced the way I indulge Neve undoes all the discipline she tries to instill in her. *Melissa's kind of right.* "Good morning, Graham." Melissa gives me a kiss on the cheek and takes Neve out of my arms. "I'm so glad you could join the family for breakfast."

"It's a day to celebrate," Jimmy says. He walks away from his fiancée, Leanna, and approaches me. "I guess you didn't need to run your plan by me after all. You got it sewn up in less than a week. How did you do it?"

"Who cares," Carey says. "It's done and Graham gets to take all the credit. Can we please eat? Now that the guest of honor is here."

While there's joy in the room, some contempt lingers. The thing about being good at what you do for a man like Patrick Donovan is that your good deeds can sometimes run afoul of his nephew's and his son's ambitions. I take the seat beside Neve on Melissa's side of the table where Carey and Jimmy won't feel threatened by me.

After breakfast, I load the women and Neve in their car. Leanna's itinerary has them scheduled to arrive at the resort

earlier than the other guests. I wave goodbye to Neve. Upset that I won't be making the ninety-minute drive with her, she pouts. As I head back inside, Willa occupies my thoughts. Provoked by Neve's sulking, I'm reminded of how exasperated Willa became with me once I told her the truth about what happened between us at The Donnie.

Walking down the corridor to the wine cellar, I sigh knowing that the drugs had nothing to do with me kissing her. That part of what I told Willa was a lie, and I can't shake the feeling of wishing I were a different man so I could be who she needed me to be.

I shoulder into the room where the Donovan men were waiting for me. It's another pre-wedding celebration. An impromptu one on account of my handling the Garzas for the family without dropping a single body for the press and police to salivate over.

We take a moment to laugh at the misfortunes of our enemy. Then Patrick starts doling out a few orders for each of us. "While Jimmy's away enjoying his honeymoon, I want you to oversee his business, Graham."

Jimmy nods, takes another sip of his whiskey. He doesn't look upset. Carey is another matter. "What am I supposed to do?" he says, breathing heavily like a charged up thoroughbred.

"You're coming to the office with me. I have some new business partners we need to manage."

“Sure. Whatever you say, Dad.” Putting emphasis on the last word, Carey glances at me before emptying his glass. “Let’s go, Jimmy. We need to pick up the new ring from the jewelers.”

“New ring?” Patrick says.

“Yeah,” Carey answers. “Leanna didn’t think the last one was big enough. I’m never getting married. I’m with Graham on that.”

Carey being the youngest in the room, the rest of us laugh. Even me. Even though it’s a knock against me having all of these ardent rules. We make a final toast before Jimmy and Carey are dismissed, and Patrick asks me to hang back for a bit.

“Share one of these with me,” he says. “You’ve earned it.”

Patrick opens the door on the humidor and pulls out two cases. This one I’m taking up to the resort with us, he says with his hands on the rich mahogany wood. He pulls back the lid on the other case and plucks out two hand rolled cigars.

“I might ask you to tag along with Carey and me at some of these meetings. You know I’ve always liked your head for numbers as much as I loved your fists.”

“Won’t that piss him off?”

“He’s a big boy,” Patrick says. “He’ll learn from you. You’ll teach him what he needs to learn.”

I nod. “Of course.”

Savoring smoke and liquor, Patrick and I sit in the wine cellar and talk. Minutes go by. The wine cellar has no clock, but when I check my watch it's almost noon. In a few hours, I'll have to take the Ferrari back to the dealership. At least the sales guy told me I could have my pick of any car on the showroom floor.

“So, when's your girl meeting with O'Rourke?” Patrick asks.

The booze, tobacco and the comfortable silence I shared with my boss has my mind on a wanderlust. Patrick's question yanks me out of it. I may have been avoiding Willa for the past two days, but it didn't mean I wasn't keeping tabs on her. “This afternoon,” I answer him.

“You gonna be there with her?” Patrick sucks on what remains of his cigar, twisting it in his fingers. “You should be there with her,” he adds pointedly. “We don't want her veering off course.”

I nod. “I'll make sure she doesn't.”

“Good. O'Rourke sees her magazine the same way we saw the Garzas. Meddlesome. He figures he can get your girl to make him look good, that will help move our plans along. Graham, I think that pretty little thing of yours is good for you. Better than the types you usually waste your time with. I'm telling you that as a husband and a father. But regardless of all of that, I want you to stick to her ass until her glowing article on Justin is printed. You understand me?”

I nod.



In true princess form, Willa struts out of her building looking like she's walking off a runway in Paris. Or maybe I just think that because she told me her mother modeled when she was her age. She could have followed in her mother's footsteps. Whatever star quality you need to do that kind of work. Willa has it. Obviously, she wanted something different for her life. Even if she still hasn't figured out what that is yet.

She's wearing the hell out of a pair of super tight jeans, heels, and a t-shirt. Her elegant strides stop suddenly when she sees me parked at the curb leaning against the bright red Ferrari. Taking a sharp left, she walks up to me. "What are you doing here?"

Compared to my upbringing, she's had everything. Parents, money, the best schools. None of it made her any less messed up than how I turned out. Surgeons, heirs, real life princes, men born to wear ten-thousand-dollar suits. Willa could be with any one of them. Yet she wants to be with someone like me. A criminal, a killer. *How fucking insane is that?*

I open the passenger side door. "I'm driving you to the interview."

"Are you offering to take me as a gesture, Graham? Or was that an order?" I don't answer and she nods. "It's an order then. Fine."

Willa puts on her sunglasses, walks by me like we don't know each other's names and gets into the car. Suddenly, I'm

reminded of my foster sisters and the times when they were mad at their boyfriends. From watching and listening to them, I learned a lot about women. Right now, though, I could use their advice with this one.

The car ride to Justin O'Rourke's office resembles the first night we met. Quiet. Distant. I should be celebrating that I finally figured out how to put a stop to whatever was going on between the two of us. Instead I have to stay on her ass like I was told to.

"I'm here because of Patrick," I say.

In my periphery, I see her angle her body towards me. "So you wouldn't have seen me again, if Patrick hadn't made you?"

The honest answer to her question is complicated. I've tried not to think about her. But since I sent her home with Sammy the other night, I've been tracking her movements. I even stumbled upon an Italian place in her neighborhood with a parmigiana on their lunch menu to rival mine. "Willa, I'm sorry I hurt you. I didn't mean to."

"I don't want to talk about it. In fact, I don't want to talk at all. Could you just drive and not say anything else to me, please?"

Sighing, I focus on the road and grant her her request. But not for very long. I give her time to cool off, then I say to her, "Willa, come with me to the wedding."

I expected her to fly off the handle but she just crosses her arms in front of her and slowly shakes her head. “You’re positively mental,” she says.

It must seem like I’m crazy. I admit I’ve been hot and cold with her. Typically when I say I’m done, there’s no confusion on anyone’s part. Things have been muddled between us from the start. I dip into the garage, finding a parking spot on the last level. “Let me get your door for you.”

She’s content to wait, choosing not to unbuckle her seatbelt until I pull open the door. *A real fucking princess.* Last week, I would have been rolling my eyes at this kind of behavior from anyone other than Neve. Today, at this very minute, I fucking love it. I see it all now. This is Willa’s toughness. Flynn was wrong after all. She is my type, just not the way I’ve experienced before.

Willa steps out of the car and I block her in between my chest and the door. “Say you’ll come with me, Little Tiger.”

Willa admitted she likes it when I call her that, so I know it’s a cheap shot to use at this moment. Like when I was coming up in the junior boxing leagues and I’d try to take suckerpunches at the bigger guys in the ring. Sometimes it worked in my favor, and sometimes it didn’t.

Forced to acknowledge my presence, Willa removes her sunglasses and says, “Let me guess, Graham, and tell me when I’m getting close. You’re asking me to go to the wedding because the only person in the world that you seem to care

about wants me at that wedding. So you're stuck with me. Am I right?"

From my mother to my grandparents and especially my foster parents, I have been lied to almost all my life. There's no point in lying to her about this. "Yes, Willa. You're right."

She chuckles, and says, "I'm going to be late. Excuse me." I plant my feet and she grins, "What's this? A standoff? An ultimatum? You and Patrick want me there that badly?" She nods, shrugs. "If that's what you want, then all you have to do is break your rule. I'll be there. All smiles if the other night was any indication of your sexual prowess."

Yeah. Sometimes the suckerpunch trick landed me on my ass. This time it knocked me flat on my back. "You're fucking crazy. You might as well auction yourself off to the highest bidder."

"Do you really think that's what I'm doing?"

"Isn't it?" She doesn't answer me. "What else could it be?"

Willa slips her fingers around my tie and pulls me towards her. Our mouths are almost touching. I'm close to leaning in and kissing her, but her eyes have me trapped in a stare. "It's me, being done with your way being better. If we're doing anything now, we're going to do it my way instead," she says and shoves me out of her way.

elle

Every time I glance over at Willa as the elevator carries us up the building, I think her haughty chin rises an inch. “This is blackmail,” I say to her.

“It is. Someone so desperate to be close to a man like Patrick Donovan should be familiar with that,” she says.

“I want this to end.”

“It will. One way or another,” she says.

Justin meets us in the reception area of his campaign office. He packs on the charm offensive, seeking to execute his plan of using Willa and her magazine as his personal public relations firm. For her part, Willa is cordial with him.

Attempting to follow them into the conference room, Justin stops me. “Why don’t you wait outside,” he says to me.

“Don’t you think it would be for the best if I listen in?”

Justin grins and looks at Willa. “He’s so protective of you.”

“Yeah,” she says. “I’m so lucky.”

Her tone is venomous. The strike goes deep, but I deserve it after the foolish things I’ve done. Especially how I have approached her so far this afternoon.

“Have a seat outside,” Justin says, “If you need some water or something, just ask one of my aides.”

Justin shuts the door and I stand guard outside for a moment watching as he and Willa engage in a brief conversation while he takes the seat next to her. They go back and forth like that and then Willa turns on the recorder on her phone.

I take the opportunity to call Jess. First, I give her an attagirl for getting the job done with the Garzas and then I make arrangements for us to meet again, after I'm back from the wedding this weekend.

Although it pissed Carey off not to get the assignment, taking over Jimmy's work for a few weeks isn't a big deal for me. The truth is neither man has a reason to feel threatened. I don't want to be what Patrick has in mind for either of them. I don't want to be Jimmy, the king of the underworld. And I don't want to be Carey, the heir and outward face of the legitimate Donovan businesses. The one who'll take the family into the future. I'm fine managing my gym, the clubs and being the one Patrick can always rely on.

My gaze lingers on Willa, unsure how I'm going to deal with her and growing more anxious than I've been in a long time. When she glances at me and smiles, I look away. Maybe my anxiety is her true aim, and all that blackmailing shit is just talk. Maybe she's bluffing.

I rise as Willa exits the conference room with Justin trailing behind her. We have about ten minutes before the dealership closes to the public, and about two hours before I have to be at the welcome party for Leanna and Jimmy's wedding.

"She's all yours again, Graham," Justin says. "We had a great conversation. Willa, I can't wait to read this article."

Willa glances at me, then she smiles at Justin. "I'll be in Chicago through the summer at least. Maybe once you're in office we could do this again."

“Looking forward to it. I’ve gotta run,” he says.

Justin leaves my side first, then Willa leaves without looking in my direction. As we exit the campaign office, I tell her, “I need to listen to that recording and look through all of your notes.”

She scoffs. “You can tell your dad that’s not fucking happening,” she says and presses the call button on the elevator. There’s an immediate ding and the door opens for her.

We join a few other people on the elevator, halting our discussion for the time being. Fine by me since no matter what she says my word will be the final word on this. We get to our level of the garage and she darts out of the elevator, sprinting ahead of me. “Willa, what are you trying to do? Run away?”

“Isn’t that what you do all the time,” she throws at me over her shoulder.

Just beyond her, a car flashes across my sightline. The SUV is barreling down the exit ramp. It turns hard and the tires wail in response. The huge vehicle weaves dangerously left then right as the driver struggles to regain control. But the angles are too sharp, and the car is too close. I react. Racing towards Willa, I grab her by the arm, pulling her into me. The car swooshes by us, then brakes suddenly.

“Are you okay? Did I hurt you?” I ask, brushing my hand on her cheek.

Eyes wide like saucers, Willa's fingers grip the sleeve of my suit jacket. She nods, taking big gulps of air into her mouth. "I'm okay."

"Why don't you watch where you're going, you dumb bitch!"

My eyes shoot daggers at the man standing at the back of the SUV. The license plate on his car is from Minnesota. It's the last thing I see before I rush him. Crashing his back mercilessly into the liftgate, I pin him down with my forearm.

"Jesus Christ, man," he hollers out.

I rear my arm back and let it sing through the air in a quick, but controlled jab. My fist lands calmly beside his ear. Lowering my voice, I say, "You're so lucky she wouldn't want me to put my hand through your face." I take a step toward him. "Or stick my gun down your throat and not stop pulling the trigger until there's nothing left but blood and little pieces of your brain on the ground."

I straighten and release him. "Go," I bark at him. He scurries around the car and drives down the ramp. When I turn around Willa's standing in the same spot. I walk over to her and she throws her arms around my neck. Breathing in her scent, I hold onto her tighter. "Are you sure I didn't hurt you?"

She nods. I feel her chest rising and falling against mine. "Yeah, but if you didn't grab me when you did, I don't know. Thank you, Graham."

"Willa, I'm sorry about the other night."

“Me too. Graham, why didn’t you hit him?”

Because the second before I pulled my arm back, I saw her reflection in the window of the car. The horrified look on her face when she thought I would do to that man what I did to Juilo. And I realized in that instant that Willa doesn’t know the worst parts of me. She knows me as the stranger who didn’t abandon her in the alley and as the guy who defended her in a boxing ring because of a lewd stare. The man who rescues her. To others I’m a monster, the mafia boss’s enforcer. To Willa, I’m her consummate hero.

So much of me now wants to be more like that, more like the man she thinks I am, and I didn’t want to do anything that would destroy that. I bury my face in her hair. “He wasn’t worth it,” I answer her.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

WILLA

RAFÉ WAS A BLIP. He was a sexy idea in the form of a guy who visited the banker in the apartment next to mine every third Friday of the month. At first, my curiosity drew me to him. Admittedly, things went too far. Then I met Graham, and this is more than an intense attraction. I think I really like him. I know he likes me too. But what I'm never really sure of is how he feels about the idea of us—of any kind of 'us' that includes him.

“I saw you inside the dealership. Looking at that huge picture of the race car on the wall. Caught you staring at it a few times, but it didn't seem like you were *just* looking at it. Care to share?” Graham says.

His new Ferrari, on loan to him while they make the repairs to the one I damaged, gracefully traverses the slow corners of the country road miles outside of the city. Looking at all the trees and rolling grass, it's difficult to think that we were surrounded by concrete and skyscrapers a short while ago.

“It reminded me of my father. He was an engineer. He designed race cars like the one in the picture. He died six years ago. Cancer. I still hear his voice in my head sometimes. I miss him.”

Graham reaches out for my hand. He squeezes his fingers around mine, but he doesn't say anything. I don't think he believes he can. To watch him struggle with his feelings of abandonment and still try to provide some comfort to me for my loss, shows the kind of person he really is when you peel back the layers he built around his heart probably since he was a kid so he can protect himself. My heart aches for him.

The deeper my feelings for Graham get, the more conflicted I become about Patrick Donovan and the role he plays in Graham's life. He loves him, and having grown up never knowing his father, Patrick was the next best thing. But he took advantage of Graham. He's been manipulating him since they met. Now Graham is so grateful that he believes Patrick's approval is really love. It isn't.

If I tie together the pieces of what I learned in my interview with Justin to what I heard him and Patrick discussing at the party, I could write an article that might invite others to ask uncomfortable questions of the incoming mayor. But the fallout would devastate Graham, and I can't be responsible for that.

I hesitate, but I ask, “Have you ever thought about finding your birth mother?”

He shakes his head. “I hadn’t. I wouldn’t know where to start. Or what to say, if I ever found her. If she’s even still alive.” Graham removes his hand from mine and places it on the steering wheel. “We should be at the resort in about ten minutes. More than enough time to enjoy the party,” he says, clearly signaling that he’s done with that conversation.

I nod and admit, “I’m a little nervous about meeting everyone.”

“You’ve met most of them already. You know Patrick and Flynn. We bumped into Jimmy and Carey on our way out of The Donnie the other night. Leanna, Melissa, and Neve will love you.”

I remember Patrick mentioning that his wife Melissa was responsible for his lovely home and Jess told me that Jimmy’s bride was his long-time girlfriend, Leanna. “Who’s Neve?” I ask. I hadn’t heard that name until now.

Graham grins wide. His face that had been a little glum seconds before is now lit up like the Chicago skyline. “She’s Patrick’s little girl. She’s nine years old and a lot like you. A princess.”

I smirk. “From the look on your face, I’m going to guess you’re partially responsible for making her that way.”

He chuckles. “I do my best,” he says. “Neve demands nothing less. Also like you.”

elle

There's a sign at the entrance of the resort welcoming guests of the Donovan wedding party. We have our own personal concierge to greet us and she tells us that our bags will be taken up to our room. Graham said Patrick rented out the entire resort for the weekend and had additional staff hired and trained for the event.

Our concierge provides us with a complete rundown of the itinerary for the entire weekend. The bride and groom had planned activities for the adults for each day that extended late into the night while children's activities ended at eight o'clock.

"Would you like to go to the party now? Or would you prefer it if I showed you to your room?" the concierge asks.

"The party," Graham says at the same time I suggest we go to our room.

I look at him and say, "I think we should unpack first."

"Whatever she says," Graham concedes, smiling. "Her way is better."

We share a coy smile.

"Of course, sir," the concierge says, and starts leading us through the massive foyer. Everywhere you turn inside the resort there are reminders of the wedding happening in forty-eight hours.

"This is crazy," I say when I glimpse the party. "I've never been to such an extravagant wedding before."

Graham smirks. “Yours will probably be something like this. Fit for a princess.”

I open my mouth, but another voice speaks before me. “Graham, you’re late,” he says.

“Hey, Carey,” Graham says and I peek around him to see who it is. “How’s the party?”

“Boring,” Carey says, then he looks at me. He smiles. “Hello again. I don’t think we’ve officially met. Graham, introduce us.”

“Carey, this is Willa. Willa, this is Patrick’s son and the best man.” Judging by the warm grin on Graham’s face and the way he doesn’t bother to make eye contact with him I get the sense he treats Carey like a little brother. “We were just going to check into our room. I’ll see you later?”

“Yeah, I’m not going anywhere.”

“It was nice to see you again, Carey,” I say to him. He salutes me and shuffles off in the direction of the party. “He seems reluctant.”

“He hates weddings,” Graham says as we follow a few steps behind the concierge. “And he’s mad at me.”

“Why’s he mad at you?”

“Patrick gave me something he wanted, but it was never meant for him anyway.”

I don’t ask him to elaborate. We’re taken to our room where our luggage was already neatly stored by the closet. “If you

need anything. Day or night. Just give me a call,” the concierge says before she departs.

Graham closes the door, turns around and looks at me. Raising my eyebrows, I say, “Day or night? She can’t be serious.”

“Patrick really went above and beyond.”

“Yeah, I can’t imagine what it’ll be like for Carey’s wedding.”

Graham shakes his head. “No. Neve definitely, but not Carey. He’s like me. He’s never getting married either.”

I study him for only a moment. “Is that another one of your rules?”

“Yeah,” he says.

I nod. So he won’t be anyone’s first, and he’ll never get married. When he made up these personal commandments, Graham likely had no vision for his life outside of pleasing Patrick Donovan and the rest of these people. He seems to have convinced himself that this is all he’s good for.

Once again, my heart aches. This time it’s for me.

Graham heads over to our bags, and removes his suitcase from the luggage carrier. He sets it aside, then picks up one of mine and lugs it over to the bench at the foot of the bed. I walk over to the windows and push aside the curtains. Below us on the patio, the wedding guests are enjoying the food and the music by the pool.

“Did any of the activities the concierge was talking about interest you?” he asks. I hear Graham unzip his suitcase and I look over my shoulder. He digs underneath the first layer or two of his clothing and removes a sleek black case. “Willa, did you hear my question?”

My eyes flick up to his. “Some of them did. What’s in the case?”

Graham stares back at me. He lets my question hang in the air between us for a beat and then he says, “It’s for work.”

I have an idea what he means when he walks over to the closet and opens the hotel safe. Graham secures the case and its contents, then joins me by the window. He holds my face and pulls me into a kiss. I kiss him back, lacing my fingers in his blond curls.

“It’s just in case,” he says when our lips part. He rests his forehead against mine and I gaze into his eyes. “Come on. Let me walk you downstairs and introduce you to everyone else.”

“Are you sure you don’t just want to stay here for a little while?” I ask, smiling.

Graham’s hands drop to my hips. “My Little Tiger’s back,” he says. He smooths his palms over my ass, lifting me up and I wrap my legs around him. Graham takes my breath away and sweeps me off my feet in the same instant. As he walks us across the room, he adds, “Why are you always making big demands of me?”

“Because I know you can fill them,” I say, reminded of the impressive size of his cock. My cheeks blush and my skin feels like it’s being burnt from the inside out. I’ve imagined Graham inside me so many times, it’s all I can think about as we land on the bed in each other’s arms. “Do we have to go to the party at all tonight?”

“No, we don’t.” His mouth captures mine again. I slip my tongue past his lips and I reach between us for his belt. Then his phone rings. “Shit. Hang on.”

“No, no, no, Graham,” I beg him when he raises off me and rolls onto his back. “Don’t answer.”

“I have to,” he says and puts the phone against his ear. “Yes, Carey.”

Staring at his profile, I watch as the joy slowly slips from his face and he seems to sober up. I sigh when he says, “No. I’ll be down in a sec.”

Graham hangs up the phone, and I say, “Is it okay if I stay here until you get back.”

“It might take a while.” He leans forward, presses his lips on my mouth. “I gotta go.”

“Hey.” I take in a deep breath. “I just want you to know that you never have to shut me out, Graham.” I place my palm over his chest and say, “I don’t always understand all of this, but... My heart understands your heart. Do you understand what I mean?”

Graham's eyes lock onto mine for a long, quiet moment. Finally, he nods. He leans in, kisses me again before he leaves.

I head over to the window and lean against the wall. I spot the same trio of men who interrupted us in the garage at The Donnie, Flynn, Carey, and Jimmy, huddling together by the pool. I watch Graham cross the patio and stride up to them. The four of them talk briefly, then they leave together. Walking away from the resort, they disappear down stone stairs that lead out of sight.

My gaze hones in on the rest of the partygoers. In the crowd, there's the bride-to-be. Surrounded by ten other women all around her age dressed in pastel shades of pink, she sticks out like a sore thumb. Her dress is Barbie pink, and she's wearing a fucking crown. And Graham has the cheek to call *me* Princess. I scoff.

CHAPTER TWENTY

GRAHAM

“YOU SEEM OUT OF it,” Carey says, and he’s not wrong at all.

The phrase thousand-yard stare comes to mind. Since I left our room, I have been in a Willa-induced whirlwind. *Hell, I’ve been in one since I met her.* What she said about understanding my heart still has my brain in a daze. I don’t even want to think about what it’s doing to the rest of me.

Carey sits on the sofa to my right. “Now is not the time to lose focus, Graham. Running Jimmy’s operations is a big deal. You can’t fuck it up.”

Understandably, Carey’s singularly focused on his own future as all men born with destinies are. I balance the glass of whiskey on my knee, and say, “My mind’s staying on the tasks at hand, Carey. Don’t worry about me. When Jimmy’s back, it’ll be like he never left.”

Carey glances at his cousin laughing with Flynn on the opposite side of the man-made grotto. He flicks his thumb

across his bottom lip and huffs. “Yeah. Everything will be exactly like it’s supposed to be.”

As I’ve ascended in rank, I’ve learned to keep my distance from the simmering tensions between Carey and Jimmy. Most of the discord comes from Carey’s side. Traditionally, the Donovans share power. One side of the family devoted themselves to the loosely connected legal businesses that we operate. As it was intended, the illicit enterprises that funnel money into those businesses were inherited by Jimmy. But the duty came to him early in life with the untimely death of his father. Carey’s yearning to switch sides has the potential to become a dangerous fantasy.

“Leave it alone, Carey. There are other things more worthy of your time.”

His head snaps around. “You don’t think I can run the business as well as him?”

“You could probably do it in your sleep, Carey,” I say, chuckling. He laughs, and I feel a measure of relief. “What I meant was Patrick’s preparing you to take over for him.”

“And when’s that gonna be? When I’m eighty? The man has more stamina than a fucking race horse.”

He chuckles, and I agree, nodding with a broad smile. “Knowing Patrick, he’ll outlive us all.” I clap my hand on Carey’s shoulder and say, “My point is, whenever Patrick puts you in charge, I’ll be right there by your side. You’re my brother. Always.”

“Always,” Carey says, nodding and patting my arm. He sinks further into the cushioned seat beside me and takes another sip of his drink. “So, you’re fucking two women at the same time? When did you become a cad?”

I shake my head. “It wasn’t like that.”

“It never is, right?” Carey grins, then he says, “I’m not judging, Graham. It’s just not like you, so I guess it’s surprising to some, especially my father. He really seemed to think you’d date strippers for the rest of your life. I guess you told everybody that so many times, he believed you.”

I scoff. “And you didn’t?”

Carey balks, shaking his head. “Nah, I always knew you were too smart for that to last forever. I figured you’d be tempted and overreach one day.”

“What the hell does that mean? Overreach?”

“No offense, Graham, but that Willa chick seems way out of your league, don’t you think?” If I wasn’t grinding my teeth, I might have opened my mouth and said something I’d regret. I swallow hard around the tight lump in my throat, trying to contain my rage. When I don’t answer him, Carey shrugs. “It was just an observation, but maybe I’m wrong. The one thing I’ve admired about you since we were kids, Graham, is that you always understood your place.”

Carey is still hurt about not being chosen by his father today. More than that, he enjoys pushing people’s buttons. I never give him the satisfaction of feeling like he’s gotten one

over on me, and I won't start now. Despite how much I'd like to throttle him, I smile and raise my glass. "Here's to everybody knowing their place."

He gives me a dark look in return before we empty our glasses and for a long while neither of us speaks to the other.



Gently pushing down on the doorknob, I enter the room to near complete darkness. Willa is curled up underneath the blanket, not quite in the middle of the bed. I strip off my suit jacket and take a seat on the bench, kicking off my shoes. As I loosen my tie, my gaze travels to the desk by the window. I glance over my shoulder at Willa again before I stand and quietly walk to where there's a collection of empty bottles from the mini fridge.

Pulling my phone from my pocket, I shine the light on them, then pick one up. Willa drank three of the white wines and two reds. *At least I wasn't the only one of us overdoing it.* I set the bottle back down and wave the phone light over the desk. The screen on her laptop is black and her phone with the recording of the interview stored on it is locked. I shut off the light and place my phone next to hers, unbuttoning my shirt.

After so many glasses of whiskey, I'm in no shape to come up with a way to convince her to share the story with me before anyone else sees it. Tomorrow, I'll take her out on one of the couples' activities the concierge told us about and try my luck then.

I undress to my underwear, wondering whether I'm being inappropriate. Careful not to disturb her, I climb into the bed and settle onto my back. Her words about understanding my heart and Carey accusing me of being Icarus still occupy my thoughts.

WILLA

THE LIGHT STREAMING INTO the room hurts my eyes. Last night I forgot to move the heavy curtain back in place, and morning creeps into the room too soon. Stretching, I squint at the mess next to my laptop. After listening to my interview with O'Rourke for hours, I wrote a grand total of nine words before I gave up and crawled into bed. Alone.

Graham. I roll over and he's there beside me. *We slept in the same bed.* The thought brings a smile to my face that disappears instantly when my eyes focus on the scars over his naked skin. Jolting forward, I sit straight up and he shifts onto his back. My jaw drops. Across his chest, there's more evidence that his violent world had left its mark. Unable to take my eyes away from them, I hear him moan as he stirs again. Panicking, I kick the blankets off me and race from the bed. Shutting the bathroom door behind me, I hold my chest and I press my back against the wall.

What I've just seen shouldn't have surprised me, but it terrifies me to think about Graham as a mafia enforcer, rather

than a man. During our dinner, we talked about what our lives were like growing up. When I asked him where he learned to box, Graham said he'd been fighting since he was born. From the day his birth mother left him with her parents, and later when his grandparents died and he was entered into the child welfare system. He said those early years were hard for him, especially because he was smaller than the other boys. He had to grow up quickly. Graham hinted that he experienced abuse in the foster home he was eventually placed in, but suggested that his foster sisters bore the brunt of it.

My childhood was nothing like his, but I had been exposed to the sanctioned violence of motorsports. As far back as I can remember, I watched race car drivers perform at the track by my father and then my godfather's sides.

Although it may not seem brutal, driving at those high speeds takes a toll on the human body. Race car drivers are like fighter pilots on four wheels and they treat every race like it's a war. When a driver collides with something else on the track, the g-force from the crash makes it difficult for them to walk away unscathed. Some drivers never walk away at all.

I had seen the crumpled wreckage of a car my father had worked on and struggled to think someone bigger than me once sat in it. I knew my godfather had scars from his racing days. My parents talked about them, but I'd never seen them because they shielded me from that brutality.

I let out a breath, feeling my heart rate slowly returning to normal just as a soft knock at the door echoes inside the

bathroom.

“Willa,” Graham says and his voice sounds muffled like his mouth is close to the door. It also grates with a rougher tone from him just waking up. Soothing like a balm, the turmoil inside me finally comes to a rest simply from hearing him say my name. “You know, I lived with four sisters, so this isn’t new to me. We had a couple of bathrooms in our house, but I still had to wake up before any of them to have five minutes to myself in there.” I smile. “You’re different since you grew up all by yourself in that big house in the country. Your bathroom alone was probably the size of this entire—“

I swing open the door and point a finger at him. “If this rambling monologue ends with you calling me a princess, I swear I’m leaving. Jimmy’s fiancée had a crown on her head last night.”

Graham has on black sweatpants. His chest is still naked, toned beyond belief and peppered with scars, but his eyes are warm and so appealing. A shoulder braced against the door jamb, he grins and says, “You ordered us room service?”

I glance past him towards the table with our breakfast laid out on it, then I lock eyes with Graham again. It was a dumb attempt at being sentimental about my first time, but I did it anyway. My voice is tiny when I say, “I thought I’d want to celebrate after we...” My face burns with embarrassment. “I thought you would’ve been back last night, and we would’ve, you know. But I fell asleep.”

He straightens, takes my face in one hand and pulls me in for a kiss. His mouth on mine sends tingles down my spine. “I’m sorry,” he says. “I should’ve left the other guys, but Carey’s really taking being the best man to heart. He had the whole weekend planned before either of us knew I’d have a date to occupy me.”

“It’s okay,” I say. I rise up on my toes and bring my arms around his shoulders. There’s a hint of tobacco smell to him. Perhaps it was from his cologne or maybe when he left with the others they went off to smoke cigars. I don’t think about Graham as he is standing in front of me. I imagine him being a little kid other kids bullied and adults abused. Closing my eyes, I tell him again, “It’s okay.”

Graham swallows me in a tight embrace. I feel him breathing against my chest, the air from his mouth caressing my skin. “I better be careful,” he says in a quiet voice.

“Why’s that?”

He sighs. “Even somebody like me could get spoiled waking up to one of your hugs.”

The pinch of hope inside me swells into a bite that latches onto me. It spreads, and then I can’t control it anymore. I should try to build up a wall around my heart, but it’s already too late. Graham is even more wrong for me than Rafé because he’ll be all my firsts. The first man I’ve fallen in love with, maybe the first I’ll have sex with, and definitely the first to truly break my heart.

GRAHAM

ANOTHER COPY OF THE pre-planned itinerary arrived with our breakfast tray. As Willa and I eat, she steers our conversation towards the wedding activities. I should be redirecting her to feed me information about her O'Rourke article, but I'm thoroughly enjoying the sight of her nightgown caressing her breasts when she moves, laughs, or takes a wistful breath.

Yesterday, I had convinced myself that if I filled the long weekend with distractions, wore us both out during the day, then we would be too exhausted to break my no virgins rule by the time our backs hit the bed each night. If that didn't work, I planned to charm her into waiting for another time. When things wouldn't seem rushed. When I could make her first time more special. But every minute that ticks by has my head losing an epic battle with my body. I want her and if that ends in destruction for me, so be it.

From the list of today's activities, Willa was most excited about hiking a three-mile trail adjacent to the resort. I catch a

glimpse of her brushing her hair in the bathroom mirror as I step into my running shoes. It took all the will I had in me not to go in after her while she was showering. She's fully clothed now, and once again I'm imagining her naked, losing my common sense between her legs.

“Hey, you almost ready?”

She sets her brush on the counter and glances over her shoulder. “Someone's eager to go for a long walk. Is that on your Tinder profile? It should be.”

I laugh. “I hate waiting.”

Willa enters the room and I swear I hear my heart beating inside my chest. She smiles back at me and says, “Okay, I'm ready.”

My eyes linger on her, studying every inch of Willa's body and wondering what I would've done if she hadn't told me she's never had sex before. I don't deliberate for long. I would've taken her, owned her. Then I would have seen her off once this whole thing with O'Rourke was over and Willa left Chicago for the East Coast. And that would've been it.

I sigh and stand. “Let's go. There's a diner I like around here. We can get milkshakes after we're done walking.”

She laughs at me. “Are you a vanilla or chocolate guy?”

“My favorite is strawberry.”

We walk out of the hotel room with smiles on our faces and I don't stop myself when I reach out for her. Unsatisfied with

just holding hands, Willa leans into me and cradles her body around my arm as we walk down the corridor.

“Graham.” I look ahead of us and see Melissa. Dressed in a pair of black riding boots, she stomps up to me. “We have an emergency and I need you to keep Neve busy for me this morning while I help Leanna. One of her bridesmaids is missing.” Pausing, Melissa regards us. “Hmm. You look busy. Maybe I should ask someone else to take Neve riding this morning, except she’ll only want to go with you.”

Willa perks up beside me. “You mean horses, right? I used to ride.”

“You did?” Melissa says. “Would you mind?”

“Of course not.”

Melissa touches Willa on the arm. “You’re Willa, right? Everyone says you’re so sweet and I see why now. Thank you. I don’t want to intrude on your day with Graham.”

Willa looks up at me. “No, it’s no bother at all.”

Melissa beams. “Great. Neve is downstairs in the lobby with Sammy. Call me if you need anything,” she says as she continues down the hall.

I made sure my room was close to hers and Patrick’s in case anything went wrong this weekend. That might prove to be a mistake if we keep bumping into each other and Melissa assigns me with work away from the resort.

“She’s beautiful,” Willa says. “Patrick has impressive taste.”

I agree with her. Melissa is all class. She's confident, cultured, and she taught herself how to maneuver in spaces that include criminal elements like her husband and men like me. She's the perfect addition to Patrick's arsenal. If I ever wanted to be like him, Willa would be the perfect addition to my arsenal.

Neve has her back to us and I sneak up behind her. She yelps and giggles when I lift her in the air. "Guess who's spending the morning at the stables with their favorite person." She squeals and shouts my name.

"I want you to meet my friend. Her name is Willa and she's going to hang out with the only cool people here."

Neve surprises me when she's not her usual outgoing self. She tucks her head under my chin and hugs my neck. "Hello," she says just above a whisper.

Willa is equally sheepish in her response. "I'm so excited to see the horses. I used to ride when I was your age."

There's a long silence until I say, "Why don't we get going."

I dismiss Sammy and chauffeur the three of us to the stables half an hour from the resort. With the two of them not saying much to each other, I'm forced to hold what feels like two separate conversations.

"Hey, Neve," I say looking at her in the rearview mirror. Our eyes meet. "Willa had a great idea earlier." Neve looks

from me to the passenger seat. “She thought we could get burgers and milkshakes from that diner we like.”

Neve looks at Willa again. “How do you know about the diner? Have you been there before?”

“I told her about it, but I think you both love vanilla milkshakes.”

Neve mulls something over to herself. She quietly eyes both me and Willa before she resumes playing a game on her tablet. I look over at Willa and she leans against the headrest. She shrugs, hiding a smile behind her hand.

At the stables, the frost thaws somewhat when Neve actually speaks to Willa and Willa shares with us that she practiced dressage until she was fifteen. I don’t feel so out of place when Willa explains what dressage is to me afterwards.

“She’s so happy,” Willa says. “And so are you. She has you wrapped around her little finger. Nothing like me at all.”

Smiling, I say, “We all spoil her.”

“Oh, I bet.”

Neve waves in our direction from atop the pony as the trainer leads her and the horse around the pen. I wave back and say, “I’m probably the worst, though. Melissa hates it because I let her have her way all the time.” Willa leans against the fence. I inch over to her. “So, do you want kids?”

Her head whips around. “I think so. I guess I do. Sure,” she says, then giggles. “Wow, I don’t think I’ve ever really thought about it. Probably because my mother hasn’t honed in on that

yet. She's still working on the "getting me suitably married" part of her grand plan."

She returns to staring at Neve and I can't take my eyes off her. I want to know more about her mother's plan. Whether Willa has bought into it, or whether Rafé and I are merely her attempts to rebel against it.



Our morning walk turned into a day-long outing. After the horse riding lessons, we ate burgers and indulged with our favorite milkshakes at the diner. By then, Willa and Neve couldn't stop talking. The love affair continued through the afternoon as we explored the greenspace around the resort and at times it seemed like I was intruding on their day. Now they're waving at each other from across the room like old girlfriends.

"Going above and beyond to impress a nine year old is crazy, isn't it?" Willa says. She leans forward, rests her elbow on the table and props up her chin with a fist. "I must secretly like you a lot."

It took a while to get there with Neve, but Willa had no trouble winning over the rest of the wedding guests. Most of them were in awe at her looks, or just that she walked into tonight's dinner party on my arm.

I glance at Patrick with Melissa sitting at his side and their children around them. Carey's lucky. Right now, I'm more like Patrick than he could ever be. Just like his father, my

reputation strikes fear in the hearts of our enemies and I've got a head for business despite not earning a degree from an elite college. I could own Chicago and with Willa in my life, I'd be happy doing it. Carey's birthright is safe because of me.

"Penny for your thoughts," Willa says.

I look at her. Although she's never voiced them, Willa has been more forthcoming with her feelings for me—especially at this moment, if my ability to read body language is still worth anything. I grin. "I'm flattered." Drawing near to her, I whisper to her ear, "If you kissed me, how much you like me won't be a secret to anyone in this room."

She shifts to look me in the eyes and smiles. "And what would it mean if when I kiss you, you kiss me back?"

We both know what it would mean. Whether either of us will stop this doomed collision is out of the question. Willa and I are about to take a leap into the unknown for both of us. She was more prepared for this than I was, but we're of the same mind now. "I ruined your plans for last night. Let me make it up to you."

She blinks. "Right now?"

"I think you've waited long enough for this."

WILLA

HE STRIPS OFF HIS suit jacket and I slip his tie from around his neck. Our fingers undo the button on his shirt and we rip it out of his pants before our bodies slam into each other. Graham's powerful hold around my back ignites my skin when he moves against me. I feel my nipples stiffen and my heartbeat speeds up.

One of his hands brushes aside my hair. The other grips it firmly out of the way as he leans closer and presses kisses up my throat. Still holding my hair, Graham takes a step back and I take two forward. We reach the bed and he sits on the edge.

A devastatingly sexy look on his face, he nudges me towards him and says, "Are you ready, Tiger?"

His question is spoken in a low, raw voice. Exquisite pleasure seeps deep into my muscles and soaks my core. I draw in a sharp breath. This is everything I want. Mind. Body. Soul. A part of him might no longer hate the thought of being my first, but if I tell Graham how I'm starting to feel about him the rest of him will take over. He won't go through with it.

The rules he swears by won't let him take the risk of me wanting more from him than sex this weekend.

My mind floods with questions. *What risks am I willing to take? Can I live with the inevitable moment when Graham pushes me away for good?*

“Or,” he says, standing back up when I don't give him an answer. “Maybe you've had a change of heart about blackmailing me to sleep with you?”

He tries to step around me and I stop him when my hands reach out. “No. I have waited long enough.” I undo his belt and say, “I'm ready.”

Graham gazes down at me and I slip my fingers under the straps of my dress. They fall from my shoulders, revealing my breasts. As Graham eases back on the bed, the silky fabric drops around my ankles. His eyes rove over me. Taking me in, he brings his hands up to my hips and gently pulls down on my underwear.

“Come here.” Graham helps me on top of him. My knees straddle his sides and he smiles. “Closer than that, Tiger.”

Encouraging my hips further up his body, I follow his lead as his head rests on the mattress and he scoops his arms underneath my thighs. My naked cunt hovering over his face, Graham breathes me in deeply. He releases the breath through his mouth and it caresses the warmest parts of me. His hands seem like they're everywhere on my body. My breasts, my ass, teasing my spine. But his eyes are still locked on mine, never wandering. I'm hanging on tenterhooks, locked in our gaze.

“I want your pussy for dessert, and for breakfast in the morning,” he says. “Do you still belong to me, Willa?”

“Yes,” I whimper without hesitation. “Yes.”

“Are you sure?”

Graham slaps my ass with his palm and my entire body answers him. My knees tremble. My mouth lets out a tiny plea. My pussy throbs.

“Show me”, he says. “Sit that pretty pussy on my face or I’ll slap your ass until it’s so red you’ll wake up tomorrow with my handprint still on your skin.”

Both excited and alarmed, I quickly sink my hips around his face. Graham’s mouth covers my flesh. His tongue slips between my folds and he licks me from cunt to clit. I buckle over. Falling forward, I fist the sheets in both hands. I try to keep myself up as Graham sucks and teases me. The tip of his tongue flickers over my swollen nub and I fight to pull away, but his hands hold my hips in place. He groans. It’s deep and guttural. The sound rumbles a rapturous sensation all through me and somehow, I overpower him, breaking free of Graham’s firm grasp and his delicious kiss.

He laughs. “Oh, don’t tell me my mouth’s turned you into a kitten all of a sudden, Little Tiger. Am I your first for this too?”

Panting, I gaze down at him. Shaking my head, I say, “No, but you’re a lot better.”

“It seems that way. Unless you’re always like this.” He smiles. His eyes locked on mine, Graham leans his mouth to the left and kisses me on the leg. It’s then I realize I’m so turned on, that he can lick my wetness from inside of my thigh. “It’s too late to run. You said you were mine and I take care of everything that belongs to me, Willa. If you want to belong to me tonight, just let go and let me take care of you.”

Graham raises his head up and coaxes me into his mouth again. I look into his eyes and I find my safety in their dark brown depths as he eats me out. As he takes care of me like he says he will. Letting go of all my fears, I bury my fingers in his hair and ride his face until I can’t think about them. They are so deep under the well of my desires that they drown. All that’s left are my unbridled shrieks, my legs quaking, struggling to keep me upright as I writhe and I cum so fast it’s embarrassing.

With his eyes gazing up at me, Graham just lovingly drinks from my pussy until he’s satisfied, but not before I can feel another orgasm building in my cunt.

I suck in big gulps of air. “Oh God, you’re really good at that.” *Of course he is. It’s not fair that I can’t have him for the rest of my life.*

“Graham, I want you inside me.” He raises himself up, moving me down his body and I sit on his lap. “I’m sorry for forcing you to break your rule, but please fuck me now.”

He licks his fingers, then reaches between us, between my legs. Tantalizingly slowly, he traces his touch over my clit.

“Do you know how much I want that? Right now I couldn’t give a fuck about those rules, Willa.”

I feel his fingers sliding against the entrance of my slippery pussy. I kiss him, tasting myself on his lips. “Show me then.”

Graham fumbles at his hip, then pulls something from his pocket. I’m surprised when I see the gold-foiled condom. He’s prepared. Then again, he did say he didn’t give a fuck about his rules anymore. While he rips open the condom wrapper, I undo the button on his pants and unzip them. When I pull back on his underwear, Graham’s thick cock stands straight up. He’s hard and he’s huge.

“We’ll go slow.” He touches my face and brushes my lips with his thumb. “I’ll be gentle with my Little Tiger.” He pulls me close and kisses me, then he rolls the condom down the length of his dick and takes my hand. “In this position, you can control how deep I go in, how fast I can move. Everything. Take your time, trust me, and tell me what you want, okay?”

I nod, listening to him like he’s a professor. My professor of fucking. “Okay,” I say.

Holding his cock in my hand, I position him between my legs. Graham grabs me before I can do anything else. When I look at him, he says, “You’re anxious. I can tell.”

He starts moving our hands, gliding his cock against my wet flesh, swirling the tip over my clit. I shutter and swallow and try to breathe calmly. “That feels so much better than I ever imagined it could.”

His arm encircles my back. “Slow,” he says. “Just like this. Wrap your arms around my shoulders and kiss me. Keep looking at me in my eyes.”

Every instruction he gives, I follow exactly.

“Lower your hips when you’re ready. Just a little at a time,” Graham whispers into my mouth. He groans when I do as I’m told. “Fuck.”

“What’s the matter?”

Graham squeezes his eyes shut for a moment, then he shakes his head. “You feel good already, Tiger. I don’t know if *I’m* ready.”

We chuckle. He kisses me, deeper. I inch lower and feel the head of his cock enter me. I moan. Desperate for more, I try to buck my hips.

Graham grabs me. “Hey, I don’t want to hurt you. Besides, this teasing is nice the longer it goes on. You’ll see.” Graham lowers his head and pulls my nipple between his teeth. The pain distracts me. “Did you like that?”

“Yes. Do it again.” Now Graham listens to my instructions. “Hold me closer. Call me your Little Tiger.”

He’s as good a student as he is a teacher, and soon I’m pushing past the intense ache coming from between my legs as Graham pushes deeper inside me. Finally, I feel comfortable enough to slowly rock my hips back and forth.

“Fuck” Graham says again, drawing out the word.

“These are good fucks you keep saying, right?”

“Yes, fucking yes. You know they are.”

He groans and I smother it with my mouth. I suck on his lip and he thrusts his hips high between my thighs. I cry out. My fingernails dig into his back, adding to the scrapes that were already left there from some other woman. Jealousy, irrational and unyielding, overwhelms me. More and more as Graham and I search for our rhythm.

“Sorry,” he whispers and holds me close to him. “Did it hurt a lot?”

There was pain, sharp and strange, but I say, “You feel good just like this.”

He grunts. “I want to fuck you harder, though. It’s killing me not to,” he says and I can hear the desperation in his voice, yearning for me. “Squeeze your legs around me tighter. Willa, you have to be in charge of me, okay? Please.”

My pulse quickens at his words. Graham pleading for me to control his will sends me into a spiral of pleasure I never knew I’d enjoy. It feels all the more sweet when he squeezes my breast and tweaks the nipple between his fingers. I clamp my thighs around his waist and I sink deeper, taking all of him inside me. Graham does something with his hips my mind can’t bother to comprehend because whatever it is feels a thousand times better than my fingers or my vibrator ever have. “Oh fuck. Don’t. Do that again.”

“You didn’t like it?”

“No. I mean don’t stop doing it.”

He doesn’t. He grabs my ass and doubles down on the move instead. Graham chuckles. “Keep going. Just like that. You should see how beautiful you look. Your skin’s on fire. I can feel you burning from the inside out for me.”

With every word, Graham screws me slowly and my pussy clamps around his dick like a pulsating vice. I can barely hold my eyes open, but every time they flutter Graham tugs gently on my hair.

“No,” he says. “Stay right here with me.”

Mouth gasping, I nod. My body quivers. I rebel against Graham’s embrace, but he pulls me closer to his chest. He nibbles on my breast until his teeth are pressing tiny bites around my nipple again. Pain and pleasure. Ecstasy and agony. All wrapped up in one skipped heartbeat.

“You’re close.”

I must be. “Oh God,” I whisper.

“Look at me, Willa.”

I do as he says. Graham’s hand helps me grind against him. My clit is so sensitive that the sensation is almost too much to take. I want to feel this way forever, but I want to feel what comes after it even more.

Graham brings his other hand to my throat. He grips my neck, my hair and he thrusts inside my pussy. My thighs tremble. I arch my back and my hips match his speed

perfectly. Neither of us are in control of the other right now. The power is shared between us and it brings me to my peak.

“Graham,” I whimper.

“Cum for me,” he says in a voice as wicked as sin. On his command, my body explodes. As every second goes by, the waves of pleasure spasm over me. I’m shattering in his arms. Crashing, spiraling, writhing. Graham grunts. With my limbs weakening, he slams his cock between my thighs. Over and over, he buries his cock into my pussy. He’s squeezing me tight and I squeeze him right back. He grunts. *“Fuck!”*

Graham stands. He hammers himself inside me for a few delicious strokes, before he throws me on the bed. I hold on to his arms as he unleashes a flurry of short thrusts and heat builds in my cunt like a furnace. I succumb to the fire again. I scream his name so loud this time that his hand around my throat lets go and covers my mouth.

“Shh,” he says. Graham flattens my chest with his chest. “Okay, I’ll go slow again.”

“No,” I plead.

Graham smothers my protest with a soft kiss. “Trust me,” he says and tempers his pace. Already, I like this rhythm just as much, maybe even more.

Grazing his thumb across my lips, he slips the digit over my tongue and I suck on his rough skin. Graham eases the finger back and forth, fucking my mouth in time with his hips.

“Jesus, woman. You’re such a sweet surprise. I want you to cum for me again. Get my dick as wet as that finger.”

With each deliberate stroke, Graham pulls me out of myself. I feel like I’m floating off the bed, rising higher and higher with every pulse of my cunt around his cock. His thumb still slowly fucking my mouth, I can only moan as I start careening again to my breaking point.

“That’s my Little Tiger. I want to feel your pussy clamping down on me again.” Graham grunts. “Christ, you feel like Heaven and I deserve Hell for all the things I’ve done.”

His eyes finally flutter shut and I’m close to falling off the cliff of my ecstasy and into the throes with him. He removes his hand from my mouth and I pant, feeling my entire body primed for another release.

Graham scoops his hand underneath my head, fisting my hair. “All of you belongs to me,” he says. “Who do you belong to, Willa?”

He tugs my hair just the slightest and I tip over the edge. My climax reaches new heights and I dig my nails into his skin again. “You,” I stammer out. “I belong to you, Graham. I’m your Little Tiger.”

He squeezes his eyes shut and hammers my pussy. His rhythm becomes erratic and his grip tightens around my throat as his breathing grows ragged and he finally lets himself feel his release. Graham collapses on top of me, capturing my mouth in a breathless kiss.

We open our eyes. Breathing heavily, we stare at each other. Graham speaks first.

“How was it? How do you feel?” he asks.

I feel intoxicated. Utterly sated. Despite the knots in my belly tightening as the seconds slip by in the passage of time. I don't know where Graham or I will be a year from now or ten years from now, but I doubt I'll ever cherish being in a state of intimacy as deep or fulfilling as what I've shared with him tonight.

GRAHAM

WILLA CRADLES HER BODY over half of mine. Warm and naked, she's been content sharing this space on the bed with me for the last twenty minutes—or however long it's been since we recovered from our first time and dove right back into it like greedy lovers.

I pull her closer. Pressing my lips against her forehead, I continue playing in her hair and she coos in my arms. These natural responses to intimacy are exactly the reasons I had to create boundaries for the women I allow into my life. But Willa growing attached to me won't be a consequence of me breaking a rule for her. It's simply the result of who she is. Willa won't be like Molly. She'll believe all our days to be like today, and all our nights to be like tonight.

She kisses my chest and turns her face up to mine. "I never want to leave this bed," she says.

I shake my head. "Uh oh."

Gazing up into my eyes, she says, "What does that mean?"

“Nothing.”

She smiles. “Stop panicking. I’m not going to blackmail you into marrying me next.”

I chuckle. The truth is, I’d forgive her this one time if she were compelled to propose. Sex with Willa was amazing. She was beautiful to watch as she responded effortlessly to me. As she took my direction, then became more confident and started ordering me around. I really could spend the rest of my life pleasuring her just to witness all of her climaxes.

Willa lifts her head and I’m uncomfortable when the warmth of her body vanishes from my skin. I stop myself from reaching out for her when she starts to trace her finger over what remains of my fight with Victor Reuben in seventh grade.

A natural-born bastard, my foster father got drunk and took his frustrations out on the midsection of Bonnie, my eldest foster sister. When I tried to fight him off her, he turned his fists on me. I was still in pain and in a foul mood the next day. Not even solving problems in my favorite class could temporarily lessen my rage. I was good at math and didn’t mind helping others who weren’t. But that day I refused to share my answers in Algebra with Victor, so he stabbed me with his pencil in the hallway. I lost it and beat the shit out of him. I beat him so bad, his parents transferred him to another school.

“Are these all from working for Patrick?”

I shift underneath her. “No. Not that one. That one came from before. A few of them did.”

Willa circles the tip of her finger over the scar. “How do you do it?”

“Do what?”

“Risk your life for money and power so easily when you won’t even take a chance on being loved by someone?”

My eyes snap up from her finger tracing my skin and lock onto hers. “I don’t need to be loved, Willa.” I draw in a long breath. “It’s that simple.”

After a moment, she nods. “I get it, you know.”

She couldn’t possibly, but challenging her assertion is pointless. She wouldn’t know the first thing about living a hard life. Or how to survive one. Arguing with her over what she does and doesn’t get would just encourage her. It would make me sound like I’m trying to convince her that she could love me. That if I would only help her to understand what it would take to turn her into a Molly or a Melissa, we could be together.

I won’t do that to Willa. If she wants me to take her down this path, she’ll have to make that choice all by herself.

“I’ve been thinking,” she says. “I don’t want to write the piece on O’Rourke.”

Blindsided, I blink. *Was she backing out on the opportunity because of me?* “You don’t have to do that. Just be smart about what you say in the article. I can help you with that.”

She nods again, then her eyes meet mine. “Graham, I lied to you. Since the beginning. I did hear something when I walked in on Patrick and O’Rourke. Something that could damage them both.”

I sit up and she follows me. Apprehension. It’s what I see on her face, lurking just behind all that beauty and temptation. “Don’t be scared,” I reassure her. “I’ll protect you.”

“You’ve been doing that since we met.”

“No one will dare lay a hand on you. No one,” I repeat.

There’s a knock at the door. I sigh and get out of the bed. Willa covers herself up and I wait for her to give me a signal before opening the door just enough to see Sammy, but not enough for him to see far inside. “What’s up, man? It’s late.”

“It’s Patrick.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

WILLA

“WILLA, I SAID STAY in the room.” Graham moves quickly to put on his pants and pulls one of his t-shirts over his head. “It’s probably nothing. Like Sammy said.”

The panic on his face betrays every word he spoke, so I tighten the belt around my robe. “No, I’m coming with you.”

He lets out a loud sigh, opens the door, and I follow him over the threshold. We stop short outside our room. There’s a crowd at the far end of the hall. In the middle of it is Patrick lying on a stretcher, Melissa holding his hand. I look at Graham and our eyes meet briefly before he steams towards the fray.

“They should have called me,” he says.

I try to keep up with him, but his long, determined strides pull him away. He’s a yard ahead of me. By the time I reach them, Graham is peppering the EMT with questions, and his voice is the only one in the hall. There’s an edge of frustration

in his tone that only the EMT is shocked to hear. The rest of us would expect him to react this way to a scene like this.

I look around the hallway. Jimmy, Leanna, Melissa, Sammy, and several other faces I recognize from tonight's party are present. Right away, I notice that Patrick's children are missing. Neve is likely asleep, but where the hell is Carey? I never left my father's side when we learned he was ill.

"Calm down, son," Patrick says and places a hand on his arm. Graham's jaw clenches shut, but he takes a breath. I can truly see the bond between them. It's a twisted devotion that they have for each other, but the love they share is honest. It's real. "Graham, it's a bad case of heartburn. I overdid it on the stuffed peppers at dinner. That's all."

"We're going to take him to the hospital. Just to be on the safe side, but," the EMT pauses. "It's probably the peppers."

There's a low murmur amongst the crowd from everyone chuckling. Everyone except me and Graham. I don't know how to react in this moment, so I take my cues from him. He's my tether to this world, and I don't want to break our link.

"See," Patrick says. "Just the peppers, son."

Graham nods. "I'll ride in the ambulance with you."

"No, I'm riding with him," Melissa says. "This is my fault. After thirty years of marriage, I should've stopped him from eating any more of them once he started complaining at the dinner table. I'll go with him, Graham."

“I’ll follow you then,” Graham says, slapping his hand against Sammy’s chest. “Give me the keys.”

Before Sammy can retrieve the keys from his pocket, Patrick says, “No, stay here. Neve might wake up and I don’t want her to fuss over nothing.”

He sees reason in the argument and finally agrees, although his approval comes with a huff. “Okay, but someone call me with an update as soon as you know something.”

“I will,” Melissa says, smiling at him.

She’s just as enamored by their bond as I am.

The EMTs wheel Patrick down the hall and Graham instructs Sammy to remain stationed at his post outside of the Donovans’ suite. With all their equipment and their patient on the stretcher, there’s only room for Melissa in the elevator. The rest of us continue to the main stairs. Everyone regroups in the lobby.

“Hey Jimmy, why don’t you let me do this, so you can get some sleep. Tomorrow’s your big day.”

Jimmy grins. He kisses Leanna and says, “I’ll see you tomorrow. I’ll be waiting for you at the bottom of the aisle.”

“Okay,” she says. “Tell Patrick he better not upstage me. The train on my dress took months to complete.”

He flashes her a broad smile and smacks her bum as she walks towards the elevator.

“Jimmy,” Graham says.

“It’s fine.” His tone is sharp. “Listen, while I’m on my honeymoon, enjoying my new wife, you’ll get to be me for a few weeks. You will have another chance to impress him, okay? Just...” Jimmy sighs. He glances at me. “This is family, Graham. Just the Donovan family. Have a good night, alright. Both of you.”

He stomps off. Graham’s disappointment is palpable. His head falls and his shoulders slump. Watching his reaction to Jimmy’s slight, tears sting the corners of my eyes. I grab his hand. “Come on. Let’s go back to our room.”

Graham doesn’t budge, but he raises his head. Lights flashing and no sirens, the ambulance drives off with Jimmy trailing behind them. They slowly roll by the magnificent fountain that greets the resort’s guests as they enter. The two vehicles carry on down the long, tree-lined driveway, their headlights casting shadows in the night.

“Don’t listen to him.”

“He’s right, though. Isn’t he?”

“No. Family doesn’t come in one shape. And it isn’t always about blood.”

He looks at me and says, “Jimmy and Carey are just pissed off because *I* did my job.”

“Is that why Carey’s not here?”

“Who knows? Maybe.” Graham sighs. “I didn’t bring our room key with me. Did you?”

“No.”

Graham turns and walks us over to the front desk. He explains to one of the staff that we're locked out of our room. With the commotion over, the lobby is quiet. My thoughts travel to Melissa and Patrick. Thirty years married to a mafia king. I glance up at Graham, and of course I make the obvious comparison between us. I wonder what it was like for Melissa to make the choice to be with Patrick. What did her family think of her husband? Did they just accept the man and his reputation after a while?

And then there's Leanna. She's also marrying into this world. From my limited interactions with them, both couples appear to be so different. The older one seems reserved and understated, while the soon-to-be newlyweds are overt judging by the extravagance of this weekend. I sigh. Maybe tomorrow at the wedding, I'll get the opportunity to ask the women how they got here. And how they survive living with the men they fell in love with.

We're issued another key and we take the stairs up to the second floor. Once we're back inside our room, Graham snaps up his jacket from the floor and takes out his phone from the pocket.

"I think I'm going to take a shower."

"Okay," he says. At last he smiles at me again. "Let me know if you need someone to rub soap on your back. I know a guy. He's pretty good at it."

I giggle. "You'll be my first call."

As the water beats down on me, my fingers move down my body to feel between my legs. Investigating the current state of my womanhood, I smile thinking about how loving and gentle Graham was with me both times we had sex.

I'm not sure how much longer he'll tolerate me being around him, but I've decided that I'm going to turn down the job offers out east. I want to stay in Chicago for at least another year. That will give me time to figure out what I want to do with myself. My mother won't be pleased. Neither will my godfather.

After showering, I return to the room to find it empty. I know Graham's left for the hospital when I discover the door on the safe is wide open and the box he stored his gun in is sitting on the shelf above it.

Intending to call him, I retrieve my phone from my purse. Then I stop myself. Graham took his gun. Why would he do that? If Patrick was having a heart attack, a gun would be the last thing he'd need.

Pacing around the room, I try to imagine what Leanna or Melissa would do in this circumstance. They would probably not panic like I'm doing. I toss my phone on the bed and grab the towel, drying my hair to distract me for a while. But the minutes turn into hours and finally fear wins.

I call Graham's phone at a quarter to one in the morning and it just rings. I decide to dress and see if I can get some information from Sammy, or whoever was still outside Neve's door.

There are two men posted by the suite. They see me coming and the one closest to me starts marching up the hall. “You should go back to your room,” he says.

“Do you know where Graham is? I tried his phone, but it went to his voicemail.”

The bodyguard sighs. “Everyone’s at the hospital.”

“Did something happen to Patrick?” He offers no response to the question. My mind switches from fear to near hysteria. “I... I need someone to take me to the hospital. Right now!”

Given my newness in this world I was an afterthought for most of the people here. The bodyguard denies my demands and orders me back to my room, but I head straight for the lobby instead.

My Uber driver arrived almost twenty minutes later. “There’s a big detour down the main road,” he says. “Lots of cops. Something exciting must have happened.”

What’s the emotion that comes after hysteria? I feel it now. Whatever it is. I try not to think about what the driver’s saying and ask him to take the fastest alternate route. When we pull up to the emergency room, police are here, too. I exit the car and approach the entrance.

“Willa.” I look in the direction of Flynn’s voice. He intercepts me and says, “The cops won’t let you into the hospital. We’re not family.”

It’s just Flynn and Sammy outside and the looks on their faces terrify me. Sammy’s eyes are puffy and his face is

soaked with tears. His hand shakes as he wipes it across his nose. I shudder. My fingers dig into my palms. My heart rate spikes. “Where’s Graham? Is he okay? I tried to call him but he wouldn’t answer me.”

“It’s standard procedure. No phone calls. Graham’s fine. We all just need to stay off our phones for a while.”

“Flynn, what happened?”

“We don’t know yet.” He sighs. “Patrick’s ambulance got ambushed. Whoever did it, killed him, Melissa and the EMTs.” My eyes go wide as he continues, “Jimmy’s the only one who wasn’t pronounced dead at the scene. Last we heard they were operating on him, but he probably would’ve died there on the road, too, if Graham hadn’t gone after them.”

My hands fly to my face, covering my mouth. “Jesus.” What Flynn says hits me like a truck. My legs wobble and he catches me. Leading me to the bench, he helps me sit. “Graham,” I whisper. “He must be...”

“Willa, maybe you should go back to the hotel. I’ll have Sammy drive you.”

I shake my head. “No, I’m not leaving until I talk to him.”

After an intense stare down, Flynn nods. “Okay, you can wait out here with us. But it’s cold, so why don’t you sit in the car?”

Flynn lets me inside the back of the SUV. I don’t expect him to join me, but since I want to know more, I’m glad when he sits beside me. Although I have so many questions, I struggle

to voice any of them. Flynn looks devastated and I can't even imagine how Graham might be feeling.

We sit together in silence. I remember tucking my legs inside my arms, my eyes stalking the glass entrance of the emergency room, but I'm not sure when I drifted off to sleep. I'm jolted awake when a door on the SUV opens. My eyes blink and slowly Graham appears in my view. I kick my feet off the seat and sit up straight. He gets in and sits where Flynn had been and I throw my arms around him.

"Graham, I was so scared."

He embraces me, holding the back of my head with a hand and pulling me close. "I know. I'm sorry."

"Are you hurt?"

"No, I'm fine." After a long quiet moment, I break away and look at his face. His features are eerily calm like the night in the alley. But unlike the alley, with our bodies so close, I can search his eyes. I catch a glimmer of the pain he's concealing, just before it vanishes and he lowers his face. "Jimmy didn't make it," he says.

"Oh, Graham. I'm so sorry."

He reaches for the handle on the door and pulls on it. Graham looks outside. He nods his head, then yanks the door shut again. "We're going to the resort to pack up and go back to the city."

The two front doors on the SUV open. Flynn and Sammy get in and leave the hospital as a new morning penetrates the

eastern sky. As we drive, I gaze out the window, thinking about Leanna. *Oh, God. What about Neve?* Tears tumble down my cheek.

I turn my head to look at Graham and he wipes my face. “When we get back, I’m taking you home.” He leans forward and whispers, “What happened between us last night meant a lot. But you can’t be around me anymore. You won’t want to. Do you understand me?”

My head nods. “You can talk to me.”

He shakes his head. “Everything’s different now, Willa. Everything.”

As we pack away our clothes, we move around each other like ghosts. At times, I notice him pausing in the middle of doing something. When it happens again while he’s putting on his shirt, I walk over and help him secure the two top buttons.

“It was like this for me too, after my father died. Sometimes, I’d just stop because I couldn’t imagine him not being there anymore.” When I raise my gaze, his eyes are staring back at me. I touch his cheek. “You don’t have to pretend that you’re fine.”

He takes my hand and presses his lips into my palm. “Thank you,” he says.

Graham and his world are deadly. And even though he fights not to show it, he’s broken right now and he needs someone. So why not me? My feet inch off the carpet and I rise onto my toes. I kiss him and he kisses me back.

We hold onto each other for a while, and I tell him, “I’m not leaving you.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

GRAHAM

OUR PROCESSION INCHES TOWARDS the arched gates of the cemetery. A black hearse carrying a beautiful array of flowers from the church leads a long line of mourners. The next car carries Jimmy's coffin. Melissa's and Patrick's hearses follow it. The remnants of the Donovan family, Carey, Leanna and Neve, travel behind in the fourth vehicle and Willa and I ride alone in the fifth car.

In death, I know I won't find any peace. I accepted my fate years ago. Peace has never been anything more than fleeting in my life, but even for me and my world, the past ten days have taken on a more spiteful cruelty.

My family has been shattered. I have no leads on who murdered three of them and left the other people I love heartbroken. Angry and hopeless, my gaze lingers on the stone and iron entrance of the cemetery before I turn my head and look at Willa. She's staring out the other window, sitting tall and straight. Her long black hair is pulled back and confined to

an elegant bundle at the base of her neck. Its color blends in against her black dress which contrasts against her skin.

Following the soft outlines of her curves, my eyes take in the sight of my hand nestled between both of hers. Our hands rest on her lap. I didn't want her at the funeral, but she never listens to me any more. She even got herself fired when she refused to give her editor any of the details of what happened at the resort, or the story she wrote about O'Rourke, including what she overheard being said between him and Patrick.

She's young and just as fucking naive as the night I rescued her in the alley. I never should've broken my rule for her. I shirked my responsibilities, forgot to be disciplined all the time. I gave into my lust and now I'm stuck with her treating me like I'm a bird with a bad wing.

"After the wake tonight, it's over. I don't want you back at my apartment."

"I know you don't," she says and never looks in my direction.

"I mean it this time, Willa."

"I know."

"Will you stop being such a fucking brat." My voice rises uncontrollably with each word. "You don't know any of us. We're a spectacle to you. A sick, violent carnival. You're just some stupid, reckless little rich girl that I've been fucking. You don't belong here. Or with me."

Finally, she turns her head and faces me. I wanted to see tears welling in her eyes, spilling down her beautiful face and ruining her makeup. I hoped I might see a flash of that anger that made me want to call her a tiger. *My Little Tiger*. I needed her to lash out and slap my face again. Or better yet, listen to me and leave me. But I don't get any of it. Instead, she just nods and says, "I know, Graham."

I have to look away. I have to go back to staring out of the window at the entrance of the cemetery. But I also need to squeeze my eyes shut. My chest heaves with every breath and I have to ball my left hand into a fist.

For all my annoyance at her, for all my supposedly famous rage, I can't scare her off. And I can't remove my right hand from its position cradled on her lap like a fragile egg, nestled inside her warm, gentle touch.

I'm the fool. I'm the one who's reckless.



Across the room, I get a signal from Flynn. He jerks his head in the direction of the exit and I nod in response.

Taking a step, I turn and stand in front of Willa. "We're meeting downstairs now and I have to go."

"Okay." I pull her close and take her face inside my left hand because once again the fingers on my right hand are interlaced with hers. Leaning forward as she rises up to me, our lips meet for a brief kiss. When we break away, she looks at me and says, "I'll be here when you get back."

I linger a moment longer, staring into her eyes, my thumb stroking her cheek. When I turn my back on her, I make sure Sammy's not far away. The two of us make eye contact, then he trains his gaze on her. I made certain two of the guys I trust the most are posted outside of Neve's bedroom door. I'm not taking any more chances with them. Not even inside Patrick's mansion.

Maneuvering through the crowd of mourners, I angle my way to Flynn and Jimmy's guys, Ryan Murphy and Michael Sullivan. We exit the room and they follow me downstairs. Walking through the narrow pathway to the wine cellar, my mind recalls all the times I've taken these steps with Patrick in front of me. I lead the guys through the four-inch thick bulletproof door, into the fifty seven degree room with rows of dusty wine bottles, trying not to feel overwhelmed by those memories.

Carey and the other bosses are already inside. There are five of them. They are old and all agreed to work for Patrick many years ago. I wonder if any of them were behind the plot. Before I even recovered from the shock and my initial grief, I had all the bosses in our ranks surveilled. For Patrick's killers to have gotten to him at the wedding makes me know for sure that someone close to us betrayed the family.

Trust is in short supply. But when I gaze around the room, all I see are people I would die for. None of us sit in the chairs around the table. I can't even look at the empty seats. My head tips forward and I study the grain in the wood floors instead.

“This isn’t an easy time for this kind of conversation, but our alliance has work to do,” I hear Liam Murphy say. I raise my head and catch him turning his gaze away from me. He looks in the direction of Patrick’s empty seat and continues, “We understand that before Patrick died—“

“Murdered,” I say.

Liam nods in agreement. “Yes, Graham. Before he was murdered, I understand that he appointed you to run Jimmy’s affairs. We want that to continue.”

Shit. This isn’t the time. Although I understand their urgency, there are still too many unknowns to start discussing succession. But just like me, they are searching for stability and none of us can afford the vacuum in leadership to exist for much longer.

“Carey, we expect you to continue as your father wished. Taking care of the other businesses,” Sam Wettle says. “I can help you. Until you’re up to speed.”

“What the fuck are you all talking about?” Carey shouts. “You don’t get to decide. My father’s body hasn’t even been in the ground for a day and you’re all ready to move on.”

“No one’s moving on, Carey,” Liam says.

“Yeah, except for the people who killed my family. My fucking baby sister and I deserve justice for that,” Carey says.

There’s a long silence. *This is all my fault.* I’m the one who failed Patrick. I should have listened to my gut instead of their insinuations and objections. Had I taken control in that hallway,

I would've been more prepared to protect them than Jimmy was.

“Fuck this shit,” Carey says. “I’ll find those sons of bitches myself and we’ll deal with them. Until then *this* conversation ends now.”

Carey storms out of the cellar and I look over at Flynn. He’s already taking a step towards the door when I say, “Go with him, but keep him calm.”

I trust that Flynn understands my meaning, but Carey’s not wrong. Allowing Patrick’s killers to avoid our retribution is a huge risk for our entire operation. We have to flush them out and anyone who helped them. Then we’d kill every last one of them. But we needed to be smart about it.

Ryan and Michael follow Flynn and I’m longing for another glass of something strong to drink.

“Graham,” Liam says and I look up at him. “Carey’s in an emotional state.”

“He’s not the only one. What have any of you found out?” I look into the eyes of every boss standing in the room. Scrutinizing everything from the clothes they chose to wear to their body language, I level the weight of my stare on each man. “Nothing. How the fuck can I let that stand?”

“We’re going to find out who did this, Graham. You have the word of every man in this room on that. Patrick and I had been friends since...” Liam pauses and I can see the pain on his features. “A long time. Those bastards and anyone else

who played a part in this will pay. You have my solemn word on that.”

“Mine too,” Sam says and the other bosses nod. “And,” he continues. “You’d have the support of all of us, if you wanted to stand in for Carey until he’s ready.”

“He’s not ready, Graham,” Liam says. “But you have been by Patrick’s side. You have our trust now and we believe you can get Carey there one day. This family Patrick built needs you.”

Again, each one of the bosses nod in agreement.

They must all be out of their fucking minds.



A second knock comes to the door of Patrick’s office where I’ve been drinking and hiding out for the last hour. Neve’s nanny came earlier to deliver her evening report to me. Tonight, she’d finally gotten Patrick’s daughter to sleep, but once again Neve cried for a long time.

The door opens even though I never answered the knock.

“Hey,” Willa says. “Everyone’s just about gone. And Flynn told me to tell you that Carey’s back.” She closes the door and walks across the room. Joining me on the sofa, she sits, leaving an arm’s length distance separating us. “It’s time to go home.”

Yeah. I can try to tell her that she won’t be coming home with me tonight, but I’m already dreaming about waking up

beside her. For the past ten mornings, she's been one of the few beacons of light in the swell of my dark days.

From the day we left the resort, Willa's been with me. She even told her mother not to fly out for her graduation because she wasn't planning on attending either of them. Her mother was livid at first, but then she turned the situation around on her daughter. As a trade for not walking across the stage to receive her diplomas, Willa had to take one of the jobs waiting for her out east. If she didn't, her mother threatened to cut her off. Then her mother also demanded that she start sooner rather than waiting until after the summer.

Willa and I are living on borrowed time. *We always were anyway.*

She extends her hand to me and says, "Come on. Take me home."

"You mean my place."

She sighs and crosses her arms. "So we're doing this again?"

"Willa, ask me why I've been in here for the last hour."

She sighs again and it is heavy on the princess, heavy on the tiger. "Go on and tell me."

I ease off the sofa and move closer to her so I can whisper. As I tell her what Liam, Sam and the other bosses asked of me her face remains neutral to the untrained eye. I see the alarm she's trying to mask, though. She might as well be screaming.

“That’s the kind of man you’re sleeping with,” I say. Her eyes are burning holes in mine and she doesn’t move. “So, answer my question now. Do you still want to come home with me?”

WILLA

STANDING AT THE FOOT of Graham's bed, I raise my eyes from the phone screen and gaze at him. He's tangled in the sheets with his messy morning hair on my pillow. A soft light from the windows casts his features in an ethereal glow and I can't help but smile at him. For days, Graham has been miserable in bed. He tosses and turns and keeps me awake half the night. But when I open my eyes and feel his face nuzzled in my hair I don't regret missing the sleep.

I tiptoe over to the bathroom, shutting the door behind me. I had expected that the text messages were from my mother, making sure I don't forget our bargain. She's the only person I've confided everything that's happened to me in the last three weeks. I needed her advice, her wisdom, and her ultimatum.

I never got my chance to speak to Melissa or Leanna. But in spite of how I feel about him, I couldn't bear the thought of losing Graham the way Leanna lost Jimmy. Or if one day, I'd have to raise his child alone. When I told him about the

bargain I struck with my mother, Graham said I made the right choice. He didn't even question the obvious holes in my story. I'm an adult. My trust fund belongs to me, and therefore my mother can't cut me off.

All five of the text messages came from Jess. She sounded worried, so I had to call her.

"Hey," she says. "Is everything ok? Why have you been avoiding me?"

"I haven't been on purpose. It's just a little crazy."

"How was the funeral?"

"Jess, it's still early in the morning so I'm going to ignore how weird that question is."

"Sorry. That was a strange way to ask how someone's doing. I just wanted to make sure you were okay. I went to The Donnie and Vice, but no one would let me in. Everybody and everything just shut down after Graham fired me."

"He did what? Why would he do that?"

"I don't know," she says. "I don't know."

I rake my fingers through my hair, resting my hand on my head. Graham has been holding all his emotions inside. I have been with him almost every minute since the murders and I haven't seen him cry once. His mood fluctuates between bouts of rage and moroseness. Even when we're having sex, there are moments when I lose him and I have to pull him back.

"Patrick's death really hit him hard, Jess."

“Yeah, I don’t doubt it. That man was like a father to him. He could do no wrong in Graham’s eyes.”

The reverence Graham still holds for Patrick is misguided, but Jess’s words couldn’t be more true. Graham had lost the only father he knew. Remembering what he said about being asked to take Patrick’s place, I worry Graham and Carey will be at odds. The two men might end up fighting each other like hell, both of them desperate to live up to a dead parent’s expectations.

I know all about that desperation. It’s what I’ve been doing. Taking on two majors in school and doubling down on my education, I ignored almost every other aspect of life trying to make my dead father proud of me.

After all of the work and resulting loneliness, I’m standing in the bathroom of someone who might become a mafia boss this week. I’m in love with a man who has killed, and will kill again. And I’m still contemplating throwing all my hard work away to be with him, so that he can know it’s possible for me to love him. Flaws, scars, wickedness, and all.

“Willa, you don’t owe me anything, but I need this job,” Jess says. “Do you think you could talk to him? Ask him to give me a call?”

“Of course,” I say. “But Jess, I can’t make any promises.”

“If anyone can get him to do it, it’s you.”

After I end the call with Jess, I rejoin Graham in the bedroom. His face is buried in the pillows and I believe he’s

still asleep until his hand pats my side of the bed and he says, “Is it your mother again? Is she still upset with you about missing graduation?”

Still clutching my phone, I walk over to the bed. “Don’t sweat it. My mother gets upset with me about at least two things every month.”

“Well, I’m upset with you.”

I balk. “About what?”

He repositions his head, lifting it and moving it around until I can see all the sweet boyish beauty of his face. “You robbed me of waking up to the smell of your hair. I’ve gotten accustomed to it.”

I dive into the bed beside him, grinning and making sure my hair falls over all parts of him. “Is that better?”

“Much.”

I close my eyes, resting in our embrace listening to his heart beating slowly. “Graham, could you do me a favor?” He hesitates. I brush my hair out of the way and look up at him. “Please,” I whine.

“Willa, Don’t ask me to do anything that puts you in any more danger. I can’t do that and...” He sighs. “I can’t say no to you right now.”

A half-hearted smile tugs at one corner of my lips. “It isn’t about me. It’s Jess.”

“Jess?”

“I was just on the phone with her. She said you fired her and everyone has shut her out. Why would you do that, Graham?”

He sits up. “Have you been talking to her?”

“No. Not until today.”

“Block her number, Willa. Jess isn’t a bartender. She’s working undercover. She’s a cop.”

My face rumples in confusion. “She’s... No,” I say in disbelief, but then I think about some of the conversations we’ve had. How she knew a few things about me that she shouldn’t have. “Oh.”

“Have you told her anything she could use against us?”

I raise my gaze and meet his. “I don’t know anything.”

“But she has been asking?”

I shake my head. “A few times she’s tried to get me to talk about you, but we barely knew each other then.”

“Alright, but stay away from her. She can’t be trusted,” he says. Graham kisses me and leaves the bed. As he walks to the bathroom, he asks me what I want to eat for breakfast like we didn’t just have a conversation about an undercover police officer actively investigating them.

There’s a lot I don’t know about Graham. *How can I really be in love with him?* The truth is, if he were a book I may have only read the blurb on the back of the jacket. I know that he cares about keeping me out of trouble. That he would’ve died for Patrick, Melissa, and Jimmy. That he’d kill to protect

Neve, Carey, and the rest of his family. I know he likes to kiss me softly and fuck the brain cells out of my head every night. That he loves to cook and hates to show his emotions.

Knowing those things are not enough.



We spend another day confined to Graham's penthouse. Constantly trying, I didn't convince him to let us go outside to stroll around the park until after dinner. I think he finally got tired of hearing me talk about how he needed to process his feelings.

After another spirited debate, we hopped on the L and ended up in Fulton Market on a rooftop overlooking the city, watching a movie. In the middle of the third act, Graham received the phone call he's been waiting for for days.

We take an Uber to one of the few warehouse districts that developers haven't converted into luxury apartments yet. Getting out of the car, Graham says, "Sammy's going to take you back to the penthouse."

His eyes are busy studying the street. On the drive over, he was quiet but he insisted that I come along. Graham takes me by the hand and leads us across the road. We pass through the fence surrounding the brick buildings. Gravel crunching under our feet, we reach a cluster of cars parked in front of a loading dock. Carey's there. He's standing with Flynn and two other men.

"Where are they?" Graham asks.

“On the way,” Flynn answers.

“Where’s Sammy?”

Flynn points at the big, black SUV. Graham pivots, dragging me with him. Sammy exits from the driver’s side and barrels around the nose of the vehicle. “Where to, boss?” he says, and Graham flinches.

He glances over his shoulder at the others, then says, “My place.”

A van pulls up behind us, entering from the street where we walked in.

“Okay,” Graham says. “Willa get in the car.”

I get a dreadful feeling in my gut as Sammy walks away and Graham ushers me to the door. He opens it and I ask, “Should I be worried for you?”

His eyes search mine like they searched the street moments earlier. “You knew it would come to this eventually.”

I swallow, shut my eyes for a breath. Squeezing his hand, I whisper, “You don’t have to do this.”

The van stops and I see two men exit from the sides. Then the back doors swing open and someone big is thrown out onto the ground. It only takes another second for me to understand that this was why he wanted me here.

The person has a hood over their head and the other two men hoist him roughly to his feet. As I watch them drag the man inside the loading dock, panic, the size of a boulder, sinks

to the lowest part of my belly. Immediately, I recognized the tattoos on the hooded man's arm. My hand claws at Graham's t-shirt. When our eyes connect, he's staring directly at me.

"Is that Rafé?" When he doesn't answer me, I say, "Graham, you can't do this."

His face is hard, but his gaze is even harder. "Fun and games are over now, Little Tiger. This is who I am. And everything you're feeling inside right now is what you'll have to live with if I'm who you want."

"No." I shake my head.

"Willa, God knows this is something I never thought I'd say. Not even in a million years. But if you tell me you can handle this. That you want to be with me in spite of what I'm about to do. In spite of *everything* that I'm going to do, then I'll believe you and I'll try to make this work between us. I won't push you away again. I'm done with that. So you're going to have to process those feelings. You have to make your choice. Because I made mine long before you and I found each other in that dark alley."

He can't stop me from being with him during the fallout of the deaths. We've fought over it a hundred times and he always gives in. Forcing me to decide whether I can stomach watching him take revenge on the people who wronged him is the price I'll have to pay to have him.

Sammy rolls down the window and Graham sticks his head a fraction inside. "Hey, she's going to tell you whether she

wants you to take her home. Or if she wants to go back to her apartment.”

“Okay, boss.”

Graham looks at me sitting in the back of the SUV, clutching my middle. He doesn't say another word. He steps back and lets Sammy roll the window up and drive us off. I stare at him until he turns and heads towards the loading dock.

“Do you know where you wanna go?” Sammy asks.

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

GRAHAM

HANGING BY HIS RESTRAINED hands from a chain in the ceiling, our hostage's midsection has played punching bag for the better part of the evening. Burying my fists into his body until they are raw proves one of two things: either Rafé doesn't know shit about who was involved in the murders, or he's never going to talk.

"He can't know anything," Flynn says. "Taking a beating like that."

Rinsing blood from my hands under the faucet, I agree with his assessment.

"Bullshit," Carey says. "He has to know what hole Stevie's hiding in."

I shut off the water and rest my hip against the stainless steel sink. "Carey, we don't even know for sure if Stevie's the one behind all this."

"It's gotta be him," he says. "I know it's that son of a bitch."

“How?” Flynn asks, his frustrations escaping him. “We can’t move on one of our own without proof. Not without risking the alliance with the others. And not to mention if we attack the wrong people, the real killers will still be out there looking to strike while we’re wasting time and resources shooting at ourselves.”

I push off the sink. Knowing that we’d already fuck this up, I say, “He’s right, Carey. We had to be sure.”

“Graham, you know Stevie’s always been ambitious. He’s never satisfied.” Carey’s face frowns with his words. “It has to be him. Fuck that,” he says and heads back into the room where we stashed Rafé. “Where is he!” Carey screams in the distance.

“He’s out of control,” Flynn says.

“I know.”

“What do you want me to do?”

“I’ll take care of it.”

Flinging aside the plastic curtains separating the rooms, I walk into the area where Carey is. He’s circling Rafé like he’s chum. Like he’s biting chunks of meat from his bones, Carey throws a fist into his ribs every other step he takes.

“Let him down,” I say to Ryan. He hops from his seat and turns the crank, lowering Rafé to the floor. “Take him over to the mattress.”

Carey’s arms shoot up into the air. “What the fuck are we doing?”

“You’re leaving, Carey. You’re going home.”

Disbelief on his face, he chuckles. In his mind, he’s already assumed Patrick’s place as Boss. According to Flynn, he’s been on a tirade since he stormed out of the wine cellar last night. But by kidnapping Rafé, Carey’s temper has just started a war. One I can’t afford for us to lose.

“You telling me what to do now, Graham?”

“We both know I’ve been doing that for years.”

He reaches inside his belt and pulls his gun on me. Ryan draws his. So do Michael and Flynn. With three barrels pointing at him, he scoffs.

“Put the gun down, Carey.”

“So, you think you’re the Boss now, huh?”

“No, I’m still the one cleaning up the mess. This is a mess, Carey. You said you had proof. Where is it?”

Huffing, he shakes his head. “Maybe there isn’t any. Fuck it,” he says, then he aims the gun at Rafé’s head. “I don’t give a fuck.”

“Carey! Wait!” I walk over to him with my hand outstretched. “Don’t do this. You don’t want to do this. Give me the gun. Let me take care of this for you,” I say in a low voice.

Tears welling in his eyes, he says, “He was my father, Graham.”

“I know.”

“You can’t take away what rightfully belongs to me.”

“I told you. Brothers always. That will never change.”

His gaze falls from my eyes to my palm. Carey hesitates, but then he hands me the gun. I grab him by the shoulder and pull him into a full hug. Lowering my voice again, I say, “Go blow off some steam at Vice. Fuck a girl tonight, then get some rest. Tomorrow, we’ll wipe out Stevie and all the others.”

“What about the alliance? I don’t have any proof, Graham.”

For the past hour, I’ve been trying to come up with a way to put an end to this. It’s not the way I wanted this to play out and I can’t predict the outcomes of my next moves, but I hope for all our sakes my plan keeps us safe and alive. I’m responsible for Carey and Neve now, and I can’t fail Patrick again.

Tapping his gun against my thigh, I release Carey from the embrace and look at him. “We’ll figure something out. Trust me.”

Holding his head, Carey leaves. Ryan comes over to where I’m standing and crouches down before Rafé. Still breathing heavily, he wipes his forehead. “He’s one tough son of a bitch, Graham. It’s a damn shame,” he says as he picks Rafé up and sits him on the chair.

When I got the phone call from Carey tonight, I believed him when he said he knew who killed Patrick and that he had a rat who would talk. I was just as shocked as Willa when I saw

that Rafé was the Scavenger that Carey had thrown out of the back of the van.

“What do you want us to do now?” Flynn asks.

His eyes are determined. Deadly. Flynn’s telling me that he’s with me, and he wants to know how I want to get rid of Rafé. In what manner I’ve determined to end his life and dispose of the evidence. That’s who they know me to be, but that’s not who I am anymore.

The little tiger took her bite, and she’s corrupted me.

I can’t kill Rafé. Willa would know me like how Flynn and the others do, and she’d hate it. She’d hate me. Even if I never see her beautiful face again, I would know that I’m not a man she could possibly love.

Leaning forward, I place my hand on Rafé’s shoulder and remove the gag from his mouth. “I’m sorry, man.”

“I don’t know anything, Mr. Tate. I swear,” he says, trying desperately to catch his breath.

I believe him. I turn around and face the others. “Carey fucked up. I asked him to trust me to fix this. Now I’m asking all of you to trust me to fix this my way.”

Flynn, Ryan, and Michael look between each other. Coming to a wordless consensus, their gazes return to me. “Whatever you say, Graham.”

— e e —

Flynn pulls the car up in front of my penthouse. His knuckles are white from gripping the steering wheel the entire drive over here. “Tonight was a shitshow. I don’t suspect the rest of the week is going to get any better,” he says.

“No it won’t.” My body aches from the dozens of punches I inflicted on Rafé. Ryan and Michael took him away, while Flynn and I spent an hour removing any trace of evidence from the warehouse. I could use a long soak in a hot bath. “Do me a favor. Check with the girls at Vice or at The Donnie to see if Carey stopped in. He hasn’t responded to any of my texts or calls.”

“Sure thing. What time you want Sammy to come get you tomorrow?”

“I’ll text you after I get inside and I’ll let you know.” I glance at Flynn’s hand clinging to the wheel of the car. “Is there anything else you want to say?”

“Yeah, there is something.” Flynn sighs. “Carey didn’t fuck up. I did. You told me to keep him out of trouble and I couldn’t. I’m sorry for that, Graham.”

I’m just relieved he didn’t tell me that he had doubts about my plan. I nod and say, “It doesn’t matter. We’re in this together now.”

Riding up the elevator, I’m so exhausted that my legs threaten to give out. I just want to sleep. For fear that I’ll expend too much energy, I don’t even want to hope that I won’t be alone tonight. Or have to wrestle with my conscience if Willa decided not to go home to her apartment.

We're going to war. In the coming days and weeks, none of us will be safe. Least of all her since she's been at my side as my girlfriend. Not to mention her connection to the member of Stevie's crew that we kidnapped.

Opening the door to my penthouse, I step inside and hear the news playing on the TV. A smile tugs at my lips. Willa sits up when she sees me shuffle into the living room.

"Worried you would see me on there tonight?"

"That's not funny, Graham, and besides it's international news."

Smiling, I slump onto the sofa beside her. Wrapping my arm around her middle, my head finds the comfortable nook between her shoulder and her neck. Limbs aching, I sink into her and close my eyes, breathing her in. Unable to resist, I press a kiss into the side of her neck. "Willa, what the hell are you doing here? Why won't you leave me?"

"Where's Rafé?"

It's brief and fleeting, but there's no denying the pang of baseless jealousy I feel. With my eyes closed, I ask, "Is he the reason you decided to come here instead of being taken to your place?"

"Fucking answer me," she says, all tiger and not a hint of princess.

I pick myself up and off her. She's scowling at me, but that face draws me forward. I wish I could lock her away inside my apartment. I could come home to her every night, and spend

every morning by her side. But even in my altered state, men like me don't deserve those blessings.

"Rafé's safe," I say and move in for a kiss.

Willa backs away from me. "Then why are your hands so bruised?"

"I saved Rafé's life tonight for you." I chuckle. "I risked everything for you, tiger."

After they assured me of their trusts, I had Ryan and Michael smuggle Rafé out of the city. I arranged a meeting with the alliance in the morning where I'll accept their offer to assume the leadership of what Patrick built. But only if they look beyond Carey's mistakes and help me fight Stevie and the rest of the Scavengers.

It could all work. Or it could blow up in our faces, but it was the best of all the bad choices I had left.

"Kiss me, Willa. I need that tonight. You can hate me in the morning and leave me. I deserve to lose you forever, but don't say no to me tonight."

She allows me to touch her cheek and doesn't recoil when I kiss her this time, but I note her lack of enthusiasm. I retreat. If I had a heart, that subtle rejection would have broken it.

When I open my eyes, she's staring into them. "All of my bags are packed," she says. "After tonight, I can't stay with you, Graham."

I don't deserve peace or happiness. I don't deserve love. Willa's only known me for weeks and she's given me more

love than I could ever hope for in my lifetime.

The small glint of light she shone on my dark soul should be enough for someone like me. It will have to be because if I let her stay, eventually her light will die in my darkness. And I won't corrupt her for my own happiness.

I swallow, nod. "Okay, I have to see some of my people in the morning, but I'll drive you home myself."

GRAHAM

“I HAVE SOME GOOD news,” Willa says.

The bandage around my hand is damp from helping Willa bundle her long, black hair at the top of her head. I trail my fingertips over a drop of water on her shoulder. “What is it?”

“I found a place in D.C. that I like. It has two bedrooms and a pool with a little patio. The backyard reminds me of an English garden.”

“It sounds nice.” I sigh. “Just don’t tell me where it is. If I survive what’s coming for us, I might get arrogant and try to take you back.”

More drops of water fall from Willa’s wet hair and trickle down her neck. I kiss them and she moans. My tongue glides across her smooth skin and I curse when a phone call comes through on my phone.

I look at the screen, then at Willa.

“Are you going to answer?” she asks.

“I can’t. She’s my enemy, too.”

Willa nods and settles her back against my chest. The hot bath rejuvenated me and I’m ready to indulge in her again before I have to say goodbye to her for good. I reach for the top of her towel, but the phone rings again.

It’s Jess. Now she’s calling Willa.

“No, it’s me she wants,” I say when she stretches an arm towards the nightstand. “I’ll answer it.”

“Graham, please don’t—“

“Trust me,” I say and pick up her phone. “Jess, I think you’re looking for me. Don’t call Willa again.”

“I had to speak with you. We got a tip about Stevie’s crew.” I swallow, refusing to speak because I don’t know what game Jess is playing with me yet. She sighs loudly. “Graham, they know you’re coming for them tonight.”

I raise up from the stack of pillows at my back, straightening and taking Willa with me. “Jess, what are you talking about?”

“Stevie knows you sent Carey after him. He’s at the auto shop now with an army waiting for you.”

“I didn’t send Carey anywhere.”

“Where is he?”

“I…” *Fuck!* I have no clue where he is. Again. “He should’ve been at Vice. I sent him there.”

“Molly said he left with some of the guys. He had a gun. The one you keep in the safe, I think. Molly wasn’t sure.”

“Fuck!”

“What is it?” Willa says.

I open my mouth, but Jess starts talking in my ear again.

“Was that Willa? Graham, what is she still doing with you? You...” She pauses, then continues, “Listen to me. If Carey’s not there yet, then that means there’s still time. Right now all they’d have is a gun possession charge. He’s distraught. He’s a kid who just lost his mother and father. They’ll go easy on him, but if he fires a shot that’s it. His life is over whether he walks away from that auto shop or not. Tell me where he is, and I can help him,” she says. “Give me his phone number. We’ll track it. Pick him up on the street before he walks headlong into that firing squad.”

There’s no point in that. Carey’s gone dark. His plan to ambush Stevie is why I haven’t been able to reach him. He didn’t want to be found. Not by me, anyway.

“Graham,” Willa says in a tiny voice.

I look at her. “Don’t call this number again, Jess.”

I hang up.

“Has something happened to Carey?”

“He’s...”

I sigh. I move and Willa lets me get off the bed and stand. My mind is racing at the same speed as my heart. Shaking my

head, I place Willa's phone on the nightstand and pick up mine. As my fingers type and hit send on the text message, I feel sick.

When I call Flynn's number, he answers and says, "Hey, man."

"Why would you do this? Why didn't you call me?"

Flynn sighs. There's a long silence, then he says, "I'm sorry, Graham. He knew you wouldn't agree. I couldn't let him go by himself."

"Listen to me. Stevie has to be setting you up, Flynn."

There's another long, quiet moment. "We were never meant to survive this kind of life, Graham. Some of us get lucky. Most of us don't."

Flynn hangs up and Jess's one word reply to my text lights up the screen.

Thanks!

CHAPTER THIRTY

WILLA

THE FALLOUT OF GRAHAM'S decision came swiftly. An hour after her first two calls to us, Jess called again to let us know they picked Carey up in a routine traffic stop conducted by two of her friends from the academy who she trusted.

I watch as Graham calmly listens as Jess explains what will probably happen to Carey next. He tells her he's going way out on a ledge by trusting her. She reassures him. He hangs up the phone, and then a moment later, he erupts.

Graham hollers up to the ceiling, swinging his arm. The phone sails through the air and careens into the wall. It smashes to the floor and clatters, leaving an ugly dent a foot away from a trio of framed artwork. He lets out another loud scream before he buckles forward, his open hands landing on the back of the sofa.

He wasn't calm. He was in shock.

I climb onto the sofa cushion in front of him. Graham raises his head and looks at me. "Did I do the right thing?" He wipes

his palm over his face. “It doesn’t feel like I did the right thing.”

“Come here.” Wrapping my arms around his shoulders, I hug him. He swallows me in a full embrace, and I say, “The worst is over now. Do you love him?”

I feel him nod. “I do.”

“Then all that matters now is that you fight for him,” I say.

Before I realize what’s happening, Graham holds me tighter. His hands cup my ass and he lifts me in the air. Instinctively, I squeeze my thighs around him. He looks up at me and I can see tears glistening in his brown eyes. His mouth opens and closes, but nothing comes out. I crash my mouth against his and capture his lips. He spins us around and slams my back against the wall.

Bracing myself up with the wall and his shoulder, I reach between our bodies and sink my hand under his pants. Graham yanks on my panties and they rip from the force. He shoves his cock inside me and I holler when he impales me with the first wicked thrust.

He’s nothing like our first time. At the resort, he was gentle and wanted to go slow. Here, his hips hammer into mine with no concerns for showing patience. Growling, Graham fists my hair and fucks me like a man possessed.

As much as I loved my first time with him, he’s found a new way to send me soaring. With my neck straining from the pressure of his grip in my hair, exposed to an assault from his

tongue and his mouth, I damn near hit the ceiling when I cum. Graham grunts loudly in my ear as my pussy milks his cock and he crashes, joining me in our latest rapture.

Holding me up against the wall, Graham sucks in air. Our eyes connect and he says, “Willa, there’s so much I want to say to you, but I can’t. I can’t. Please believe me. I want to, but I can’t.”

As I predicted, Graham was all my first. Pain squeezes around my heart, but I kiss him and say, “I know.”

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

EPILOGUE

STATEVILLE, IL

DRESSED IN HIS JUMPSUIT, Carey walks up to the partition and takes a seat across from me. He picks up the receiver and puts it to his ear. When he smiles, I reach for the phone on my side of the room.

“Is this my color, or what?” he says.

“Hey Carey. You hanging in there?”

“Eight years. Not too bad.”

My gaze falters. My actions caused this, but he doesn't know I was the one who betrayed him and the others. “Carey, I should've—”

“Let's not...” He shakes his head. “Let's not do that. How's Neve doing? Are you taking care of her? Don't let her get away with eating cereal all day,” he says, chuckling.

Forcing back my tears, I manage a half-hearted smile. “She loves her Lucky Charms.”

We share a laugh.

Carey nods. “Brothers,” he says and places his fist against the plexiglass.

I place my fist against his. “Always.”



WASHINGTON D.C.

Bury it under a rug. That’s the idea. Or rather, that’s the plan.

I step inside the Chesapeake Bay mansion with my boss and three other executives from his firm. The home belongs to a powerful congressman who can’t keep his dick in his pants. Now that his hot-tempered mistress—his description—has threatened to out him publicly, he’s called us for help.

This is my first client. I’ve only been in D.C. for a month. I’m learning a lot, but there’s so much about crisis management I still need to understand.

“You look nervous,” Santiago says. “Don’t be.”

I smile. Santiago Acosta has been assigned as one of my mentors. He’s worked at the firm for a dozen years.

“For this meeting, just listen. Don’t speak unless someone asks you a direct question. A lot of what we do is listening. We leave the talking to the big guy.”

I nod.

“Welcome, everyone,” a booming voice says from beside the large staircase. “Come this way. I like to take my private meetings in the conservatory.”

We fall in line behind the congressman and enter through the double doors to his conservatory. The walls are covered in dark paneling. There’s a massive fireplace at one end of the room and an equally large desk across from it.

With a five-person head count, I thought our entourage was overkill. But after a quick count, it appears the congressman has already amassed a working team that is at least twice our size.

“Please, come on in. Make yourselves at home. Introduce yourselves, everybody. Grab a seat,” the congressman says.

His voice is even louder inside the room. Surveying the unfamiliar faces here, I take in a deep breath.

“You gonna be okay?”

I look at Santiago and say, “I feel like I’ve just jumped into a lion’s den. Is it always like this?”

He smiles. “No, but you’ll get used to it.”

“I don’t know.”

“Trust me. Just remember: the only rule to surviving in a D.C. lion’s den is not to get eaten.”

We chuckle. Santiago takes a step to the right and starts introducing himself.

Doing my best to follow my mentor’s lead, I turn to the left. I freeze. Staring directly at me, the dark-haired man hovering by us has a coy smile on his face. Embarrassingly, my mouth hangs open. *I hope he didn’t overhear our conversation.*

He steps forward. “Do I detect a hint of an accent?” he says, smiling.

“Ah, you might’ve.” I offer him my hand to shake. “Willa. Willa Ryerson.”

He shakes my hand. “It’s nice to meet you.”

When he doesn’t introduce himself back right away, I’m even more surprised. Especially since he holds on to my hand.

“Um, who are you?”

He chuckles. “Sorry. I’m not usually flustered, but...” He shakes his head. “Never mind that. I’m the congressman’s aide. You can call me Rhodes.”

FIVE YEARS LATER, THESE TWO MEET AGAIN.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Serena James Chase is the bestselling author of contemporary romance and romantic suspense novels! When she's not writing her next sexy couple, you can find her padding her book collection and binge-watching new shows.

She lives in Connecticut with her husband and two sons.

<https://mtr.bio/serena-james-chase>